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The Religion–Rationality Dichotomy in the Islamic Context: Critical Rationalism as an Attempt at Solution

*Dihotomija religija/racionalnost v islamskem
kontekstu: kritični racionalizem kot poskus rešitve*

Abstract: The tension between religion and rationality has long marked Islamic intellectual history. Two broad positions have dominated this debate. On the one hand, radical rationalists regard reason as the only valid arbiter of knowledge and tend to dismiss revelation as epistemically inadmissible. On the other hand, religious absolutists treat revealed truth as self-certifying and accept rational inquiry only insofar as it confirms prior religious conviction. This article argues that neither position has offered a stable resolution because both misidentify the source of the conflict. The problem is not primarily doctrinal, but epistemological and, more precisely, psychological: it concerns how truth is understood and how the knowing subject is imagined. Drawing on Fanayî's critique of naive realism, the article shows that traditional religious epistemology often assumes that truth is simple, singular, and passively received by a mind functioning as a neutral mirror. By contrast, modern critical epistemology understands truth as complex, mediated, and approached through historically and culturally situated acts of knowing. This difference in the psychology of knowing helps explain why dialogue between religious absolutism and uncompromising rationalism remains difficult. The article argues that critical rationalism, as developed by Popper, Albert, and Lakatos, offers a more defensible way out of this deadlock, since it applies the same standard of fallibilism to all knowledge claims and rejects absolute epistemic foundations for either religion or reason.

Keywords: religiosity, rationalism, Islamic thought, critical rationalism, Islamic orthodoxy

Izvleček: Napetost med religijo in racionalnostjo že dolgo zaznamuje islamsko intelektualno zgodovino. V tej razpravi sta prevladovali dve širši stališči. Na eni strani radikalni racionalisti razum obravnavajo kot edino veljavno merilo spoznanja in razodetje navedeno zavračajo kot epistemološko nesprejemljivo. Na drugi strani verski absolutisti razodeto resnico razumejo kot samoumevno in samopotrjujočo ter racionalno raziskovanje sprejemajo le toliko, kolikor potrjuje predhodno versko prepričanje. Članek trdi, da nobeno od teh stališč ne ponuja stabilne rešitve, ker obe strani napačno prepoznata izvor konflikta. Problem ni predvsem doktrinaren, temveč epistemološki in, natančneje, psihološki: zadeva način, kako je razumljena resnica in kako je zamišljen spoznavajoči subjekt. Izhajajoč iz Fanayijeve kritike naivnega realizma, članek pokaže, da tradicionalna verska epistemologija pogosto predpostavlja resnico kot preprosto, enotno in pasivno sprejeto v umu,

ki deluje kot nevtravno zrcalo. Nasprotno pa moderna kritična epistemologija resnico razume kot kompleksno, posredovano in dosegljivo prek zgodovinsko in kulturno umeščenih dejanj spoznavanja. Ta razlika v psihologiji spoznavanja pomaga pojasniti, zakaj dialog med verskim absolutizmom in brezkompromisnim racionalizmom ostaja težaven. Članek zagovarja tezo, da kritični racionalizem, kakor so ga razvili Popper, Albert in Lakatos, ponuja bolj prepričljivo pot iz tega zastoja, saj enako merilo falibilizma uporablja za vse spoznavne trditve in ne priznava absolutnih epistemoloških temeljev ne religiji ne razumu.

Ključne besede: religioznost, racionalizem, islamska misel, kritični racionalizem, islamska ortodoksija

Introduction

Rationality and religion have long stood in a complex and often contested relationship, each challenging the authority and limits of the other. Since antiquity, philosophical and theological reflection has been marked by debates over such dichotomies as reason and revelation, faith and morality, rational inquiry and spiritual experience, and reason and love. Within these debates, some thinkers have defended reason and philosophy as the ultimate authorities of judgment and knowledge, thereby rejecting or marginalizing forms of knowledge grounded in revelation, intuition, spiritual experience, or imagination. Conversely, others have regarded revelation, spiritual experience, or intuitive insight as the primary, or even exclusive, sources of truth and cognitive certainty. From this perspective, reason and philosophical inquiry are either disregarded altogether or accepted only insofar as they do not challenge established faith. The perceived opposition between the sacred and the worldly appears especially prominent in the intellectual and religious traditions shaped by the Abrahamic faiths. This tension has persisted across different historical periods and has continued to inform philosophical, theological, and cultural debates even in the postmodern context of the West.

