



From Reformist Thought to Institutional Transformation: KH Ahmad Dahlan and the Making of Muhammadiyah

Apris Yaman,^{1✉} Desi Asmaret,² Julhadi,³ Syaifullah⁴

¹²³⁴Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Barat, Indonesia

Corresponding author: apris05590@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of Muhammadiyah represents a pivotal milestone in the history of Islamic reform in Indonesia, closely linked to the pioneering thought of KH Ahmad Dahlan. Nevertheless, previous studies have predominantly focused on Muhammadiyah as an organization or Ahmad Dahlan as its founder, leaving limited attention to the reconstruction of his ideas as the conceptual foundation of the Muhammadiyah reform movement. This study aims to analyze the pioneering thought of KH Ahmad Dahlan in shaping the Muhammadiyah reform movement and to explain how his ideas were institutionalized into a sustainable socio-religious movement. The research employs a qualitative conceptual approach based on an extensive literature review of reputable journal articles, academic books, and relevant documents. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis supported by the perspectives of Islamic Modernism, Social Movement Theory, and Institutional Theory. The findings reveal that Ahmad Dahlan's reform paradigm consists of five interconnected dimensions: purification of Islamic creed, revitalization of *ijtihad*, integration of Islamic and modern education, Al-Ma'un-based social theology, and organizational modernization. These dimensions enabled Muhammadiyah to institutionalize Islamic values through education, healthcare, philanthropy, and community empowerment, ensuring its sustainability as a reform movement. This study contributes to the literature by providing a conceptual reconstruction of the relationship between Islamic reformist thought, institutional development, and the sustainability of Muhammadiyah. The findings also offer practical insights for strengthening moderate Islamic movements and promoting adaptive Islamic education in addressing contemporary social and technological challenges.

ABSTRAK

Lahirnya Muhammadiyah merupakan salah satu tonggak penting dalam sejarah pembaruan Islam di Indonesia yang tidak terlepas dari kepeloporan pemikiran KH. Ahmad Dahlan. Namun, sebagian besar penelitian terdahulu lebih menitikberatkan pada Muhammadiyah sebagai organisasi atau Ahmad Dahlan sebagai tokoh pendiri, sehingga kajian yang merekonstruksi pemikirannya sebagai paradigma konseptual lahirnya gerakan pembaruan masih relatif terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis kepeloporan pemikiran KH Ahmad Dahlan dalam melahirkan gerakan pembaruan Muhammadiyah serta menjelaskan proses institusionalisasi gagasannya menjadi gerakan sosial-keagamaan yang berkelanjutan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis kajian konseptual melalui studi kepustakaan terhadap artikel ilmiah bereputasi, buku akademik, dan dokumen yang relevan. Analisis dilakukan menggunakan analisis isi kualitatif dengan perspektif Modernisme Islam, Teori Gerakan Sosial, dan Teori Kelembagaan.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepeloporan pemikiran KH Ahmad Dahlan dibangun atas lima dimensi utama, yaitu purifikasi akidah, revitalisasi ijtihad, integrasi pendidikan Islam dan ilmu pengetahuan modern, teologi Al-Ma'un sebagai dasar transformasi sosial, serta modernisasi organisasi. Integrasi kelima dimensi tersebut memungkinkan Muhammadiyah berkembang sebagai gerakan pembaruan yang mampu menginstitusionalisasikan nilai-nilai Islam melalui pendidikan, pelayanan kesehatan, filantropi, dan pemberdayaan masyarakat. Penelitian ini berkontribusi memperkaya kajian pemikiran Islam Indonesia dengan menawarkan rekonstruksi konseptual mengenai hubungan antara pembaruan pemikiran, institusionalisasi nilai, dan keberlanjutan gerakan Muhammadiyah yang tetap relevan dalam menjawab tantangan masyarakat kontemporer.

