

SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN'S THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT AND ITS SELECTIVE RECEPTION IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN PESANTREN

Agil Shodiki Manurung* 

*Correspondence:

Email:
agilshodikimanurung48@gmail.com

Authors Affiliation:

Universitas Islam Negeri Sjech M.
Djamil Djambek Bukittinggi, Indonesia

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the theological thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), a prominent nineteenth-century Muslim reformer from India, and to analyze its relevance and reception within contemporary Indonesian pesantren. While previous studies often emphasize the influence of Islamic modernism on Muslim educational reform, this study argues that pesantren engagement with Sir Sayyid's thought is neither linear nor uncritical. Using a conceptual–analytical approach, the article explores three core dimensions of Sir Sayyid's theology: his rational reinterpretation of Qur'anic exegesis in light of modern science, his critique of taqlid and advocacy for renewed ijihad, and his project of harmonizing Islam with modernity. The analysis demonstrates that although pesantren exhibit institutional convergence with modern educational practices—particularly in integrating scientific knowledge—they maintain significant theological resistance at the metaphysical and epistemological levels. Pesantren selectively appropriate Sir Sayyid's rationality as an instrumental epistemology while preserving Ash'arite theology, the sacrality of revelation, and the authority of sanad. The findings suggest that Sir Sayyid's modernist theology functions more as a catalytic reference than a doctrinal foundation within pesantren discourse. This study contributes to Islamic intellectual history by proposing a model of selective–epistemic adaptation and provides a theoretical framework for future empirical research on the reception of modernist Islamic thought in Indonesian pesantren.

Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan mengkaji pemikiran teologis Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), seorang reformis Muslim terkemuka abad ke-19 dari India, serta menganalisis relevansi dan resepsinya dalam konteks pesantren Indonesia kontemporer. Berbeda dari pandangan yang menempatkan modernisme Islam sebagai pengaruh yang diterima secara linear, artikel ini berargumen bahwa keterlibatan pesantren terhadap pemikiran Sir Sayyid berlangsung secara selektif dan tidak tanpa resistensi. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan konseptual-analitis, kajian ini menelaah tiga dimensi utama pemikiran teologis Sir Sayyid, yaitu reinterpretasi tafsir Al-Qur'an berbasis rasionalitas ilmiah, kritik terhadap taqlid dan pembukaan kembali pintu ijihad, serta upaya harmonisasi Islam dengan modernitas. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa meskipun pesantren mengalami konvergensi pada tingkat institusional dan pragmatis—terutama dalam integrasi ilmu pengetahuan modern—terdapat resistensi teologis yang signifikan pada level metafisis dan epistemologis. Pesantren memanfaatkan rasionalitas Sir Sayyid sebagai instrumen integratif bagi sains, namun tetap mempertahankan teologi Asy'ariyah, kesakralan wahyu, dan otoritas sanad. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa pemikiran Sir Sayyid lebih berfungsi sebagai rujukan katalitik daripada fondasi doktrinal, serta menawarkan kerangka teoretik bagi penelitian empiris lanjutan mengenai penerimaan pemikiran modernisme Islam di pesantren Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Islamic world is currently facing complex challenges in balancing the preservation of religious traditions with the demands of adapting to the times. This phenomenon has been a subject of lengthy debate since the 19th century when Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) emerged as an Indian Muslim reformist who sought to bridge Islam with modern science and rationality (Yani, Hasaruddin, Magun Pikahulan, & Iin Mutmainnah, 2025). One of the central figures who responded to this challenge was Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), an Indian Muslim reformer who sought to bridge Islam with science and modern thought (Mujibuddin, Masuwd, & Achfandhy, 2024).

In Indonesia, Pesantren, as the oldest Islamic institutions, face a similar dilemma; they are required to respond to modernity without losing their fundamental identity. Although Pesantren have demonstrated flexibility through various models of adaptation, studies that specifically explore the theological dialogue between Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's radical modernist thinking and the epistemology of Pesantren are still very limited (Achmadin et al., 2024).

The urgency of this research lies in the need to map the possible reception or resistance of Pesantren to the ideas of contextual *ijtihad* and the integration of science and religion offered by Sir Sayyid. Until now, there has been a gap in the literature that sharply analyzes the convergence and divergence between Sir Sayyid's rationalism and the Asy'ariyah theological tradition that dominates Pesantren. Based on this background, this study focuses on three main issues: (1) Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's theological concept in responding to the decline of Muslims in India; (2) the epistemological characteristics and scientific orientation of contemporary Pesantren in Indonesia; and (3) the relevance of Sir Sayyid's theological thinking in the context of Pesantren. Through this analysis, the article aims to identify the potential convergence and divergence between Sir Sayyid's rationalism and the Pesantren tradition, thereby offering a theoretical framework for efforts to renew Islamic thought in Pesantren that remain adaptive without neglecting their traditional roots.