The debate is far from resolved in contemporary Islamic thought. The Syrian philosopher Sadiq al-Azm poses it as a question of intellectual integrity: can one simultaneously hold inherited religious doctrines and the conclusions of modern science without sacrificing the coherence of one's thinking (Al-Azm 2014, 123)? The Iranian philosopher Mostafa Malekian goes further and argues that the incompatibility is structural, not contingent: religion by its nature demands unconditional submission to its founder, scripture, and authorities, while rationalism demands that every belief remain open to revision in light of evidence. According to him,



the two orientations cannot coexist in the same person (Malekian 2012). We take these challenges seriously. But we argue that they succeed only as critiques of a particular psychology of religious belief, not of religion as such, and that identifying this distinction opens the way to a resolution that neither al-Azm nor Malekian considers.

The argument of this paper is that the root of the religion-rationality dichotomy in the Islamic context lies in what Fanayī (1389) calls naive realism: the twin assumptions that truth is simple and given, and that the knowing mind is purely passive. These assumptions, when institutionalized in religious authority, make disagreement read as moral failure rather than as an ordinary epistemic condition. Critical rationalism dissolves the deadlock not by adjudicating between religion and science, but by rejecting naive realism on both sides and replacing it with a fallibilist epistemology in which all knowledge claims, religious and secular alike, remain open to honest scrutiny.

1 Theoretical framework

This article is theoretically grounded in critical rationalism, particularly as developed by Karl Popper and later elaborated by Hans Albert and Imre Lakatos. Critical rationalism provides a suitable framework for examining the religion-rationality dichotomy because it rejects all claims to absolute and final foundations of knowledge. Unlike dogmatic rationalism, it does not treat reason as an infallible source of certainty, and unlike religious absolutism, it does not allow revelation or tradition to remain immune from critical examination. Its central premise is that all knowledge claims, whether religious, philosophical, or scientific, are fallible and must remain open to criticism, revision, and rational scrutiny.

Within this framework, the conflict between religion and rationality is not understood primarily as a conflict between faith and reason, or between revelation and philosophy. Rather, it is interpreted as an epistemological problem concerning the status of truth, certainty, and interpretation. Critical rationalism challenges the assumption that any system of thought can possess an unquestionable foundation. In this sense, it offers a third position between religious dogmatism and radical rationalism: it neither



dismisses religion as inherently irrational nor accepts religious claims as self-certifying. Instead, it requires that all claims to truth be subject to the same critical standards.

This article also draws on Fanayī's critique of naive realism, which helps clarify the psychological and epistemological roots of the religion–rationality dichotomy. Naive realism assumes that truth is simple, singular, and directly accessible to a passive knowing subject. In many forms of traditional religious epistemology, this assumption leads to the belief that revealed truth is immediately clear and that disagreement with it reflects moral or spiritual failure rather than an honest epistemic difference. The article argues that knowledge is always mediated by interpretation, historical context, cultural formation, and the active role of the knowing subject.

Therefore, the theoretical basis of this study combines critical rationalism with an epistemological critique of naive realism. This combination allows the article to argue that the solution to the religion–rationality dichotomy does not lie in subordinating reason to revelation or revelation to reason. Rather, it lies in abandoning the demand for absolute certainty on both sides. Religious belief can remain meaningful, but only if it accepts the fallibility of human interpretation. Likewise, rational inquiry can remain authoritative, but only if it renounces the claim to final and unquestionable foundations. In this sense, critical rationalism offers a methodological path toward a more open, self-critical, and dialogical understanding of the relationship between religion and rationality.

