

Al-Azhar Reform and the Pressures of Globalization: Reorienting Turath Pedagogy in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis dinamika reformasi pendidikan tinggi Islam di Universitas Al-Azhar dalam menghadapi tekanan globalisasi pada abad ke-21. Berangkat dari asumsi bahwa reformasi di Al-Azhar tidak bergerak melalui pemutusan tradisi, studi ini menelaah bagaimana *turāth*, sebagai fondasi epistemik dan pedagogis, direorientasikan secara hati-hati melalui strategi kontinuitas, adaptasi terbatas, dan negosiasi makna. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis analisis dokumen, wacana institusional, dan literatur akademik, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa perubahan yang terjadi lebih bersifat pedagogis daripada epistemik. Teks-teks klasik tetap menjadi pusat otoritas keilmuan, namun semakin dibingkai melalui konteks sosial, isu kontemporer, dan tuntutan publik global. Artikel ini juga menyoroti ketegangan antara reformasi institusional dan realitas kelas, serta fragmentasi implementasi antar fakultas, dosen, dan generasi ulama. Alih-alih memaknai ambivalensi sebagai kegagalan reformasi, studi ini menafsirkannya sebagai kondisi pedagogis yang memungkinkan *turāth* tetap hidup dalam dunia yang berubah cepat. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada diskursus global tentang pendidikan Islam dengan menawarkan pemahaman yang lebih bernuansa mengenai reformasi, otoritas, dan keberlanjutan tradisi.

Kata kunci: Al-Azhar; reformasi pendidikan Islam; *turāth*; pedagogi Islam; globalisasi

Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of higher Islamic education reform at Al-Azhar University under the pressures of twenty-first-century globalization. Departing from the assumption that reform at Al-Azhar avoids narratives of rupture, the study explores how *turāth*, as an epistemic and pedagogical foundation, is cautiously reoriented through strategies of continuity, selective adaptation, and negotiated change. Employing a qualitative approach based on document analysis, institutional discourse, and relevant scholarly literature, the article demonstrates that recent

reforms are largely pedagogical rather than epistemic in nature. Classical texts remain central to knowledge authority, yet they are increasingly framed through social context, contemporary issues, and global public expectations. The analysis further highlights the gap between institutional reform agendas and classroom realities, revealing fragmented implementation across faculties, lecturers, and scholarly generations. Rather than interpreting ambivalence as a failure of reform, the article argues that tension, hesitation, and inconsistency constitute a pedagogical condition that allows *turāth* to remain intellectually active in a rapidly changing world. This study contributes to global discussions on Islamic higher education by offering a nuanced account of reform, authority, and the sustainability of tradition under globalization.

Keywords: Al-Azhar; Islamic education reform; *turāth*; Islamic pedagogy; globalization

Introduction

For centuries, Al-Azhar University has occupied a singular place in the landscape of Islamic higher education (Bano, Masooda & Benadi, 2018). It is often described, sometimes reverently, sometimes uncritically, as the guardian of *turāth*, the vast corpus of classical Islamic knowledge that stretches from jurisprudence and theology to grammar, logic, and ethics (Cochran, 2013). Yet to frame Al-Azhar merely as a museum of tradition would be misleading (Hatina, 2003). Even a brief look at its long history reveals an institution that has repeatedly adjusted, resisted, absorbed, and reinterpreted change (Brunner, 2009). Still, something feels different about the pressures it faces today. Globalization, in its many guises, seems to touch Al-Azhar not only from the outside, but from within its own pedagogical assumptions (El Hakam et al., 2025).

We think this is where the tension becomes interesting. On the one hand, *turāth* pedagogy, text-centered, commentary-driven, slow, cumulative, has been precisely what allowed Al-Azhar to endure political upheavals, colonial interventions, and ideological storms (Ibrahim, 2024). On the other hand, the contemporary global order increasingly rewards speed, interdisciplinarity, measurable outcomes, and market-oriented relevance (Ma`arif et al., 2023). These are not simply administrative preferences; they shape how knowledge is valued, taught, and legitimized (Jakes, 2023). The question, then, is not whether Al-Azhar should “modernize” (a term that already carries too much baggage), but how it negotiates continuity under conditions that subtly, and sometimes aggressively, redefine what counts as valid education (Nakissa, 2022).