This research is a qualitative study with a library research design that focuses on conceptual analysis. As a study at the conceptual–theoretical level, this article does not involve empirical field data collection, but rather focuses on text analysis and the construction of a theoretical framework for further research. The analysis process was conducted using conceptual analysis techniques aimed at developing a framework for understanding the potential reception of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas in the context of Pesantren in Indonesia. The analysis began by identifying key concepts in Sir Sayyid's theology, which were then compared with the epistemological characteristics of contemporary Pesantren. The research data was sourced from primary literature, which included Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's original works, as well as secondary literature, which included journal articles, books, and relevant academic research on Islamic modernism and the dynamics of Pesantren in Indonesia (Sugiyono, 2020).

REASON, REVELATION, AND REFORM: SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN'S INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was born in Delhi, India, on October 17, 1817, and died in Aligarh on March 27, 1898. He lived during a crucial period in Indian Muslim history, namely the fall of the Mughal Empire and the consolidation of British colonial power.

The 1857 Rebellion (Indian Mutiny), which ended with the harsh suppression of Indian Muslims, was a turning point in Sir Sayyid's thinking. Witnessing the deplorable conditions of Indian Muslims politically, economically, and intellectually, Sir Sayyid realized that this decline was not solely due to colonialism, but also due to the internal stagnation of the Muslim community itself (Lelyveld, 2020). Muslims in India at that time tended to reject modern education, shut themselves off from scientific developments, and became trapped in blind imitation of traditional religious authorities. Sir Sayyid then dedicated his life to advancing Muslim education in India. In 1875, he founded the Muhammadan Anglo–Oriental College in Aligarh (later to become Aligarh Muslim University), which combined a traditional Islamic curriculum with modern Western science and education (Hadziq & Muzadi, 2025). This institution became a symbol of Sir Sayyid's vision to create modern Muslims who remain committed to Islam but do not lag behind in scientific developments.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan positioned reason and science not merely as auxiliary instruments, but as standards for understanding revelation so that it would be relevant to empirical reality. The essence of this theology is the belief that "the Qur'an is the word of God, and the universe is the work of God"; since both originate from the same source, it is impossible for there to be any contradiction between them. Therefore, Sir Sayyid rejected literal interpretations that ignored the laws of nature. In his view, miracles were no longer understood as violations of the laws of nature, but rather as extraordinary natural phenomena or symbolic – metaphorical phenomena.

This theological position is in line with Widdia Putri's findings, which confirm that for Sir Sayyid, reason functions as a filtering tool to ensure that interpretations remain logical without replacing the position of revelation itself (Putri, 2019). Furthermore, the integration between religious knowledge and worldly knowledge is a systematic effort to rejuvenate the intellectuality of the people so that they are not trapped in the dichotomy of knowledge (Amir, 2020). Thus, Sir Sayyid's interpretive methodology offers flexibility that calls for criticism of traditional readings, which are often more influenced by local culture than by the revealed text itself.

Sir Sayyid believed that the main cause of stagnation in Muslim civilization was the attitude of *taqlid* (blindly following) the ideas of past scholars. In his theological view, he emphasized that religious truth should not be imprisoned by medieval interpretations bound by space and time. According to him, human reason is God's most authoritative instrument for dynamically testing and understanding divine messages.

He called for the opening of *ijtihad* on a broad scale, not only in the realm of practical law (*fiqh*), but also in matters of faith. Sir Sayyid emphasized that every competent Muslim has the authority to engage directly with the Qur'an and Sunnah in a contextual manner. By freeing the ummah from the constraints of rigid traditional authority, he hoped to see the emergence of a Muslim society that is creative, intellectually independent, and capable of responding to the challenges of modernity without abandoning its fundamental beliefs.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan strongly criticized the practice of *taqlid*, or blindly following the opinions of earlier scholars, because he believed it led to intellectual stagnation within the Muslim community in India (Hannum, 2025). In his view, *taqlid* is the main obstacle to the emergence of new ideas that can respond to the challenges of the times, whether in the fields of science, ethics, or social structure. He emphasized that the door to *ijtihad* is never closed, and that every Muslim who has rational and scientific capacity has the right to perform *ijtihad*. For him, this is not just a matter of rights, but a moral obligation to respond to new issues that were never directly faced by classical scholars,

such as those resulting from scientific advances or changing social norms. Therefore, he reiterates that the Quran and Sunnah, as the primary sources of Islam, should be read contextually and critically, not merely by automatically following old schools of thought, especially in the aspects of fiqh and aqidah, which he feels require interpretive renewal (Putri, 2019).

