



K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's Islamic Renewal Movement: Dynamics, Ideas and Relevance in Contemporary Context

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Abstract

The development of Islam in Indonesia cannot be separated from the contribution of reformist figures who tried to respond to the challenges of the times with a contextual and solution oriented approach. One of the central figures in the history of Islamic reform in Indonesia is K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah, who is known for his reformist ideas in the fields of education, socio religious, and community empowerment. The reform movement he carried out was not only a response to the stagnation of the community, but also a constructive effort to build a rational, dynamic, and progressive Islamic civilization. This study aims to examine the dynamics of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's reform movement, trace the main ideas underlying his struggle, and analyze the relevance of these thoughts in a contemporary context. The methodology used is a descriptive qualitative approach through library research on primary and secondary sources, including historical works, Muhammadiyah documents, and academic literature on Islamic reform. The results of the study show that K.H. Ahmad Dahlan emphasized i) the renewal of Islamic thought through rational education, ii) *tajdid* in understanding religion, and iii) social charity as a form of Islamic teaching practice. The implications of this finding suggest the importance of reviving the spirit of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's renewal in responding to the problems of today's people. The renewal movement that is based on Islamic values and aligned with the demands of the times becomes a strategic model in building a Muslim society that is progressive, has character, and is adaptive to global change.

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20th century, Muslims in Indonesia faced a rather worrying situation. In the midst of the pressure of colonial occupation and the weakness of the education system, the condition of the people experienced decline, both socially and spiritually.

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In such a situation, the figure of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan emerged, a reformer who came with the spirit of reviving the dignity of Islam (Nani Kuniasih, 2024; Hasanah et al., 2024). He offered a more rational approach and in accordance with the context of the times. After studying in Mecca, Ahmad Dahlan returned to his homeland bringing a spirit of renewal. He was greatly inspired by the thoughts of great figures in the Islamic world such as Muhammad Abduh and Jamaluddin al-Afghani. With that provision, he aspired to build a modern, intelligent Islamic society that still adhered to religious teachings (Arifin et al., 2024; Fauziah, 2018). This ideal was then realized through the establishment of the Muhammadiyah organization. For Ahmad Dahlan, Muhammadiyah was not only a da'wah movement, but also a vehicle for struggle to present Islam in a more down-to-earth form. Through education, social services, and well-organized da'wah activities, Muhammadiyah became a real tool for social transformation.

The history of the development of Islam in Indonesia cannot be separated from the role of reformist figures who tried to align Islamic teachings with the dynamics of changing times. One of the important figures in the Islamic *tajdid* (renewal) movement in Indonesia was Kiai Haji Ahmad Dahlan, a progressive cleric who lived during the transition between colonialism and national awakening. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan appeared with a strong spirit of change, realizing that Muslims at that time were experiencing decline in various aspects: traditional and exclusive education, religion trapped in formalistic forms, and social inequality that was left without a real response from religious institutions (Mutaali, 2023). In this context, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan pioneered Muhammadiyah in 1912 as a forum for the renewal of modern, rational, and real-deed Islamic thought and practice. The movement carried out by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is strongly rooted in the principle of *tajdid*, namely an effort to revive the spirit of Islam that is purely based on the Qur'an and Sunnah but with a rational, progressive, and contextual approach. He rejected the attitude of blind imitation and encouraged *ijtihad* in understanding Islamic teachings so that they are relevant to the social conditions of society (A'yun et al., 2021).

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan integrated religious teachings and general education, initiated a modern school system with an integrated curriculum, and built a network of social charity efforts such as hospitals, orphanages, and community cooperatives. Through this strategy, he not only offered theological reform, but also a progressive Islamic model that touches on social, cultural, and humanitarian aspects. At the beginning of the 20th century, Muslims in Indonesia faced a rather worrying situation (Mahama & Jehwae, 2018; Syah, 2016). In the midst of the pressure of colonial occupation and the weakness of the education system, the condition of the people experienced decline, both socially and spiritually. In such a situation, the figure of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan emerged, a reformer who came with the spirit of reviving the dignity of Islam. He offered a more rational approach and in accordance with the context of the times.

After studying in Mecca, Ahmad Dahlan returned to his homeland bringing a spirit of renewal. He was greatly inspired by the thoughts of great figures in the Islamic world such as Muhammad Abduh and Jamaluddin al-Afghani. With that provision, he aspired to build a modern, intelligent Islamic society that still adhered to religious teachings (Abbas, 2025; Derysmono & Mohamoud, 2021). This ideal was then realized through the establishment of the Muhammadiyah organization. For Ahmad Dahlan, Muhammadiyah was not only a da'wah movement, but also a vehicle for struggle to present Islam in a more down-to-earth form. Through education, social services, and well-organized da'wah activities, Muhammadiyah became a real tool for social transformation.

In the current context, the ideas and movements of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan are still very relevant (Hasanah & Fadillah, 2020; Khair et al., 2024). The Muslim world is

faced with the challenges of globalization, the decline of public ethics, the disintegration of values, and the rise of religious radicalism. Renewal efforts that prioritize the purification of Islamic teachings, strengthening education, and defending the oppressed are the legacies of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan that should be revived. Therefore, this study is important to explore more deeply the dynamics of his thoughts and strategies of his renewal movement, and to assess the extent to which his contributions can be used as a reference in building an inclusive, advanced, and solution-oriented Islam in answering the problems of modern society (Hambali & Yulianti, 2018; Khasanah, 2021).