2 Critiques of religion in the contemporary Islamic world

The encounter with Western modernity confronted Muslim intellectuals with a challenge that was not primarily military or technological. It was epistemological. The rationalist and scientific frameworks that had reshaped European thought arrived in the Islamic world not as options to be gradually absorbed but as a concentrated package that called the entire structure of traditional knowledge into question at once. Sadiq al-Azm argues that Muslim societies inherited the intellectual consequences of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, Darwinism, and historical



materialism simultaneously and without the gradual preparation that had preceded them in Europe (Al-Azm 2014, 17–75).

Al-Azm formulates the problem as a question of intellectual integrity: »Can I continue to accept inherited doctrines if they are incompatible with other convictions which I have formed, without betraying the principle of intellectual integrity and without sacrificing the unity and internal cohesion of my thoughts?« (Al-Azm 2014, 123) On this basis, he distinguishes between religion as a cognitive-epistemological system, which must submit to rational scrutiny, and religion as a personal spiritual experience, which belongs to a different register. What al-Azm identifies, without explicitly framing it in these terms, is the consequence of naive realism in the contemporary context: a tradition that treats its own claims as self-certifying cannot engage honestly with the epistemological challenge posed by modernity. For al-Azm, one cannot sincerely maintain inherited doctrines when they conflict with other rationally formed convictions without compromising intellectual integrity.

Malekian¹ pushes this argument further, moving from epistemological tension to structural incompatibility. In his view, a religious person cannot be a rationalist, and a rationalist cannot be religious. His reasoning turns on the meaning of submission. Religion, understood as an institutionalized system, requires the believer to accept the authority of its founder, scripture, and tradition without the conditional and revisable assent that rationalism demands:

It would make no sense for someone to consider themselves a Muslim, while at the same time declaring that until he finds compelling evidence, he will not believe a verse of the Qur'an. If that were the case, then everyone in this world would be called a Muslim. But a Muslim is one who obeys/submits without any hesitation to the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, that is, who accepts their words and teachings without any doubt. (Malekian 2012)

1 Several ideas and viewpoints of Mostafa Malekian were discussed in the article: Rexhepi and Bërkolli (2024).



The rationalist, Malekian argues, cannot satisfy this demand without abandoning rationalism; and the believer who insists on rational verification of every doctrine is, by his definition, not a believer. His alternative, a project he calls »Rationality and Spirituality«, preserves the personal dimensions of religious experience while detaching them from the cognitive authority claims of institutionalized doctrine (Malekian 2012).

Malekian's incompatibility thesis applies specifically to religion understood as an institutionalized doctrinal system with cognitive authority claims. It does not apply to religion understood as spiritual cultivation, moral orientation, or a form of life that does not make the heavy cosmological claims that generate the conflict (Kripke 1982, 34). More importantly for our argument, both al-Azm and Malekian, in diagnosing the problem, share an assumption with the religious absolutists they critique. Both treat their own epistemological orientation, the demand for rational verifiability, as the correct one, rather than examining what kind of epistemology could adjudicate between competing orientations without simply presupposing the answer. Section 4 addresses this question.

3 Naïve realism and the psychology of knowing truth

As the preceding discussion suggests, the disagreement concerns not only what is true but also what knowing the truth involves. This section presents observations and analysis by drawing on Fanayī's epistemological diagnosis. His central claim is that traditional religious epistemology encodes what he calls naïve realism: two interlocking hypotheses about truth and the knowing subject that together make disagreement structurally unintelligible. The first hypothesis is metaphysical. Truth is simple, it has no gradations, perspectives, or complexity. It does not come in degrees. The second hypothesis is psychological. The knowing subject is entirely passive, a mirror that reflects truth directly once the moral obstacles to reception are cleared away. In this picture, if someone rejects a claim that is true and simple, there is only one possible explanation: something is morally wrong with them. As Fanayī observes, in the traditional framework, a person who does not accept the truth is described as follows:



The first concerns the 'nature' and 'structure' of truth, and the second concerns the 'psychology of perception'. The first hypothesis, which is a metaphysical and ontological hypothesis, says: 'truth is simple', that is, it has no form or content, and it is without stratifications, dimensions, aspects, degrees, facets, or varied and complex reflections; therefore, in it there are no doubts, hesitations, or complications. The second hypothesis, a psychological hypothesis, says: the individual in the position of perceiving the truth is completely passive, that is, he is only a 'beholder' and his mind is 'flat' like a mirror, and operates 'without coloration'; therefore, it suffices only to open his eyes and to cleanse his heart of vices, and thus the truth will be reflected in his mind and heart. We may call this stance naive realism. Hence, the person has no choice but to accept the truth passively. If he does not accept it, he has rejected it (has committed *kufṛ*), and his *kufṛ* stems from his carnal vices, meaning it is the result of a disease, and not based on any reasoned decision. (Fanāyī 1389 [1969], 141)

This is not simply a description of historical religious culture. It is a precise diagnosis of why that culture tends, under certain institutional conditions, toward coercion rather than argument. If truth is simple and if the proper mind receives it passively, then the person who fails to receive it cannot be in an honest epistemic predicament. There is no complexity that might explain their failure; there is only their fault. In tradition, the individual had no conceptual space to seek truth independently, because the truth was given *a priori*, and one only had to accept it and remain within tradition. Otherwise, if one refused it, either he was considered ill and had to »combat the vices of his carnal self«, or he was rejected (declared unworthy of the community, a heretic, *kāfir* or *murtadd*), or he faced judgments and punishments. By contrast,

one of the main discoveries that ushered humanity into the new world is the fact that people realized the falsity of the two hypotheses mentioned above and their outcomes, and they understood that the truth is not 'simple' but is extremely complicated, stratified, and multi-dimensional, and not only does it have one form and content, but it has a thousand faces and reflections and a thousand invisible aspects, and it is not clear but rather doubtful, conjectural,



complicated; in other words, mysterious. Further, the human mind in accepting the truth is not completely passive and contemplative, but is active and creative. Thus, not only individual attributes, spiritual and psychic characteristics, and one's moral and epistemological values and vices, but also geographical, political, social, familial, and cultural environments all pour into one's knowledge. (Fanāyī 1389 [1969], 142)

Fanāyī describes the shift as the recognition that truth is not simple but »extremely complicated, stratified, and multi-dimensional« and that the knowing subject is not passive but »active and creative« in constructing knowledge (Fanāyī 1389, 142). What the modern knower possesses is not the truth itself but a theory of the truth, in the construction of which the knower plays an irreducible role. That is what Kant expressed through the distinction between the *Noumenon*, the absolute truth, and the *Phenomenon*, the truth for us. In other words, the forms and theories that people have in their minds are the results of their own reconstruction of the truth. And indeed, this reconstruction can be »rational« or »non-rational«. Moreover, modern man understood that a single truth can take different forms and that from a single truth we can derive diverse interpretations, commentaries, presentations, and theories. The world of existence is like a text that we can view from different perspectives and subject to all sorts of readings (Fanāyī 1389 [1969], 144). The practical implications of this shift run deeper than a revision in philosophical anthropology. Under naive realism, disagreement licenses coercion: if the other person simply refuses to receive what is plainly given, there is nothing to discuss and suppression becomes the rational response. Under the modern epistemological orientation, disagreement is the expected condition of finite knowers confronting a complex reality, and the rational response is inquiry, not punishment. The religion-rationality dichotomy is not a conflict over which specific claims are true. It is a conflict between two psychological stances toward the act of knowing, one treating the mind as a passive mirror and the other as an active constructor. Resolving it requires addressing that prior conflict directly (Fanāyī 1389 [1969], 145). It is worth noting that radical rationalists who dismiss religion entirely make a symmetrical version of the same mistake. They treat their rational conclusions as direct and unmediated access to reality and interpret religious disagreement as irrationality rather than as an alternative epistemic



orientation that requires engagement. The difference between naive realism in religion and dogmatism in rationalism is one of content, not structure. Both presuppose the passive-mirror psychology and conclude that those who disagree are failing to receive what is obvious. A resolution to the religion-rationality dichotomy must reject that assumption on both sides simultaneously.