PROPHETHOOD, MIRACLES, AND RATIONAL CRITIQUE IN SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN'S THEOLOGICAL REFORM

In explaining the concept of prophethood, Sir Sayyid offers the approach of "Natural Prophethood." He attempts to shift the popular understanding of the Prophet as a figure with supernatural powers to that of a perfect human being with a very high level of spiritual sensitivity (*malakah*). Prophethood is seen as a noble potential within the human soul that emerges to provide guidance for social and moral welfare.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan proposed a paradigm of prophetic understanding (*nubuwwah*) in which prophets are not supernatural beings, but exemplary human beings who, with their moral and spiritual superiority and knowledge of nature, are able to provide guidance and perform miracles (Tajudin, Masripah, & Nenden, 2024). Miracles, in his view, are not merely violations of the laws of nature that contradict science, but rather extraordinary events that cannot yet be explained by human science. He rejects the notion that miracles must always be explained as something that contradicts the laws of nature, but rather that they should be seen as manifestations of nature accompanied by an extraordinary dimension or spiritual metaphor when a literal interpretation would cause them to contradict logic and empirical science (Muh. Ilham Usman & Baharil, 2020).

This prophetic model emphasizes the Prophet's role as an agent of social and intellectual change. By emphasizing the Prophet's humanity, Sir Sayyid wanted to show that Islam is a down-to-earth religion that cares deeply about the advancement of civilization. This concept also breaks down the distance between traditional theological understanding, which is often mystical in nature, and the demands of modern society, which places greater emphasis on the functional and empirical aspects of a teaching.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan reconstructed the doctrine of prophethood with a functional-naturalistic approach. He rejected the traditional understanding that viewed the Prophet as a supernatural figure with semi-divine attributes. This capacity is a human trait that reaches its peak through moral clarity and spiritual acuity, enabling a Prophet to grasp universal truths directly from God's "Law of Nature" without any physical-mysterious intermediaries. In this view, revelation is no longer understood as an external voice descending from the heavens, but rather as an inner illumination or enlightenment arising from within the Prophet's pure soul.

In terms of miracles, Sir Sayyid carried out a radical demythologization in order to maintain consistency between revelation and science. He adhered firmly to the principle that God would not act inconsistently by violating the laws of nature that He Himself had established. If miracles are defined as events that override the laws of physical causality, then Sir Sayyid categorically rejects them. He argues that the Qur'an never claims miracles as proof of prophetic truth that is "against nature." Instead, miracles should be understood in two categories: first, as extraordinary natural phenomena that could not be scientifically explained by humans at that time; second, as metaphorical-symbolic language used by the Qur'an to explain God's greatness to society using the logic appropriate to that era.

This interpretation aims to purify Islamic theology of elements of superstition and irrational mysticism, which it considers obstacles to intellectual progress. By redefining miracles as events that are consistent with the laws of nature (albeit extraordinary in nature), Sir Sayyid sought to show that belief in the prophet does not have to sacrifice intellectual integrity and scientific logic. This paradigm requires interpreters to use a rational approach in analyzing verses that appear supernatural, in order to discover the essential meaning behind these textual symbols without contradicting established empirical facts.

Although Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan is recognized as a pioneer of intellectual renewal, his radical rationalist approach sparked fundamental epistemological debates in modern Islamic discourse. The main criticism from traditionalists highlights that attempts to deconstruct supernatural aspects, such as miracles and the transcendent dimension of revelation, risk reducing Islam to a mere rational ethical system devoid of spirituality. The author argues that the excessive emphasis on reason (rational—overdrive) in Sir Sayyid's thinking tends to marginalize the authority of literal texts, which for centuries have been the anchor of the Muslim faith. This is in line with the assessment of Khan, who refer to this approach as "apologetic rationalism," in which traditional nuances are often sacrificed for the sake of harmony with rigid Western logic (Khan, Ameer Ali Humaira Ahmad Associate Professor, Ahmad Khan, & Ameer Ali, 2022).

Furthermore, the author sees a fundamental weakness in Sir Sayyid's methodology, which tends to be reactive and defensive. Instead of formulating an epistemology of science that is firmly rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition itself, Sir Sayyid seems too hasty in adopting the Western paradigms of positivism and materialism as the standard of truth for testing the validity of revelation. Criticism from modernist groups also emphasizes that this approach does not provide sufficient space for criticism of the secularism bias inherent in modern science. The failure to filter this Western epistemological framework has led to Sir Sayyid's thinking often being considered "foreign" and difficult to integrate organically into the structure of Islamic science (Bus, 2015).

Analytically, the author assesses that this tension stems from Sir Sayyid's attempt to place science as the judge of revelation, rather than as a partner in dialogue. In the context of Pesantren in Indonesia, which strongly uphold the *Asy'ariyah* theological tradition, Sir Sayyid's approach of rejecting physical miracles would inevitably face significant theological resistance. However, the weaknesses of this methodology should not blind us to his intellectual courage. The author concludes that Sir Sayyid's greatest contribution was not his controversial theological answers, but his courage in opening the door to *ijtihad*, which forced traditional institutions to no longer remain static in the face of modernity.

SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN'S THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO THE DECLINE OF THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY

The decline of Muslims in the 19th century, particularly in India, cannot be separated from the pressures of colonialism, intellectual stagnation, and the weak response of Muslims to the development of modern science and civilization. These conditions led to various efforts to renew Islamic thought with the aim of reviving the competitiveness and dignity of Muslims. One of the central figures who provided a theological and intellectual response to this situation was Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Through his thoughts, Sir Sayyid sought to reformulate the relationship between Islamic

teachings, rationality, and modern science as a theological foundation for the revival of Muslims from their decline.

Diagnosis of the Problem: Intellectual Rigidity and Taqlid

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan identified that the root cause of the decline of Muslims in India was not merely due to external factors such as colonialism, but rather the result of an internal crisis in the form of intellectual stagnation. The author's analysis shows that Sir Sayyid saw an epistemological failure caused by the dominance of rigid religious orthodoxy. This stagnation was rooted in the rejection of *ijtihad* and the sacralization of past theology, which was considered static and untouchable by rational criticism. This condition, in the author's view, created a Muslim society that was "imprisoned" in historical romanticism, where the mentality of taqlid stifled the creative drive to understand texts in the context of an ever – changing era.

As an antithesis to this stagnation, the author argues that Sir Sayyid offers a repositioning of reason not as a substitute for revelation, but as an instrument for validating interpretation. Placing reason in a high position while keeping it within the corridor of revelation is a systematic attempt to break down the wall separating sacred texts and objective reality. Here, the author sees that Sir Sayyid's offer is actually a challenge to fatalistic thinking. By reintroducing the concept of Sunnatullah or natural causality, he seeks to shift the paradigm of the ummah from "resignation to fate" to "proactive based on the law of cause and effect."

Sir Sayyid's criticism of literalist interpretations that are detached from their historical context is highly relevant to Pesantren in Indonesia. The author argues that the tendency of Pesantren to preserve the purity of tradition often falls into the trap of literalism in classical Islamic texts, which ignores contemporary sociological realities. Sir Sayyid's efforts to bridge *ilm al – dunya* and *ilm al – din* through the Aligarh movement provide a valuable lesson: that preserving religious identity does not necessarily mean isolating oneself from modern science (Amir, 2020).

The greatest challenge, according to Sayyid Ahmad Khan, was a passive mentality and religious fatalism that viewed decline as an unchangeable fate. Through publications such as *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* and his lectures, he encouraged people to take responsibility for their future: through education, critical thinking, openness to new knowledge, and reform of religious institutions and Islamic education. His theological efforts also included reconstructing aspects of old theology that were too static, as well as strengthening the theological foundations that allowed adaptation to the conditions of the times without losing religious integrity.

The author concludes that the greatest challenges diagnosed by Sir Sayyid, namely passive mentality and religious fatalism, remain latent challenges in traditional Islamic educational institutions. The theological reconstruction offered by Sir Sayyid forces us to reexamine whether education in Pesantren today truly fosters independent thinking or merely reproduces dogmatic obedience. Thus, Sir Sayyid's diagnosis is not merely a historical note on India, but an epistemological critique that forces Pesantren to conduct an intellectual audit of their established traditions.

Prescription Solution: Epistemological and Educational Reform

Responding to this diagnosis, Sayyid Ahmad Khan emphasized that Islam and modern science are not two conflicting domains, but can be harmonized through textual reinterpretation that takes contemporary scientific findings into account. In the article "Relationship Between Religion and Science in Muslim Modernism: Theology and Science," it is examined how Sir Sayyid and other modern Islamic thinkers view the

relationship between Islam and science as a system in which the laws of nature (*sunnatullah*) are considered a manifestation of Divine will (Hakan Zoruh, 2020).

As an antithesis to the intellectual crisis, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan offered a solution in the form of epistemological reform that placed modern science and Islam within a single coherent system. The author analyzes that the main foundation of this solution is the repositioning of the concept of *Sunnatullah* (natural law) as an empirical manifestation of divine will. Arguing that "Natural Law" and "Revelation" originate from the same source, Sir Sayyid sought to break down the wall separating scientific methods and theological authority. However, the author notes that these attempts at harmonization were often one-sided, with revelatory texts being forced to conform (apologetically) to scientific findings in order to avoid being labeled irrational.

Thus, revelatory texts that appear to contradict science should not necessarily be rejected, but can be interpreted metaphorically or contextually so that they do not depart from reason and the laws of nature. Sir Sayyid reopened the door to *ijtihad* as a response to the problem of intellectual stagnation (Putri, 2019). He rejects the notion that *ijtihad* has been closed after the four *imams* of the *madhhab*, considering that the challenges of the times continue to change and require new contextual solutions. This concept is closely related to the understanding that Islam must be adaptive to social and scientific changes, without losing the fundamental aspects of its teachings. This approach includes interpreting verses that appear to contradict natural law or common sense symbolically or metaphorically, rather than literally, to avoid internal conflicts within the religion and make Islam responsive to the developments of the times.