Reform at Al-Azhar is not new (Zengin, 2022). Historians often point to the nineteenth-century reforms under Muhammad ‘Ali or the curricular restructuring of the twentieth century as evidence that change is woven into

the institution's DNA (Elston, 2022). Yet many observers, myself included, at least at first glance, sense a certain fatigue surrounding reform discourse today (As'ad et al., 2021). There are policy documents, revised curricula, new faculties, international partnerships. And still, lingering questions remain. Has the epistemic core of *turāth* pedagogy actually shifted, or has it merely been surrounded by modern institutional forms? Perhaps the reforms are more cosmetic than transformative. Or perhaps transformation is happening in quieter, less visible ways, inside classrooms, study circles, and student practices that official reports rarely capture (Mayeur-Jaouen, 2021).

Globalization complicates this further (Elgendi, 2021). It is not only about Western academic standards or international rankings, though those certainly matter. It also involves transnational Islamic networks, digital learning platforms, donor expectations, and the symbolic role Al-Azhar plays in global debates on moderation, authority, and religious legitimacy (Al-Ansari, 2021). In this sense, Al-Azhar is not simply reacting to globalization; it is being actively positioned within it. This positioning creates pressure to speak a global language, sometimes literally in English, while remaining anchored in Arabic textual traditions that resist easy translation, both linguistically and conceptually (El-Ashmouni & Salama, 2020).

This article starts from a simple, perhaps overly cautious assumption: that *turāth* pedagogy at Al-Azhar is neither frozen nor fully reinvented (Ragab, 2019). It exists in a state of negotiation. Sometimes this negotiation is explicit, articulated in reform agendas and policy statements. At other times, it is implicit, visible only through pedagogical practices, assessment patterns, or the uneasy coexistence of classical texts and modern disciplinary frameworks. We do not claim to resolve this tension neatly. In fact, we are not sure it can be resolved at all (Bano, M & Benadi, 2019).

What we aim to do instead is to explore how recent reforms at Al-Azhar reflect deeper questions about knowledge, authority, and relevance in the twenty-first century (Bano, M, 2018b). By situating these reforms within the broader pressures of globalization, the article examines whether *turāth* pedagogy is being reoriented, reinterpreted, or quietly defended (El-Sherif, 2018). The analysis does not assume that globalization is inherently corrosive, nor that tradition is automatically virtuous. Both, we think, are more ambivalent than we often admit. And it is precisely within this ambivalence that Al-Azhar's contemporary educational trajectory becomes most revealing, not only for Egypt, but for Islamic higher education more broadly.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, partly because the object under discussion, *turāth* pedagogy, is not easily captured

through numbers or formal indicators. We considered, briefly, whether a comparative or quantitative design might strengthen the argument. But in the end, it felt somewhat artificial. Pedagogical orientation, especially in an institution as layered as Al-Azhar University, is better understood through meanings, discourses, and practices than through metrics alone.

The primary method used is critical document analysis. This includes official reform documents issued by Al-Azhar authorities, curriculum guidelines from selected faculties (particularly those combining religious and “modern” disciplines), and public statements by senior scholars and administrators. These texts are read not simply as policy instruments, but as rhetorical artifacts, documents that reveal anxieties, aspirations, and sometimes contradictions in how reform is imagined and justified. We paid attention not only to what is emphasized, but also to what seems conspicuously absent or vaguely stated, which, we think, can be just as revealing.

In addition to institutional documents, the study draws on a selective review of secondary literature: scholarly analyses of Al-Azhar reforms, works on Islamic higher education under globalization, and studies on *turāth* and knowledge transmission. This is not intended as an exhaustive literature review. Rather, the literature is used dialogically, as a way to situate Al-Azhar within broader debates about tradition, authority, and modern education. At times, these sources agree with one another; at other moments, they pull in different directions. We chose not to smooth out these tensions too neatly.

To complement textual analysis, the article also relies on interpretive insights drawn from publicly available interviews, lectures, and recorded discussions involving Al-Azhar scholars. While this does not replace ethnographic fieldwork, something that would certainly deepen the analysis, it offers glimpses into how reform is discussed in less formal, more reflective settings. Listening to these conversations, we was struck by how often reform was framed defensively, as clarification rather than innovation. That observation, admittedly subjective, shaped the analytical lens of this study.