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a literature study method. (library research). The data sources used are primary and secondary literature, including biographical works of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, official documents of Muhammadiyah, writings of modern Islamic thinkers, and previous research results relevant to the theme of Islamic renewal. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is historical and conceptual, namely tracing the traces of religious social thought and movements built by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan and its relevance to the conditions of Muslims in the contemporary era. Data analysis was carried out using a historical-hermeneutic approach, namely interpreting the historical context and meaning behind the ideas and actions of renewal carried out by the figure (Arifin et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2023; Mutiaramses, 2025; Wulandari et al., 2025.; Yahya et al., 2021). The data obtained were analyzed thematically to identify the basic values of renewal such as *ijtihad*, modern education, social charity, and purification of Islamic teachings. In addition, it was also carried out contextual analysis of current socio-religious dynamics to test the relevance of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's ideas in responding to the challenges of Muslims in the modern era. Data validity is maintained by using source triangulation techniques and cross-clarification of the literature used.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

First, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan viewed education as the main foundation in efforts to renew Islamic thought. He believed that the decline of Muslims during the colonial period was not only caused by political and economic pressures, but also by the backwardness of the education system which was dogmatic, exclusive, and not adaptive to changes in the times. In response to this reality, he designed a modern and inclusive Islamic education system by integrating religious knowledge and general knowledge in one curriculum (Ikma et al., 2025; Khatimah et al., 2024). Through the establishment of Muhammadiyah schools, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan presented an educational approach based on rational reasoning, pure Islamic values, and practical skills. This is in line with the principle of *tajdid* (renewal) which revives Islamic teachings so that they are contextual and functional in real life.

The concept of education promoted by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan was not merely a methodological transformation, but also concerned the transformation of religious paradigms. He wanted to produce a generation of Muslims who not only understood the text, but were also able to implement Islamic teachings intelligently and productively in the social realm. Education was positioned as a means to free the people from stagnation of thought and structural dependence on colonialism, as well as an instrument for forming progressive Islamic character. Therefore, his vision of education encompassed spiritual, intellectual, and social aspects, making it the main pillar in the development of the people and nation. Until now, the Muhammadiyah education system remains concrete evidence of the idea of Islamic renewal based on knowledge and charity, which is relevant to answer the challenges of the times

(Fanani, 2019; Romli, 2021).

Second, one of the main foundations of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's movement is the concept of *tajdid*, namely renewal in the understanding and practice of religion. *Tajdid* does not mean overhauling Islamic teachings, but rather reviving the pure spirit of Islam with an approach that is in accordance with the development of the times (Hilalludin, 2024; Fatima et al., 2025). For K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, many religious practices of the people at that time were filled with traditions that were not based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, and even tended to be trapped in blind imitation and forms of heresy. Therefore, he encouraged Muslims to return to the Qur'an and Sunnah textually and contextually, and to abandon meaningless ritualism that did not provide real contributions to the improvement of the people.

Tajdid in the thoughts of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is also reflected in his call to use common sense and *ijtihad* in understanding religious teachings. He realized that Islam is a dynamic religion and must always interact with social reality. In this case, renewal is not only at the level of ideas, but also the practice of preaching. For example, in the Muhammadiyah preaching method, sermons, religious studies, and education are delivered rationally, concisely, and relevant to the lives of the community, in contrast to previous traditions that tended to be monologue and symbolic (Marlini et al., 2024; Tentiasih et al., 2023). Therefore, *tajdid* according to K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is a renewal that is based on evidence, oriented towards solutions, and is transformative, namely presenting Islam as a force for change in building a civilized society.

Third, one of the most prominent aspects of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's reform movement is the emphasis on social charity as a real manifestation (practice) of Islamic teachings. For him, Islam does not only talk about the vertical spiritual relationship between humans and God (*ḥablun min Allāh*), but must also be realized in a just and civilized social relationship (*ḥablun min al-nās*). Therefore, *da'wah* is not enough to be done only through lectures and religious studies, but must be accompanied by real action in the social, health, education, and economic fields of the community. This is what motivated him to establish social institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, zakat and infaq institutions, and free education services for the poor (Maraulang, 2025; Takdir & Munir, 2023).

Social charity in the view of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is worship in the form of humanitarian service, which emphasizes the values of justice, compassion, and social responsibility in Islam. He emphasized that true religiosity must be able to move people to care about the suffering of others (Hamzah et al., 2024; Trisno, 2024). Therefore, Muhammadiyah as an organization that he founded adopted this principle by expanding the network of charitable efforts (AUM), such as Islamic hospitals, schools, universities, and mosque-based economic empowerment programs. This idea was far ahead of its time, making Islam a force for social change that was not only symbolic, but oriented towards the benefits and empowerment of the people collectively. This spirit of social charity is what until now has become the characteristic and main strength of Muhammadiyah's preaching throughout Indonesia (Darmawan, 2024; Darmayanti et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The reform movement pioneered by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan was an important milestone in the history of the rise of modern Islam in Indonesia. Through a rational, contextual approach, and based on the values of the Qur'an and Sunnah, he succeeded in formulating a model of Islamic reform that touched on three main dimensions: education, religious thought, and social action. The concept of integration between religious knowledge and general knowledge, the spirit of *tajdid* through *ijtihad*, and attention to social charity as a real manifestation of Islamic

teachings made his movement not only relevant in its time, but also inspired the transformation of Muslims in the contemporary era. The thoughts and movements of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan show that Islam is a dynamic religion, capable of answering people's problems in a solution-oriented and applicable manner. In the context of globalization and the challenges of the digital era, the values of renewal that he fought for remain relevant especially in building an inclusive, competitive Muslim society committed to the values of social justice. Therefore, the legacy of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts and preaching practices need to continue to be studied, preserved, and developed as a foundation for building an advanced and enlightening Islamic civilization.

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