The relevance of this solution becomes crucial and problematic when applied in the context of Pesantren in Indonesia. The author observes that the integration of science in Pesantren has tended to be "superficial" (atomistic) and has not yet touched upon the epistemological level offered by Sir Sayyid. Pesantren often only accept the products of scientific technology without embracing the critical reasoning (rational-empirical) behind it for fear of undermining the established beliefs.

The author concludes that Sir Sayyid's prescription requires Pesantren to do more than just transform their formal curriculum. This solution challenges Pesantren to reformulate their interpretation methodology to be more responsive to social and scientific changes without losing their fundamental essence. Without the courage to undertake contextual reinterpretation as advocated by Sir Sayyid, efforts to integrate science into Pesantren will only become an administrative formality that fails to produce a complete scientific synthesis.

Theological Implications: Repositioning Religious Authority

Sir Sayyid's thinking had profound implications for the structure of religious authority in Islam. By opening the door to *ijtihad* and emphasizing rationality, he implicitly challenged the traditional scholars' monopoly on religious interpretation (Sukron & Nawawi, 2021). The consequence is the democratization of religious interpretation: every educated Muslim is considered capable of understanding and interpreting the Qur'an without having to rely entirely on the authority of the *ulama*. This does not mean eliminating the role of the *ulama*, but changing it from an unquestionable authority to a resource person whose views can be critically discussed.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas on *ijtihad* and rationality are not merely methodological proposals, but rather a deconstruction of the established structure of religious authority. The author analyzes that the most radical theological implication of this thinking is the desacralization of interpretation. By opening up space for every

educated Muslim to engage in direct dialogue with the sacred text, Sir Sayyid implicitly dismantles the veiled wall of "clericalism" that has long monopolized religious truth. The author argues that this shift marks the birth of an era of democratization of interpretation, in which authority is no longer given based on social status or religious titles, but is argumentative and rational in nature.

In the author's critical review, this repositioning changes the function of scholars from "keepers of the truth" to resource persons or intellectual dialogue partners. However, the author needs to criticize that this model of democratization carries the risk of extreme fragmentation of authority, where the line between authoritative interpretation and amateur interpretation becomes blurred. It is this challenge that sharply triggers resistance from traditionalist groups; not merely because of the fear of losing social position, but also because of concerns about the loss of standard methodologies in maintaining the integrity of faith from overly liberal interpretations.

The author concludes that the theological implications of Sir Sayyid's thinking require Pesantren to renegotiate their authority. Pesantren can no longer maintain their authority solely through closed scholarly claims, but must be able to defend their theological arguments in a rational and open public space. Thus, the conceptual contribution of this analysis shows that Sir Sayyid's relevance to Pesantren does not lie in the elimination of the role of the ulama, but rather in the transformation of the ulama into organic intellectuals who are able to guide the people through the power of argument, not merely through the doctrine of power.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ORIENTATION OF CONTEMPORARY PESANTREN

The development of the times, marked by advances in science, technology, and rapid social change, requires Islamic educational institutions to make adjustments without losing their identity. Pesantren, as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, face challenges and opportunities to reconstruct their scientific perspectives, methods of knowledge transmission, and educational orientation. In this context, studies on the epistemological characteristics and orientation of contemporary Pesantren are important in order to understand how they integrate classical scientific traditions with the demands of modernity and respond to the socio-religious dynamics of today's society.

The Epistemological Foundation of Pesantren

Pesantren as traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia do have a distinctive epistemological foundation, especially in terms of textual authority and scientific transmission. In the boarding school tradition, classical books (*kitab kuning*) are considered a legacy of knowledge that has been tested by time, knowledge that is transmitted (*naql*) through a chain of transmission (*sanad*) that is believed to maintain its authenticity. Kyai or Pesantren scholars hold a high position as holders of *sanad* and heirs to the old intellectual tradition. They are not only teachers of texts but also guardians of traditional methods of interpretation (Kuswandi & Asmoni, 2023).

The epistemological foundation of Pesantren is fundamentally based on the supremacy of *naql* (text) transmitted through the authority of classical texts and the *sanad* system. The author analyzes that in this tradition, text is not merely an instrument of knowledge, but a sacred entity believed to preserve the authenticity of truth over time. Kyai, in this structure, act as methodological gatekeepers who ensure that interpretations do not deviate from traditional consensus. The author assesses that this

pattern represents the strength of bayani epistemology, in which truth is sought through the explanation of classical texts that are considered final in answering the moral and spiritual questions of santri.