Analytically, the study uses a thematic reading strategy. Texts and materials were coded around recurring themes such as continuity versus change, authority and legitimacy, global relevance, and pedagogical method. These themes were not predetermined in a rigid sense; they emerged gradually through repeated reading. We allowed some overlap and ambiguity in the coding process, partly because forcing clean categories felt at odds with the messy reality of institutional reform.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this method. The absence of direct classroom observation and interviews with students means that everyday pedagogical practices are inferred rather than directly observed. As a result, the analysis leans more toward institutional

discourse than lived experience. We are aware that this creates a certain distance. Still, we would argue that discourse itself, especially in a globally visible institution like Al-Azhar, is not merely decorative. It shapes expectations, legitimizes choices, and quietly defines what kinds of pedagogical change are thinkable in the first place.

Results and Discussion

1. Reform without Rupture: Continuity as an Institutional Strategy

One of the most striking findings of this study is the way reform at Al-Azhar University is consistently articulated through the language of continuity. Reform, in this sense, is never framed as a break, let alone a rupture. Instead, it is almost always narrated as *tajdīd*, renewal from within, carefully distinguished from *taghyīr* understood as radical alteration. At first glance, this may sound like a familiar rhetorical move, even a predictable one (Bano, M, 2018a). Yet the persistence of this framing suggests something deeper than mere institutional conservatism. Continuity functions not only as a cultural preference, but as a strategic resource.

Institutionally, Al-Azhar derives much of its authority from its uninterrupted chain of transmission. Knowledge is legitimate because it can be traced, through texts, commentaries, teachers, and generations, back to recognized scholarly lineages (Spannaus, 2018). A reform discourse that openly celebrates rupture would risk undermining this epistemic architecture. In this context, continuity is not simply about preserving the past; it is about safeguarding the very conditions under which Al-Azhar can claim authority in the present. Reform, therefore, must appear as refinement, clarification, or recontextualization, never as displacement.

This logic becomes visible in curricular reforms. New subjects are introduced, interdisciplinary programs are established, and modern sciences are increasingly accommodated. Yet these changes are often framed as complements rather than replacements. Classical texts remain central, even when surrounded by new explanatory layers. We found it telling that reform documents rarely specify what should be abandoned. The emphasis is almost always on addition, enrichment, or integration. Perhaps this is intentional ambiguity, a way to keep reform flexible while avoiding open confrontation with traditionalists. Or perhaps it reflects a genuine belief that the core does not need to change, only its outer expressions.

At the same time, continuity also sets clear boundaries. By insisting that reform must grow organically from *turāth*, Al-Azhar limits the range of pedagogical experimentation deemed acceptable. Certain methods, problem-based learning, critical theory, or sociological critique of religious texts, may be selectively adopted, but only insofar as they can be reconciled

with inherited frameworks. This produces a reform dynamic that is incremental, cautious, and sometimes frustratingly slow. Yet from within the institution, slowness itself may be interpreted as prudence rather than inertia.

There is also a political dimension to this strategy. In a global environment where Islamic institutions are often pressured to demonstrate moderation, relevance, and alignment with international norms, Al-Azhar's insistence on continuity serves as a stabilizing narrative. It allows the institution to engage globally without appearing reactive or externally driven. Reform is presented as self-initiated, rooted in internal scholarly logic, even when responding to unmistakably global pressures (Nakissa, 2014). This distinction matters, especially for an institution that sees itself as a reference point rather than a follower.

Still, this strategy is not without tension. Continuity can legitimize reform, but it can also dilute its transformative potential. By avoiding rupture, Al-Azhar preserves trust among its constituencies, yet it may also postpone difficult epistemic questions about authority, interpretation, and relevance in contemporary contexts (Scott, 2012). In some moments, reform seems to circle around these questions rather than confront them directly. Whether this is a limitation or a deliberate choice remains open to interpretation.

What becomes clear, however, is that reform at Al-Azhar is not designed to shock or disrupt (Aşık, 2012). It is designed to endure. Continuity, in this sense, is both shield and compass, protecting the institution from destabilization while quietly guiding the direction and pace of change. Whether such a model can sustain itself amid accelerating global transformations is uncertain. But for now, reform without rupture appears not as a contradiction, but as a carefully cultivated institutional philosophy.