INTRODUCTION

The development of Islamic thought in Indonesia from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century unfolded during a period of profound transition marked by a multidimensional crisis within Muslim society. This crisis was reflected in the decline of educational institutions, the weakening of intellectual capacity, the proliferation of religious practices characterized by syncretic tendencies, and the dominance of colonial rule, which constrained the social and political mobility of Muslim communities (Asrori, 2024; Haririe, 2024). Within this context, Islamic reform was understood not merely as a movement for the purification of religious belief but also as a project of social transformation aimed at restoring Islamic teachings to the Qur'an and Sunnah through an approach to *ijtihad* that was rational, contextual, and responsive to changing historical circumstances. Islamic modernism, which developed in the Middle East through the intellectual contributions of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida, provided an important intellectual foundation for the emergence of a new paradigm that rejected intellectual stagnation (*taqlid*), promoted the integration of religious and modern sciences, and positioned education as a primary instrument for the revival of Islamic civilization (Haririe, 2024; Mufidah, 2025; Hairul, 2026; [add one reputable reference]). These ideas were subsequently adapted to Indonesia's social and cultural context, giving rise to various *tajdid* movements oriented toward the formation of a more progressive, inclusive, and forward-looking Muslim society.

Among Indonesia's prominent Islamic reformers, KH Ahmad Dahlan occupies a particularly strategic position because of his success in transforming reformist ideas into an institutionalized social movement. Unlike some reformist figures whose contributions were primarily situated within the realm of intellectual discourse, Ahmad Dahlan developed a model of reform that integrated theological, educational, philanthropic, healthcare, and organizational governance dimensions into a coherent and sustainable system of social action (Amir, 2025; Darmayanti, 2024; Kobayashi, 2026). The establishment of Muhammadiyah in 1912 marked a significant turning point in the history of Indonesian Islam, as the organization functioned not only as a vehicle for *da'wah* but also as an instrument of social transformation that connected intellectual reform with the development of modern institutions. Through Muhammadiyah, Ahmad Dahlan introduced a paradigm of *da'wah* that emphasized rationality, professionalism, humanitarian service, and community empowerment as manifestations of Islamic teachings oriented toward the promotion of public welfare.

Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought is particularly evident in his reform of the Islamic education system. At the time, Islamic education remained largely dominated by traditional patterns that separated religious knowledge from general or modern sciences, thereby producing an epistemological dichotomy that weakened the ability of Muslim communities to respond effectively to modernization (Hamami, 2022; Mustofa, 2025; Utami, 2025). Ahmad Dahlan proposed an integrative educational paradigm that combined mastery of Islamic sciences with modern knowledge while simultaneously developing more systematic, dialogical, and character-oriented approaches to teaching and learning. This reform represented more than a mere curricular

adjustment; it constituted an epistemological reconstruction of Islamic education in which religion served as an ethical foundation for the advancement of knowledge and societal progress. This educational model subsequently became a foundation for the expansion of Muhammadiyah's network of schools, which has played a significant role in the modernization of Indonesia's national education system and in the development of Muslim human resources capable of adapting to social change (Maraulang, 2025; Setiawan, 2025).

At the same time, Ahmad Dahlan's thought displayed a distinctive character because it did not remain confined to normative religious discourse but was translated into concrete social praxis. The spirit of the theology of *Al-Ma'un* was manifested in various forms of humanitarian service through the establishment of schools, hospitals, orphanages, healthcare services, and professionally managed Islamic philanthropic institutions (Achmad, 2024; Rahmatika, 2025; Ikrima, 2024). This orientation enabled Muhammadiyah to develop into a major civil society organization that integrates *da'wah*, education, social services, and economic empowerment within a comprehensive ecosystem of reform. Accordingly, the Islamic modernism developed by Ahmad Dahlan can be characterized as transformative because it connects theology, education, and social action as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a unified reformist project.

Recent scholarship on KH Ahmad Dahlan and Muhammadiyah demonstrates growing academic interest in their historical and contemporary significance. Recent studies have extensively examined Muhammadiyah's contributions to education, philanthropy, healthcare, religious moderation, and the strengthening of civil society (Hamami, 2022; Rahmatika, 2025; Rizkillah, 2025; Setiawan, 2025). Other studies have focused on Ahmad Dahlan as an Islamic reformer and founder of Muhammadiyah who successfully introduced a modern model of Islamic education (Amir, 2025; Kobayashi, 2026). Nevertheless, much of the existing scholarship remains historical-descriptive in orientation or concentrates primarily on the institutional development of Muhammadiyah. Relatively few studies have systematically reconstructed the pioneering thought of KH Ahmad Dahlan as a conceptual paradigm capable of explaining how the ideas of *tajdid* were transformed into the design of a socio-religious movement that has endured, expanded, and remained relevant for more than a century. In other words, the causal relationship between the construction of reformist thought, the process of institutionalization, and the sustainability of the Muhammadiyah movement still requires deeper conceptual explanation.