Although *naql* is very dominant, the author argues that Pesantren do not deny the role of 'aql (reason), but place it in a subordinate position under the text in line with Asy'ariyah theology. Reason is used as a logical tool to clarify revelation through disciplines such as *ushul fikih* and *mantik*, not as an autonomous instrument to reshape the text. [2] Analytically, Pesantren seek to maintain a balance between three pillars: bayani (textual), burhani (rational), and irfani (spiritual). It is this irfani dimension that significantly distinguishes it from Sir Sayyid's dry rationalism; through *tazkiyah al-nafs* and traditional spiritual practices, Pesantren emphasize that understanding the Qur'an requires clarity of soul, not just sharp logic (Ainuri & Wijaya, 2023).

Pesantren are not only oriented towards the transfer of intellectual knowledge, but also the formation of character, piety, and spirituality. Tarbiyah and *tazkiyah al-nafs* are inherent goals in the learning process. Worship activities, recitation, *zikir*, prayer, moral appreciation, and traditional spiritual practices are an important part of the unwritten curriculum of Pesantren. In addition to textual (*naql*) and intellectual aspects, there are also spiritual and religious experiential (*irfani*) elements that give deep meaning to students in understanding the Qur'an. Furthermore, Pesantren strongly emphasize ethical and religious aesthetic aspects in education, as part of the purification of the soul and the implementation of daily morals (Nadhiroh & Hasan, 2021).

Traditional Pesantren use classical schools of thought and methodological frameworks as boundaries and guidelines for interpretation. Schools of thought in *fiqh*, theology (Ash'ariyyah), and Sunni Sufi spirituality form a methodological uniformity that enables intellectual continuity from one generation to the next. The author sees a latent epistemological conflict when this methodological framework of Pesantren is confronted with the paradigm of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. The use of the Asy'ariyah school of jurisprudence and creed in Pesantren creates a "methodological fence" that guarantees the stability of tradition, but on the other hand has the potential to limit the space for radical *ijtihad*. In contrast, Sir Sayyid demands free *ijtihad* based on empirical-natural reality, a step that Pesantren consider a threat to intellectual continuity. The author concludes that this difference reflects a clash between the Pesantren's orientation, which prioritizes text-based piety, and Sir Sayyid's modernism, which prioritizes rational-based progress. Without a bridge of dialogue, the Pesantren will continue to view modern science only as a technical tool, while Sir Sayyid will continue to view the Pesantren tradition as an intellectual obstacle (DI ALIGARH, n.d.).

The Dynamics of Modernization in Pesantren

An analysis of the dynamics of Pesantren shows that the response to modernity is not a singular phenomenon, but rather a spectrum of orientations that reflect the tension between identity conservation and pragmatic demands. At the conservative pole, Salafiyah Pesantren represent an educational model that prioritizes theological orthodoxy through the methodology of *muhafazah 'ala al-qadim al-salih*. The author argues that the dominance of the yellow book learning format and the sorogan and bandongan methods in these institutions is not merely a technical-pedagogical issue, but a form of epistemic defense against narratives of modernity that are considered secular. In this context, resistance to the national curriculum is a conscious effort to preserve the purity of classical scientific transmission from the contamination of positivistic reasoning (Basri, 2014).

In contrast to the Salafi model, Modern Pesantren or Khalafiyah adopt a hybrid orientation that seeks to synergize tradition with official modernity. The author assesses that the 100% integration of the national curriculum with the Pesantren curriculum demonstrates a progressive scientific syncretism. However, the author critically notes that in this model, general knowledge and religious knowledge often remain separate—not yet reaching a level of deep philosophical integration. This contrasts with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's vision, which demanded that science not merely be an additional subject, but rather a new lens through which to interpret religion. In modern Pesantren, science is accepted functionally, but the authority of classical texts remains unshaken (Muhtadin & Laksono, 2022).

This dynamic orientation proves that contemporary Pesantren have shifted from a reactive to a proactive stance in building social and technological relevance. The author argues that their ability to synergize *fiqh* and *usul fiqh* with entrepreneurship and 21st-century competencies demonstrates remarkable institutional flexibility. However, from Sir Sayyid's epistemological perspective, this modernization is still considered "half-hearted" as long as Pesantren only modernize at the level of management and curriculum infrastructure, without renewing their theological reasoning.

The author concludes that although Pesantren are capable of producing students who are tech-savvy, there is a wide gap between the managerial efficiency of modern Pesantren and Sir Sayyid's demands for radical intellectual reform. While Sir Sayyid demanded that science be used to reshape understandings of miracles and revelation, Pesantren preferred to use science as a tool to strengthen the existence of Islam in the public sphere. This difference in argumentative positions confirms that contemporary Pesantren prefer the path of controlled "indigenization of modernity" rather than the path of "radical modernism" offered by Sir Sayyid.