2. Reconfiguring Turāth Pedagogy: From Textual Mastery to Contextual Awareness

If the first theme in Al-Azhar's reform story is "continuity," the second, more subtle, and honestly more complicated, is a kind of pedagogical reconfiguration that tries to *keep the text at the center* while changing what the text is expected to do in the world. Classical books remain there, heavy and authoritative, often literally occupying the physical center of learning (Zeghal, Malika, 2007). But the framing around them starts to shift. Not dramatically, not in ways that would announce themselves as a revolution. More like a slow adjustment in the horizon of purpose: from mastery of inherited meanings toward an increased sensitivity to contemporary contexts and public needs.

Traditionally, *turāth* pedagogy at Al-Azhar has been strongly oriented toward textual competence: accurate reading, memorization, controlled interpretation, and disciplined movement through layers of

commentary. The goal is not “creative” interpretation in the modern academic sense, but *competent inhabitation* of the tradition, knowing where an argument sits, which school it belongs to, what its canonical proofs are, and which counter-arguments must be addressed. In this model, the ideal scholar is someone who can navigate the internal logic of the textual universe with precision (Gesink, 2009). And to be fair, there is something intellectually rigorous about this. Sometimes we think outsiders underestimate how demanding it is.

What seems to be changing, however, is the institutional encouragement, at least in certain faculties and public-facing initiatives, for students and teachers to connect that textual universe to questions that are not strictly internal to it: modern legal systems, biomedical ethics, citizenship, gender debates, climate and ecological crises, global media controversies, interfaith relations, even international diplomacy (Zeghal, M, 1999). These issues show up not only as “topics” added at the margins, but as contexts that reshape how *turāth* is taught and justified. The text remains the reference point, but the “problem” is increasingly generated by contemporary life rather than by inter-textual debate alone.

This is where the difference between *epistemic* change and *pedagogical* change becomes important. Pedagogically, many reforms can be described as changes in presentation: adding contemporary case studies, encouraging applied discussion, inviting students to articulate the relevance of classical arguments, sometimes incorporating comparative perspectives (Reimer, 1997). Epistemically, however, the deeper question is whether the *authority structure* of knowledge is shifting. Is the classical text still the primary generator of normativity, with context serving merely as an application site? Or is context beginning to function as a co-producer of meaning, something that can press back on the inherited frameworks and force methodological reconsideration?

From what this study suggests, the shift remains more pedagogical than epistemic in most cases. The tradition is being asked to speak more directly to the present, but the foundational hierarchy is largely preserved: text first, context second. And perhaps that is precisely the point. Al-Azhar can broaden its relevance while keeping intact the grammar of authority that defines it. But even if epistemic change is limited, pedagogical change still matters. Over time, shifts in teaching practice can subtly cultivate different habits of reasoning in students. You can keep the same books and still produce a different kind of graduate.

The reinterpretation of the *sharḥ-hāshiyah* method illustrates this tension very clearly. In its classic form, the commentary tradition is designed to stabilize meaning. It does not merely “explain” the base text; it maps interpretive possibilities while policing boundaries. The student learns to move through layers: *matn*, *sharḥ*, *hāshiyah*, sometimes even *taqrīrāt*. This layered reading trains a specific intellectual disposition:

patient, cautious, and deeply attentive to scholarly precedent. The risk, often highlighted by critics, is that it can become formulaic, turning learning into repetitive reproduction. But that critique is not always fair. In its best form, the *sharḥ* tradition is a sophisticated discipline of thought (Zeghal, M, 1996).

Under reform pressures, there are signs that this method is being reframed. Not abandoned, but reinterpreted as a tool for contextual reasoning rather than only textual deepening. For example, teachers may use the commentary layers to show how earlier scholars responded to crises and new realities in their own times, political disorder, sectarian disputes, moral panics, shifting economic arrangements. The implied lesson is that contextual responsiveness is not a modern intrusion; it is embedded in the historical tradition itself. We find this move quite clever, actually. It allows Al-Azhar to argue that contextual awareness is not a concession to globalization but a retrieval of something already present within *turāth*.

Yet we're not sure how far this reinterpretation can go without producing friction. The *sharḥ-ḥāshiyah* method is anchored in a logic of authorized inheritance. Contextualization, when taken seriously, can generate uncomfortable questions: What if contemporary contexts reveal limitations in older categories? What if new realities cannot be handled by analogy alone? What if the public expects answers that classical manuals did not anticipate? At that point, teachers and students might feel pushed toward methodological tools that are not traditionally emphasized, *maqāṣid* reasoning, interdisciplinary social analysis, empirical evidence, legal theory adapted to modern governance, and so on. These tools exist within Islamic intellectual history, of course, but they are not always foregrounded in the everyday routine of textual study.