One partial resolution proposed by several thinkers is domain separation. Soroush distinguishes between the »eternal order« of spiritual experience, where temporal and spatial categories do not apply, and the »temporal order« of reason, science, and material life (2002, 76–77). Popper makes a related point when he argues that religious discourse often concerns feelings and experiences that do not function as empirical claims and therefore should not be judged as if religion were a science (2008, 50). This approach is defensible insofar as religion is understood as personal spiritual experience, moral cultivation, or existential orientation. Its limitation, however, is that religious traditions do not always remain within the private or spiritual domain. They often make claims about law, politics, education, governance, social order, and public authority. Once religion enters these domains, its claims can no longer be exempted from critical and rational assessment. This is especially relevant in contemporary Muslim societies, where religious discourse frequently presents itself not merely as a source of spiritual meaning but as an authority capable of regulating all spheres of life. Projects such as the »Islamization of knowledge« further illustrate this tendency, since they seek to extend religious authority even into fields of scientific and academic inquiry. For this reason, domain separation can only offer a limited solution. It may protect the personal and spiritual dimensions of religion from reduction to empirical science, but it cannot shield religious claims that intervene in public life from rational scrutiny. Paya clearly draws out this consequence: religion should not be reduced to a purely psychological, emotional, and non-cognitive state, nor should religious claims be regarded as beyond rational critical assessment (Paya 2023, 337). Even the most authoritative religious claims reach us through human interpretation, and what is humanly interpreted cannot be treated as sacrosanct. Therefore, critical rationalism remains necessary wherever religious claims become cognitive, social, or political claims.



To summarize the argument of this section: the religion–rationality dichotomy rests on a specific and identifiable epistemological assumption. When that assumption is made explicit through Fanayî's framework, the dichotomy can be addressed at its source rather than managed at the level of its symptoms. Overcoming naive realism does not mean abandoning faith. It means holding faith without the demand for cognitive certainty that naive realism imposes, and engaging honestly with the rational scrutiny that any public truth claim invites.

4 Critical rationalism as an attempt to resolve this dichotomy

Critical rationalism, as developed by Popper and elaborated by Albert and Lakatos, meets that demand. Its core commitment is that no knowledge claim, religious or scientific, can establish itself as absolutely certain and exempt from revision. Every system of thought is fallible and open to criticism (Popper 1963, 75). This is what Popper means by »modest rationalism«: not a diminished rationalism, but one that does not exempt itself from the fallibilism it applies to others. Critical rationalism does not declare religion irrational. It applies to religious claims the same standard it applies to all claims: they must remain open to honest scrutiny and, where scrutiny reveals error, to revision. The argument of Section 3 sets up a precise demand for any proposed resolution: it must reject naive realism on both sides simultaneously, without reducing either religion or reason to the other.

Albert's Münchhausen Trilemma makes the point in its strongest form: any attempt to ground a knowledge claim in an indisputable foundation ends in circularity, infinite regress, or arbitrary postulate (Albert 1985, 146). The conclusion is not skepticism but a requirement of intellectual honesty: no knowledge system possesses the kind of absolute grounding that naive realism assumes for prophetically received truth. Lakatos extends this into evaluative practice: theories are assessed not by whether they have been conclusively confirmed, but by their ability to generate understanding and absorb criticism productively (Lakatos 1978, 47). This approach leaves room even for religious systems, so long as they are willing to submit to critical analysis and do not forcibly claim epistemological absolutism. Argumentation allows us, in principle, to distinguish rational



judgement from judgement driven by self-interest, group loyalty, or emotional commitment. But no argument, however careful, delivers certainty. Habermas's observation is worth preserving here: tradition carries accumulated moral and cultural experience that cannot be reduced to instrumental calculation (Habermas 2008, 13). The point of critical rationalism is not to discard tradition but to hold it without claiming that it is beyond examination.