THE SELECTIVE RECEPTION OF SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN'S THOUGHT IN INDONESIAN PESANTREN: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

The forces of modernization and globalization have significantly reshaped the landscape of Islamic thought and educational practice, including within Indonesian pesantren. These transformations necessitate a sustained and critical dialogue between classical Islamic scholarship and reformist ideas emerging across the Muslim world. In this context, the thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan—characterized by an emphasis on rationality, openness to scientific knowledge, and educational reform—warrants careful examination with regard to its relevance and potential reception in pesantren. Rather than approaching his ideas as doctrines to be adopted in a linear manner, this study explores the extent to which they can be selectively accepted, adapted, or reinterpreted within the epistemological framework of pesantren, without eroding their deeply rooted religious identity and scholarly traditions.

One of the most significant areas of convergence between Sir Sayyid's thought and the contemporary needs of pesantren lies in the call for contextual *ijtihad*. Sir Sayyid urged Muslims to move beyond static *taqlid* by reopening the door to *ijtihad* as an intellectual response to changing historical conditions. This appeal resonates strongly with the current challenges faced by pesantren in addressing emerging issues such as biotechnology, digital ethics, modern Islamic economics, and religious pluralism. In this regard, *fiqh* increasingly needs to be interpreted through the lens of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in order to remain socially relevant. Sir Sayyid's vision of education adapted to the demands of the age also finds contemporary expression in Indonesia's *Merdeka*

Curriculum, which encourages critical thinking and engagement with real – world issues (Tajudin et al., 2024).

The author analyzes that Sir Sayyid's call to break the chain of static taqlid found its momentum in the need for Pesantren to respond to the complexity of contemporary issues. This relevance is clearly seen in the shift in Pesantren methodology from a textual – lexical approach to one based on Maqasid al – Syariah. This convergence is not merely a practical adaptation, but rather a shared frequency in viewing *ijtihad* as an intellectual obligation. In the Indonesian context, Sir Sayyid's spirit of "democratization of reason" manifests itself in a more open learning model, as embodied in the Merdeka Curriculum, which encourages santri to not only be consumers of classical texts but also critical analysts of issues ranging from biotechnology to digital ethics.

Second, the integration between science and religion becomes an operational and philosophical meeting point. Sir Sayyid's vision, which rejects the dichotomy between revelatory knowledge and empirical knowledge, can serve as a framework for modern Pesantren to formulate an educational approach that not only juxtaposes general knowledge and religion, but also creates synergy. Science is taught not merely as practical material, but framed within Islamic epistemology: natural science is considered a manifestation of sunnatullah and inspiration from revelation (Yusuf, 2015). The second point of convergence lies in the effort to end the dichotomy between revelatory knowledge (*naqli*) and empirical knowledge (*aqli*). The author argues that Sir Sayyid's vision of nature as the Work of God, which cannot contradict the Qur'an as the Word of God, provides a theological foundation for "Science Pesantren." This synergy goes beyond simply aligning general and religious subjects; it creates a philosophical framework in which science is understood as a manifestation of Sunnatullah. This integration provides a strong argumentative position for Pesantren that studying the laws of nature is another form of intellectual worship, a concept that Sir Sayyid once championed through the Aligarh movement.

Third, educational reform as a practical idea accompanying Sir Sayyid's spirit of thought resonated strongly in the context of Pesantren. Sir Sayyid established schools that combined religious and general education, Aligarh as a modern Islamic campus, and educational organizations that discussed the education of the people, showing that students gained a more holistic understanding when they studied science and religion in an integrated manner (Alam & Rachmadhani, 2021).

Fourth, Sir Sayyid's social pragmatism, namely that religious and educational theories must have real implications for the empowerment of the people, also resonates with the orientation of contemporary Pesantren. Sir Sayyid did not only talk about faith or doctrine, but was also active in the socio – economic development of the people, educational inclusion, and social diplomacy. In the Indonesian context, integrated Pesantren and science boarding schools have begun to demonstrate this orientation, which is not only about teaching religious texts and religion, but also technology, laboratories, competency development, and community service based on technology and research (Salmon, Saefudin, Mujahidin, & Husaini, 2024).

The author argues that Sir Sayyid's social pragmatism, which emphasizes that religious theory must have an impact on economic and social welfare, has now become the spirit of contemporary Pesantren. The transformation of Pesantren from mere centers of religious study into agents of social change that master laboratories and technological research is a concrete manifestation of Sir Sayyid's ideals. Convergence at this level

shows that Pesantren are no longer isolationist, but cosmopolitan: maintaining their Islamic identity while actively participating in global socio – economic development.

While the previous discussion has demonstrated significant areas of convergence between Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's reformist ideas and the contemporary needs of pesantren—particularly in the domains of education, scientific integration, and social pragmatism—this convergence does not imply complete epistemological harmony. Beneath these shared concerns lies a set of fundamental differences that shape how Sir Sayyid's thought is received and negotiated within traditional pesantren circles. These differences emerge most clearly in questions of religious authority, the role and limits of human reason, and the interpretation of metaphysical and supernatural elements of faith.