There is also a global public dimension that complicates the picture. Al-Azhar's authority today is not only internal, directed at its students. It is increasingly performative and external: media statements, global conferences, institutional diplomacy, online fatwa platforms, international dialogues. In that arena, "context" becomes unavoidable. Public legitimacy is shaped by how quickly and convincingly Al-Azhar can address contested issues. This pushes pedagogy toward a more outward-facing orientation: producing graduates who can translate *turāth* into language that speaks to modern publics, without sounding either irrelevant or overly defensive.

But this translation is not neutral. It can change the tradition in the act of explaining it. The more Al-Azhar engages global audiences, the more it must anticipate non-traditional questions, different epistemic expectations, and sometimes hostile interpretive frames. Students trained only in internal textual debates may struggle to operate in that environment. So the pedagogical shift toward contextual awareness is, in part, a pragmatic response: a way to ensure that *turāth* remains socially functional and institutionally defensible.

So where does this leave us? The reconfiguration of *turāth* pedagogy at Al-Azhar seems to be moving along a careful middle line. Textual mastery is still treated as the non-negotiable core. Contextual awareness is increasingly treated as a necessary extension. The institution is trying to produce scholars who can do both: remain loyal to the inherited architecture of knowledge while responding to a world that does not wait for slow commentarial processes.

And maybe this is the most honest way to say it: Al-Azhar appears to be searching for a pedagogy that preserves *depth* without losing *reach*. It wants scholarship that is rooted but not sealed off. Whether that balance can be maintained, especially as global pressures intensify, remains uncertain. But the attempt itself tells us something important: reform at Al-Azhar is not only about adding new subjects or updating curricula. It is also, quietly, about redefining what it means to be a “traditional” scholar in a twenty-first-century world.

3. Global Discourses, Local Authority: Negotiating Legitimacy in a Globalized Islamic World

Globalization does not arrive at Al-Azhar as a single, clearly defined force. It comes in fragments, policy language about moderation, international expectations around deradicalization, invitations to interfaith forums, funding structures tied to global partnerships, and, perhaps most quietly, assumptions about what a “responsible” Islamic institution should sound like in public. Together, these pressures shape the educational discourse of Al-Azhar University, even when they are not explicitly acknowledged as such. The institution is rarely described as being *pushed* by global forces; instead, it is presented as *responding* to global challenges from a position of authority. That distinction matters, at least rhetorically.

One of the clearest examples of this negotiation is the prominence of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) in Al-Azhar’s contemporary discourse. Moderation is not a new concept in Islamic thought, nor is it foreign to Al-Azhar’s self-understanding. Yet its renewed emphasis reflects a global moment in which Islamic institutions are increasingly evaluated through the lens of security, extremism, and public order. Al-Azhar positions itself as a corrective voice, neither apologetic nor confrontational, capable of articulating a “balanced” Islam grounded in scholarly tradition. In educational terms, this translates into curricula and pedagogical narratives that stress ethical reasoning, social harmony, and interpretive restraint. The challenge, however, lies in ensuring that moderation is taught as an intellectual virtue rather than a political requirement.

Deradicalization discourse adds another layer of complexity. From a global perspective, Al-Azhar is often imagined as a bulwark against extremism, a kind of moral firewall. Internally, this framing can feel reductive. It risks narrowing the institution’s educational mission to a

reactive function, responding to crises defined elsewhere. Some educators appear uneasy with this expectation, wary that it shifts the center of gravity away from knowledge formation toward reputational management. And yet, disengaging from this discourse entirely is not really an option. In a globalized media environment, silence can easily be interpreted as complicity or irrelevance. As a result, educational reform is subtly shaped by the need to produce graduates who can articulate religious arguments in ways that defuse suspicion and reassure global audiences.

Interfaith dialogue operates in a similar register. Al-Azhar's participation in global interreligious initiatives enhances its symbolic capital, reinforcing its image as a voice of reason and coexistence. This global role feeds back into educational discourse, encouraging the inclusion of comparative religion, dialogue ethics, and diplomatic communication skills. At the same time, interfaith engagement raises internal questions about boundaries. How much openness is pedagogically desirable? Where does dialogue end and doctrinal dilution begin? These questions are rarely resolved definitively. Instead, they are managed through careful framing: dialogue is presented as *da'wah by example*, not theological compromise. Still, the tension remains, especially among constituencies who fear that global visibility comes at the cost of doctrinal clarity.