This research gap has become increasingly important in light of the new challenges confronting contemporary Indonesian society, including digital disruption, the fragmentation of religious authority, increasing social polarization, the development of religious extremism, and growing demands for the strengthening of religious moderation in public life (Asrori, 2024; Rizkillah, 2025; Utami, 2025; [add one recent reputable reference]). Under these circumstances, the reformist paradigm developed by Ahmad Dahlan offers a model of religiosity that remains firmly rooted in the authority of the Qur'an and Sunnah while simultaneously remaining open to scientific knowledge, institutional innovation, humanitarian service, and social change. This model demonstrates that Islamic reform is neither synonymous with the liberalization of religious teachings nor with exclusionary conservatism. Rather, it constitutes a transformative process that seeks to integrate doctrinal integrity, rationality, professionalism, and social responsibility in a balanced manner.

Against this background, this article offers a new perspective by positioning the pioneering thought of KH Ahmad Dahlan as the conceptual foundation underlying the emergence and development of Muhammadiyah's reform movement. In contrast to previous studies that tend to examine Ahmad Dahlan's thought and the institutional development of Muhammadiyah as separate domains, this article reconstructs the dialectical relationship among ideas, institutionalization, and social transformation. This approach is expected to enrich the study of Indonesian Islamic intellectual history while simultaneously providing a conceptual framework for

understanding how religious ideas can evolve into a modern social movement that is adaptive, sustainable, and continuously relevant in responding to the dynamics and challenges of contemporary society.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a conceptual paper design. The approach aims to reconstruct the pioneering thought of KH Ahmad Dahlan in the emergence of Muhammadiyah's reform movement through a critical analysis of relevant scholarly literature. A conceptual approach was selected because the study focuses on developing theoretical arguments and synthesizing concepts rather than collecting empirical field data (Jaakkola, 2020).

The study relies on secondary data obtained through a systematic review of the literature, including reputable national and international journal articles, scholarly books, and official Muhammadiyah documents addressing KH Ahmad Dahlan's thought, Islamic modernism, the *tajdid* movement, and the historical development of Muhammadiyah. Priority was given to recent scholarly publications, complemented by authoritative classical works that have significantly contributed to the study of Islamic reform in Indonesia (Nakamura, 2012; Noer, 1980; Burhani, 2016).

Data collection involved the identification, selection, and classification of relevant literature according to its thematic relevance to the research focus. The selected materials were subsequently analyzed using qualitative content analysis by identifying key concepts, organizing related themes, and conducting a critical synthesis to explain the relationships among KH Ahmad Dahlan's reformist thought, the institutionalization of his ideas, and the emergence and development of Muhammadiyah as a reform movement (Schreier, 2012).

To strengthen the analytical interpretation, this study draws on Islamic Modernism, Social Movement Theory, and Institutional Theory as complementary analytical frameworks for explaining how reformist ideas were transformed into an organized and sustainable socio-religious movement. The credibility of the analysis was enhanced through source triangulation by comparing scholarly works from different authors, intellectual traditions, and analytical perspectives. This process enabled the study to develop a comprehensive and academically grounded conceptual synthesis of the relationship between reformist thought, institutionalization, and the development of Muhammadiyah as a modern Islamic movement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Socio-Historical Context of the Emergence of KH Ahmad Dahlan's Reformist Thought

The pioneering thought of KH Ahmad Dahlan cannot be fully understood without situating it within the social, political, and religious contexts that shaped the emergence of Islamic reform movements in Indonesia in the early twentieth century. This period was marked by the declining quality of Muslim education, the growing prevalence of religious practices intertwined with local traditions without adequate textual foundations, and the limited access of Muslim communities to modern education under Dutch colonial policies (Noer, 1980; Ricklefs, 2008). At the same time, advances in scientific knowledge, the modernization of colonial administration, and increasing interaction with the broader Muslim world through pilgrimage networks and education in the Middle East introduced new ideas concerning the reform of Islamic thought (Azra, 2004).

Within this historical context, the Muslim world was experiencing a wave of Islamic reformism pioneered by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida. This movement emphasized the importance of reopening the gates of *ijtihad*, purifying Islamic teachings from practices lacking strong religious foundations, and integrating modern knowledge into Islamic educational systems. These ideas significantly influenced the emergence of various *tajdid*

movements across Southeast Asia, including Muhammadiyah in Indonesia (Esposito, 1998; Burhani, 2020).