First, regarding the authority of scholars and madhhabs: Sir Sayyid criticized absolute taqlid and encouraged individual *ijtihad*, arguing that the current generation also needs to be accountable for their understanding of religion in accordance with the conditions of the times. For many traditional Pesantren, adherence to madhhabs (including Shafi'i in fiqh and Asy'ariyah in theology) is seen not as stagnation, but as a form of theological prudence and continuity of classical Islamic scholarly tradition (Gunawan, Wathani, Hanbali, & Roni, 2021). Therefore, Sir Sayyid's efforts to open up *ijtihad* as widely as possible are often perceived by some Pesantren as potentially weakening the religious authority that has maintained the cohesion of the religious community.

Second, excessive rationalism as a point of divergence. Sir Sayyid placed reason (*'aql*) in a very strong position in his religious discourse, even considering that natural laws and human experience could be witnesses (manifestations) to revelation and divine reality. However, the dominant Asy'ariyah epistemology in Pesantren acknowledges that reason has its limits, especially in understanding the unseen (elements that are not visible to the eye) such as miracles, the barzakh realm, the spiritual realm, and the afterlife (Amir, 2020), Sir Sayyid's rationalism is sometimes considered to have crossed the line between theory and traditional beliefs in Indian Islamic communities, especially on metaphysical issues. Pesantren with strong Asy'ariyah traditions will be more cautious towards approaches that could be considered to negate the supernatural elements in religion.

Third, reinterpretation of miracles and supernatural phenomena. Sir Sayyid's thinking sometimes attempts to interpret miracles, supernatural revelations, karamah, and other supernatural elements from a more naturalistic perspective that they are not always literal or exactly as described in traditional accounts, but rather symbols, metaphors, or manifestations of God's greatness through the laws of nature. Sir Sayyid sees nature and the laws of nature (*sunnatullah*) as the means through which God works, so that the meaning of some supernatural phenomena can be adjusted within an empirical framework and the laws of nature (Putri, 2019). However, traditional Pesantren often view miracles and the supernatural as fundamental elements of faith that cannot be played with or dissolved into naturalistic rationality, because these supernatural things encompass spiritual experiences, supernatural beliefs, and part of the legacy of the ulama tradition that shapes the faith of santri.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's diagnosis of Muslim decline should be understood not merely as a response to colonial domination, but as a profound epistemological critique of the culture of taqlid that had constrained the community's

critical and intellectual capacity. By advocating contextual *ijtihad* and grounding theology in the concept of *Sunnatullah*, Sir Sayyid sought to dismantle the rigid separation between revelation and scientific reality. His most significant historical contribution, therefore, lies in his intellectual courage to desacralize inherited interpretations in order to restore the sovereignty of Islamic reason within the rapidly changing conditions of modernity.

At the same time, the study reveals that *pesantren* possess a distinctive form of epistemic resilience rooted in the integration of *bayani* (textual authority), *burhani* (rational inquiry), and *irfani* (spiritual experience). Unlike Sir Sayyid's predominantly positivistic orientation, *pesantren* maintain the supranatural and metaphysical dimensions as essential anchors of faith. Nevertheless, contemporary *pesantren* are no longer homogeneous or static. A gradual shift is evident from a defensively *salafiyah* posture toward a more hybrid *khalafiyah* orientation, particularly in their openness to educational reform and scientific knowledge. Despite this transformation, the incorporation of science within *pesantren* often remains largely administrative and curricular, rather than extending into a deeper philosophical and theological engagement.

The interaction between Sir Sayyid's modernist thought and *pesantren* epistemology is best characterized as a form of tense selective adaptation. Convergence occurs primarily at the institutional level, especially in educational reform and social pragmatism, while significant divergence persists in matters of religious authority and metaphysics. *Pesantren* tend to accept the functional outcomes of Sir Sayyid's modernity—such as scientific integration and rational problem-solving—yet resist his naturalistic method when it is perceived to diminish the sacrality of miracles and the transcendent dimensions of revelation. In this sense, contemporary *pesantren* can be understood as practicing a form of controlled modernism, selectively negotiating modern rationality while preserving classical theological boundaries. This positioning challenges the assumption that *pesantren* are intellectually resistant or stagnant, instead highlighting their role as dynamic laboratories where tradition and modernity are continuously mediated.

In light of these findings, this study suggests the importance of reconstructing *pesantren* curricula by incorporating the philosophy of science as a mediating framework, in order to prevent cognitive dualism among students who navigate both religious and scientific worlds. Future research should further explore how *pesantren* articulate theological responses to emerging technological challenges—such as artificial intelligence—through an expanded yet disciplined practice of *ijtihad* that remains firmly grounded in their classical intellectual tradition.

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