Internationalization of the curriculum adds yet another dimension. Partnerships with foreign universities, the introduction of international programs, and the use of global academic benchmarks signal Al-Azhar's willingness to participate in the global knowledge economy. But internationalization is not a neutral process. It introduces new evaluative criteria, learning outcomes, accreditation standards, employability metrics, that do not always align neatly with *turāth*-based pedagogies. The institution responds selectively, adopting certain structural features while resisting others. English-language programs may expand, but Arabic remains the primary medium of authoritative knowledge. Modern disciplines are incorporated, but not allowed to displace classical foundations. This selective engagement reflects a broader strategy: globalization is something to be navigated, not absorbed wholesale.

What makes this negotiation particularly delicate is Al-Azhar's dual identity. It is, simultaneously, a national institution embedded in the Egyptian state and a transnational symbol of Sunni Islamic authority. These roles do not always pull in the same direction. As a local institution, Al-Azhar must operate within national political frameworks, regulatory structures, and public expectations. As a global symbol, it is expected to transcend local politics and speak with universal moral authority. Educational reform sits right at this intersection. Decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, and public engagement are shaped by the need to remain locally grounded while globally legible.

At times, these roles reinforce each other. Global recognition can strengthen Al-Azhar's domestic legitimacy, presenting it as a national asset

with international standing. At other times, they generate friction. Global expectations may pressure Al-Azhar to adopt discourses that resonate poorly with local audiences, or to prioritize issues that feel externally imposed. Educationally, this can result in a cautious balancing act: teaching students to engage global discourses fluently while anchoring their authority firmly in the inherited tradition.

What emerges, then, is not a simple story of globalization eroding local authority, nor of tradition successfully resisting external pressure. Instead, Al-Azhar's educational discourse reflects an ongoing negotiation in which legitimacy is constantly recalibrated. Global engagement becomes a resource, but also a constraint. Local authority provides grounding, but can limit flexibility. Reform unfolds within this tension, shaped less by clear resolutions than by pragmatic compromises.

In this sense, Al-Azhar's position in the globalized Islamic world is not one of stable dominance or passive adaptation. It is more accurately described as a careful, sometimes uneasy, act of translation, between local tradition and global expectation, between inherited authority and contemporary relevance. Education is one of the primary sites where this translation takes place. And it is precisely because the balance is so fragile that reform remains cautious, incremental, and, at times, deliberately ambiguous.

4. Institutional Reform versus Classroom Reality: An Uneven Transformation

One pattern that becomes increasingly visible when looking beyond policy documents is the unevenness of reform as it moves from institutional vision to everyday pedagogical practice. On paper, reform at Al-Azhar University appears coherent, even ambitious. Strategic plans outline curricular updates, pedagogical innovation, and responsiveness to contemporary challenges. Yet when these aspirations encounter the classroom, where teaching is shaped by habit, authority, time constraints, and personal conviction, the picture becomes far less uniform. Reform, it seems, does not travel intact.

At the institutional level, reform discourse tends to be carefully calibrated. Documents emphasize integration, modernization without rupture, and alignment with both tradition and global standards. The language is often confident, sometimes aspirational. But classrooms operate according to a different logic. They are not primarily spaces of policy implementation; they are spaces of lived pedagogy, where individual teachers interpret, adapt, or quietly sidestep institutional directives. This is not necessarily resistance. Often it is simply the result of long-established teaching cultures that do not change easily, even when official frameworks do.

One source of fragmentation lies in the diversity of faculties within Al-Azhar itself. Faculties that combine religious and "modern" disciplines,

such as law, education, or medicine, tend to engage reform agendas more visibly. Pedagogical experimentation, interdisciplinary references, and contextual discussions are more common there, partly because the subject matter almost demands it. In contrast, faculties centered on classical religious sciences often display greater continuity in teaching style. The same texts are taught, often in similar ways, with reform manifesting only in subtle shifts of emphasis rather than in method. This intra-institutional variation complicates any attempt to speak of “Al-Azhar pedagogy” as a single, unified practice.