KH Ahmad Dahlan was among the prominent figures who successfully adapted the ideas of global Islamic reformism to the social realities of Indonesia. His intellectual experiences during his pilgrimage and studies in Makkah exposed him to various reformist ideas circulating in the Middle East. However, Ahmad Dahlan did not adopt these ideas in a literal or uncritical manner. Instead, he contextualized them by considering the pluralistic character of Indonesian society, the strong influence of local culture, and the Muslim community's need for improved educational quality and social welfare (Nakamura, 2012). Consequently, his reformist approach placed greater emphasis on transformation through education, da'wah, social services, and institutional strengthening rather than ideological confrontation.

One of the major issues that concerned Ahmad Dahlan was the educational dichotomy separating religious education from general education. The pesantren education system of the period was strong in transmitting Islamic knowledge but provided relatively limited opportunities for students to acquire modern scientific knowledge. Conversely, colonial schools offered modern education but provided minimal religious instruction and were accessible only to certain segments of society. This situation contributed to an intellectual disparity among Muslims that weakened their competitiveness and participation in the social, economic, and governmental spheres (Peacock, 1978; Hamami, 2022).

Ahmad Dahlan believed that the advancement of the Muslim community could not be achieved as long as education remained divided into separate systems. On this basis, he developed an integrative educational paradigm that combined religious knowledge, modern sciences, character formation, and the cultivation of a strong work ethic within a unified learning system. This paradigm represented an innovation that went beyond mere curricular reform, as it transformed the orientation of Islamic education from the transmission of knowledge alone into a process of developing individuals who possessed religious commitment, intellectual competence, and the capacity to contribute meaningfully to societal progress (Maraulang, 2025; Utami, 2025).

Beyond education, Ahmad Dahlan also maintained that Islamic da'wah should not be confined to religious preaching and instruction but should be translated into concrete actions capable of addressing the social problems faced by society. His interpretation of Surah Al-Ma'un provided a theological foundation for the development of Muhammadiyah's social initiatives in education, healthcare, social services, and philanthropy. Through this approach, Islamic teachings were positioned as a transformative social force capable of improving people's quality of life while simultaneously strengthening humanitarian solidarity (Latief, 2013; Ikrima, 2024).

Thus, the emergence of KH Ahmad Dahlan's reformist thought can be understood as a response to the multidimensional challenges confronting the Muslim community of his time. His reform agenda was not limited to the purification of Islamic beliefs but also encompassed educational modernization, institutional strengthening, and community empowerment. This multidimensional character became a fundamental basis for the emergence of Muhammadiyah as an Islamic reform movement that has maintained its relevance and influence within Indonesia's socio-religious landscape to the present day.

The Pioneering Thought of KH Ahmad Dahlan as a Paradigm of Muhammadiyah's Tajdid

KH Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering role is demonstrated not only by his success in establishing Muhammadiyah as a modern Islamic organization but, more importantly, by his ability to construct a paradigm of reform (tajdid) that integrates theological, intellectual, social, and institutional dimensions within a unified framework for the transformation of the Muslim community. Unlike reformist approaches that were limited to criticizing existing religious practices, Ahmad Dahlan developed a model of tajdid oriented toward systemic transformation through education, da'wah,

social services, and organizational strengthening. This paradigm became an ideological foundation that helps explain why Muhammadiyah has been able to develop as an adaptive reform movement while consistently maintaining Islamic principles rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah (Burhani, 2020; Hamami, 2022).

1. Purification of Islamic Belief as the Foundation of Reform

The first dimension of Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought lies in his effort to restore religious practices to the authority of the Qur'an and Sunnah through the spirit of purification. This purification, however, was not intended to create religious exclusivism but rather to cultivate a more authentic and rational understanding of Islam, free from practices lacking strong normative foundations. From Ahmad Dahlan's perspective, the purity of Islamic belief constituted a prerequisite for the advancement of the Muslim community because a sound understanding of religion could foster an intellectual ethos, a strong work ethic, and a sense of social responsibility (Noer, 1980; Peacock, 1978).