There is a clear link from naive realism to violence motivated by religion, and it stems from certainty. Someone who believes their understanding of truth is direct and complete, and who cannot see disagreement as an honest epistemic difference, has no rational way to choose between persuasion and force. As Popper observed, this »certainty of belief«, the conviction that one's own position needs no further justification while others' do, leads to an apologetic stance toward violence (Popper 1963, 122). Critical rationalism demands applying the same critical standards to one's own beliefs, removing that epistemological barrier. It is important to state plainly: a tradition that selectively uses rational and scientific arguments to dismiss rivals while protecting its own claims from scrutiny is not practicing critical rationalism. Instead, it practices naive realism in a dialectical form. The honest stance that critical rationalism advocates is a willingness to subject one's beliefs to the same critical examination as others' and to revise them when the evidence calls for it.

Contemporary Islamic reformist thinkers, Fazlur Rahman (1982), Mohammed Arkoun (2002), Abdolkarim Soroush (2000), Muhammad Shahrur (1990) have, through different routes, arrived at positions structurally consistent with critical rationalism. The axis shared by these thinkers is the distinction between Revelation as a divine source and tradition as a fallible human interpretation. Theological and juridical formulations are products of specific historical circumstances, not timeless articulations of divine will. The hermeneutical practice implied here consists in tracing the ethical principles embedded in a text and reinterpreting them in light of changing historical circumstances. This is precisely the kind of ongoing critical engagement that critical rationalism demands of any living intellectual tradition. It is also worth noting that the most productive periods in Islamic intellectual history were those where such open critical inquiry was institutionally possible. Critical rationalism is not being imported into



Islam from outside; it is recovering a commitment to rational scrutiny that the tradition has repeatedly generated and repeatedly suppressed.

What should be emphasized is that critical rationalism does not require the rejection of inherited thought. Tradition, as Fanayī writes, »is the collection of the theoretical and practical experiences of our predecessors« (Fanayī 1389, 258), and that accumulated experience carries genuine cognitive value. What critical rationalism requires is not that tradition be discarded but that it be held without the claim to immunity from scrutiny. Following tradition without critical analysis is no more rational than rejecting it without examination. Reason itself operates within cultural and historical frameworks and produces judgments that are provisional rather than final. This mutual fallibility of both religious tradition and rational argument is precisely what makes honest dialogue between them possible rather than impossible.

Conclusion

The religion–rationality dichotomy in Islamic thought cannot be adequately explained as a simple opposition between faith and reason, or between revelation and philosophical inquiry. As this article has argued, the deeper source of the tension lies in the epistemological and psychological assumptions through which truth is understood. In particular, the persistence of naive realism has encouraged the view that truth is simple, self-evident, and passively received, while disagreement is often interpreted as a moral or spiritual failure rather than as a legitimate epistemic condition. This assumption has shaped not only traditional religious discourse, but also certain forms of dogmatic rationalism that treat their own conclusions as final and self-validating. The encounter between Islamic thought and modern rational and scientific knowledge intensified this tension, because it brought into question inherited forms of authority, interpretation, and certainty. Contemporary attempts to resolve the problem by reducing religion to the sphere of personal spirituality offer a partial solution, but they remain insufficient when religious claims extend into public, legal, political, educational, or epistemological domains. In such cases, religious discourse cannot be exempted from rational and critical assessment, since its claims are mediated through human interpretation and therefore



remain fallible. Critical rationalism offers a more balanced framework for addressing this problem. It does not require the rejection of religion, nor does it grant an absolute and unquestionable authority to reason. Rather, it insists that all knowledge claims, whether religious, philosophical, or scientific, remain open to criticism, revision, and interpretive scrutiny. From this perspective, the reconciliation of religion and rationality does not depend on subordinating one to the other, but on rejecting the demand for absolute certainty on both sides. The significance of this approach lies in its capacity to preserve the meaningful dimensions of religious belief while preventing religious interpretation from becoming immune to critique. At the same time, it prevents rational inquiry from becoming dogmatic by reminding it of its own fallibility. Thus, critical rationalism provides a methodological basis for a more dialogical and self-critical engagement between Islamic theology, philosophy, and modern forms of knowledge. Such an approach may contribute to a more rigorous reconsideration of inherited traditions and to a more productive relationship between religious thought and rational inquiry in the contemporary Islamic context.



Data Availability Statement

As this study is based on a theoretical approach, no new research data were generated or analyzed.

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