Individual lecturers play an equally significant role. Some teachers actively embrace reform discourse, encouraging discussion, contextual reasoning, and engagement with contemporary issues. Others remain committed to more traditional modes of instruction, prioritizing textual accuracy, memorization, and disciplined reproduction of established interpretations. Neither position is inherently illegitimate within Al-Azhar’s intellectual ecology. Yet the result is a student experience that varies widely depending on who is teaching, rather than on a standardized pedagogical model. Reform, in this sense, becomes personalized, filtered through scholarly temperament, generational identity, and intellectual confidence.

Generational dynamics further intensify this unevenness. Younger lecturers, many of whom have studied abroad or been exposed to global academic environments, are often more open to pedagogical experimentation. They may introduce discussion-based learning, comparative perspectives, or applied analysis, sometimes cautiously, sometimes enthusiastically. Senior scholars, whose authority is deeply rooted in mastery of the classical tradition, may view such approaches with skepticism. From their perspective, pedagogical innovation risks diluting rigor or undermining scholarly discipline. This is not merely a generational conflict; it reflects different understandings of what counts as “serious” knowledge and how it should be transmitted.

The gap between reform discourse and classroom reality also reflects structural constraints. Large class sizes, rigid assessment systems, and limited pedagogical training can make innovative teaching difficult to sustain. Even lecturers who are sympathetic to reform may find themselves defaulting to lecture-based methods simply because they are efficient and familiar. Over time, this creates a pattern in which reform exists more as an aspiration than as a consistently enacted practice. Students learn the language of reform without necessarily experiencing its pedagogical substance.

Interestingly, this unevenness does not always produce frustration. For some students, the coexistence of different pedagogical styles is seen as an advantage. They learn to navigate multiple intellectual registers: the disciplined world of classical textual study and the more fluid space of contextual engagement. For others, however, the lack of coherence can be

disorienting. Expectations shift from one course to another, and the criteria for intellectual success are not always clear. Reform, in these cases, feels partial and unpredictable.

What emerges, then, is a picture of transformation that is real but fragmented. Institutional reform provides a framework, a direction of travel. Classroom practice determines the pace and texture of that journey. The two are connected, but not tightly synchronized. And perhaps this looseness is not entirely accidental. In an institution that values scholarly autonomy and inherited authority, enforcing pedagogical uniformity would itself represent a rupture.

Still, the distance between policy and practice raises important questions. How much reform can an institution claim if its realization depends so heavily on individual actors? At what point does flexibility become inconsistency? These questions remain unresolved within Al-Azhar's reform trajectory. But their persistence suggests that educational change, especially in a tradition-centered institution, is less a linear process than a series of negotiated adjustments, some visible, others quietly unfolding behind classroom doors.

5. Ambivalence as Pedagogical Condition: Between Preservation, Adaptation, and Anxiety

If there is one thread that quietly runs through all the previous discussions, it is ambivalence. Not the kind that signals indecision or failure, but a more structural, almost inevitable ambivalence, one that shapes how *turāth* is taught, defended, and reimagined at Al-Azhar University. Reform discourse often treats ambiguity as a problem to be solved. Yet what emerges from this study is the opposite intuition: ambivalence functions as a pedagogical condition in its own right, a space where preservation and adaptation are held together, sometimes uncomfortably, but not without purpose.

At a basic level, this ambivalence reflects the weight of responsibility borne by Al-Azhar. To preserve *turāth* is not merely to protect a set of texts; it is to safeguard an entire epistemic lineage. At the same time, to ignore contemporary realities would risk rendering that lineage socially and intellectually irrelevant. Pedagogy unfolds precisely at this intersection. Teachers and students are asked, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, to honor the past without retreating from the present. That task is inherently tension-filled. Perhaps it could not be otherwise.

Anxiety enters this pedagogical space in subtle ways. There is anxiety about misinterpretation, about saying too much or too little, about opening doors that cannot easily be closed. There is also anxiety about external judgment: how Al-Azhar is perceived by global audiences, media platforms, and political actors who often simplify its internal complexity. These pressures do not always surface in formal curricula, but they shape the tone of teaching, the caution with which sensitive topics are approached, and the

boundaries placed around classroom discussion. In this sense, anxiety is not only emotional; it is institutional and pedagogical.

Yet ambivalence also creates room for creativity. Because reform is not fully resolved, teachers are left with interpretive space. Some use that space to experiment, carefully, often quietly, by introducing contextual questions, ethical dilemmas, or comparative perspectives. Others use it to reaffirm continuity, emphasizing the sufficiency of classical frameworks. Both responses are possible precisely because the institution does not enforce a single, definitive pedagogical script. Ambivalence, then, becomes a condition that allows multiple pedagogical trajectories to coexist.