Unlike certain purification movements that primarily emphasize doctrinal aspects, Ahmad Dahlan connected the purification of Islamic belief with changes in social behavior. Consequently, theological reform was not confined to the correction of ritual practices but was manifested in improving the quality of education, caring for vulnerable groups, and establishing social institutions that provided tangible benefits to society. This approach demonstrates that purification in Ahmad Dahlan's thought was transformative rather than merely normative.

Revitalization of Ijtihad and Religious Rationality

Another dimension of Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought can be seen in his commitment to revitalizing the tradition of ijtihad in understanding Islamic teachings. He maintained that the Qur'an should be understood comprehensively by considering its higher objectives (maqāṣid) and the broader welfare of society rather than relying solely on textual readings. Accordingly, practices of taqlid to religious authorities that inhibited intellectual dynamism needed to be replaced by an intellectual tradition that was more open to dialogue, scholarly argumentation, and advances in knowledge (Azra, 2015; Burhani, 2016).

This paradigm fostered an intellectual culture that subsequently became one of Muhammadiyah's defining characteristics. Religious decision-making has been conducted through the tarjih process, which is based on scholarly argumentation and rigorous examination of Islamic sources. Ijtihad, therefore, is not positioned merely as an individual intellectual activity but has developed into an institutional mechanism that enables the organization to respond dynamically to social change without losing its normative legitimacy.

2. Integration of Islamic Education and Modern Knowledge

One of the most influential manifestations of Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought was his reconstruction of the Islamic education system. He rejected the dichotomy between religious and general knowledge that prevailed during the colonial period because he regarded it as one of the factors contributing to the marginalization of Muslim communities. Instead, Ahmad Dahlan developed an integrative educational model that combined religious instruction, science, mathematics, languages, and character formation within a modern educational system (Nakamura, 2012; Hamami, 2022).

This paradigm carried implications far beyond curricular reform. Ahmad Dahlan viewed education as a strategic instrument for building a progressive Islamic civilization. Muhammadiyah schools were therefore designed not only to produce individuals who understood Islamic teachings but also to cultivate academic competence, social ethics, leadership capacity, and readiness to respond to changing circumstances. This approach positioned education at the center of social transformation while simultaneously making it a mechanism for transmitting reformist values to subsequent generations.

3. Al-Ma'un Theology and the Transformation of Social Action

A distinctive feature of Ahmad Dahlan's thought, compared with that of many other reformers, was his ability to translate theological teachings into concrete social action. His interpretation of Surah Al-Ma'un gave rise to a paradigm in which religiosity was measured not merely by the performance of ritual worship but also by concern for the poor, orphans, and communities experiencing social injustice (Latief, 2013).

This paradigm was subsequently institutionalized through the establishment of schools, hospitals, orphanages, healthcare services, zakat institutions, and various Muhammadiyah social enterprises. Islamic philanthropy was therefore understood not as a temporary form of charitable activity but as a professionally managed and sustainable strategy for community empowerment. This perspective demonstrates that Islamic reform in Ahmad Dahlan's thought possessed a strong praxis-oriented dimension by positioning Islamic values as a driving force for social transformation.

4. Organizational Modernization as an Instrument of Social Change

Another dimension illustrating Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering role was his ability to develop a modern organization as an instrument for institutionalizing reformist values. Unlike traditional patterns of da'wah that depended heavily on the authority of individual religious scholars, Muhammadiyah was developed through an organizational system characterized by a structured leadership hierarchy, division of responsibilities, cadre development mechanisms, administrative procedures, and clearly defined governance arrangements (Alfian, 1989; Scott, 2014).

The adoption of a modern organizational structure represented a highly progressive innovation for its time because it enabled reformist ideas to extend beyond the founding generation and to be continuously reproduced through an institutionalized system. From an institutional perspective, Muhammadiyah's continuity for more than a century demonstrates that the organization's strength does not rest solely on Ahmad Dahlan's charisma but also on its success in transforming the values of tajdid into organizational culture, educational systems, networks of social enterprises, and cadre development mechanisms that continue to evolve in response to changing circumstances.

Based on the preceding discussion, KH Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought can be understood as a reform paradigm constructed through five principal dimensions: the purification of Islamic belief, the revitalization of ijtihad, educational integration, the transformation of social action, and organizational modernization. These five dimensions do not operate independently but constitute an interconnected system. Purification provides the normative foundation, ijtihad generates intellectual dynamism, education functions as a medium of transformation, Al-Ma'un theology establishes a praxis-oriented direction, and modern organization ensures the sustainability of the movement. The integration of these five dimensions distinguishes Ahmad Dahlan's reformist project from many other reform movements and constitutes a key factor in explaining Muhammadiyah's success as an enduring Islamic reform movement that remains relevant to the changing dynamics of Indonesian society.