It is tempting, especially from a reformist standpoint, to read inconsistency as stagnation. But such a reading risks imposing an external model of change, one that assumes linear progression, clarity of outcomes, and rapid transformation. Al-Azhar operates according to a different temporal logic. Change is expected to be slow, layered, and reversible. Ambivalence fits this logic well. It allows the institution to test new approaches without fully committing to them, to observe their effects, and to retreat if necessary. From within this worldview, hesitation is not weakness; it is a form of prudence.

There is also something pedagogically formative about learning in an ambivalent environment. Students are not handed a clear, unambiguous map of what Islamic knowledge “should” look like in the modern world. Instead, they encounter competing emphases, unresolved questions, and shifting expectations. This can be unsettling. But it can also cultivate intellectual maturity. Students learn to live with complexity, to recognize that tradition is not monolithic, and that authority is negotiated rather than simply inherited. Whether this outcome is intended or incidental is hard to say, but it is nonetheless significant. Of course, ambivalence has its costs. Without clear pedagogical direction, some students may experience confusion or frustration. Without shared criteria, assessment and evaluation can feel inconsistent. And without explicit articulation, anxiety can harden into defensiveness. These risks are real, and they should not be minimized. Still, to imagine a fully resolved, tension-free pedagogy of *turāth* in a rapidly changing world may be unrealistic, even undesirable.

In the end, ambivalence at Al-Azhar is best understood not as a temporary phase on the way to clarity, but as an enduring feature of its educational life. It reflects an institution that refuses to choose prematurely between preservation and adaptation, that remains wary of both uncritical traditionalism and unreflective modernization. *Turāth* remains alive precisely because it is not sealed off from doubt, negotiation, and anxiety. Pedagogically, this may be demanding. But intellectually, it signals a tradition still in motion, still thinking, and still, perhaps deliberately, unfinished.

Conclusion

This article has argued that reform at Al-Azhar University cannot be adequately understood through the familiar binaries of tradition versus modernity, resistance versus adaptation, or stagnation versus progress. What emerges instead is a more intricate picture of an institution navigating globalization through continuity, caution, and selective change. Reform unfolds not as rupture, but as a carefully managed process of reorientation, one that seeks to preserve the epistemic authority of *turāth* while responding, sometimes hesitantly, to contemporary demands.

The analysis shows that pedagogical change at Al-Azhar is real, but uneven. Classical texts remain central, yet they are increasingly framed through contextual concerns, global discourses, and public expectations. This reconfiguration, however, operates primarily at the pedagogical level rather than at the epistemic core of knowledge production. The hierarchy of authority continues to privilege inherited textual frameworks, even as teaching practices encourage greater awareness of contemporary realities. In this sense, reform is less about redefining what counts as knowledge and more about reshaping how that knowledge is communicated, defended, and applied.

Global pressures, moderation, deradicalization, interfaith dialogue, and curriculum internationalization, further complicate this landscape. Al-Azhar's dual role as a national Egyptian institution and a global symbol of Sunni Islamic authority generates both opportunities and constraints. Engagement with global discourses enhances visibility and legitimacy, yet it also risks narrowing educational priorities or imposing external expectations. Educational reform becomes a site of negotiation, where local authority and global relevance must be balanced rather than fully reconciled.

Perhaps the most significant insight of this study lies in its interpretation of ambivalence. Rather than viewing tension, inconsistency, and hesitation as signs of reform failure, the article has suggested that ambivalence functions as a pedagogical condition. It allows Al-Azhar to remain intellectually cautious, socially responsive, and institutionally stable at the same time. Anxiety, in this context, is not merely a by-product of change but part of the process through which tradition remains alive and adaptable. Al-Azhar's reform trajectory points to a broader lesson for Islamic higher education in the twenty-first century. Preserving tradition does not require freezing it, just as engaging globalization does not necessitate surrendering epistemic autonomy. Between preservation and adaptation lies a space of negotiation, slow, imperfect, and often uncomfortable. Yet it is within this space that *turāth* continues to be taught, contested, and reimagined. Al-Azhar's experience suggests that educational reform, when rooted in such negotiation, may not deliver clear resolutions, but it can sustain a living tradition in a world that rarely allows for easy answers.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. We also confirm that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to, nor is it under consideration by, any other publisher.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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