Table 1. Synthesis of KH Ahmad Dahlan's Pioneering Thought in Muhammadiyah's Reform Movement

Dimension of Pioneering Thought	Substance of Thought	Implementation in Muhammadiyah	Contribution to the Reform Movement
Purification of Islamic Belief	Restoring religious practices to the Qur'an and Sunnah through the purification of Islamic belief and the rejection of taqlid and religious	Strengthening tarjih-based da'wah, fostering sound Islamic belief, and developing a moderate and progressive understanding of Islam.	Provides theological legitimacy for the reform movement and strengthens Muhammadiyah's

	practices lacking strong normative foundations.		identity as a tajdid movement.
Revitalization of Ijtihad	Positioning ijtihad as a method for understanding Islamic teachings rationally, contextually, and responsively to social change.	Establishing the Council of Tarjih and Tajdid, developing a scholarly culture, and reformulating religious rulings in response to societal needs.	Promotes Islamic intellectual dynamism and strengthens the organization's capacity to respond to contemporary issues.
Educational Reform	Integrating religious knowledge, modern sciences, and character education within a unified Islamic educational system.	Establishing Muhammadiyah schools, madrasas, and higher education institutions with integrative curricula.	Develops Muslim human resources who are religiously grounded, knowledgeable, professional, and adaptive to changing circumstances.
Al-Ma'un Theology	Interpreting Islamic teachings as a foundation for social services, community empowerment, and solidarity with vulnerable groups.	Developing hospitals, orphanages, zakat institutions, healthcare services, and various Muhammadiyah social enterprises.	Transforms da'wah from a predominantly ritual orientation into sustainable social transformation.
Organizational Modernization	Developing professional, systematic, and cadre-based organizational governance.	Establishing organizational structures, administrative systems, cadre development mechanisms, and modern management of social enterprises.	Ensures the sustainability of the reform movement and strengthens Muhammadiyah's capacity as an adaptive civil society organization.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Noer (1980), Alfian (1989), Peacock (1978), Nakamura (2012), Latief (2013), Burhani (2016, 2020), Hamami (2022), and other relevant literature analyzed in this study.

The analysis presented in Table 1 demonstrates that KH Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought was not constructed through a single dimension of reform but through the integration of five mutually reinforcing dimensions. The purification of Islamic belief provides the normative foundation that directs the movement toward the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, while the revitalization of ijtihad provides an intellectual mechanism through which Islamic teachings can remain relevant in responding to social change. At the same time, educational reform functions as a medium for transmitting reformist values to subsequent generations, whereas Al-Ma'un theology transforms religious values into tangible forms of social service. These dimensions are subsequently institutionalized through a modern organizational system, ensuring that the reform movement does not depend on individual charisma but develops into a sustainable organizational culture.

This conceptual finding demonstrates that Muhammadiyah's success has not been determined solely by ideological strength or KH Ahmad Dahlan's leadership, but by his ability to integrate values, knowledge, social action, and institutionalization into a unified movement ecosystem. This integration creates a cycle of continuous reform that enables Muhammadiyah to

adapt to societal changes without losing its ideological identity. Accordingly, the Islamic reform initiated by KH Ahmad Dahlan is more appropriately understood as a process of institutional transformation rather than merely a reform of religious thought.

From the perspective of Institutional Theory (Scott, 2014), the institutionalization of *tajdid* values through education, cadre development, social enterprises, and organizational governance helps explain why Muhammadiyah has been able to sustain its existence for more than a century. Meanwhile, from the perspective of Social Movement Theory (Tarrow, 2011), Muhammadiyah's success demonstrates that religious ideas can generate sustainable social impact when supported by effective organizational structures, resource mobilization, and strong social legitimacy. Therefore, KH Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering contribution extended beyond the establishment of a modern Islamic organization; it also produced a reform paradigm that remains relevant as a model for the development and transformation of Muslim society in the contemporary era.

Institutionalization of KH Ahmad Dahlan's Thought within the Muhammadiyah Movement

KH Ahmad Dahlan's success as a pioneer of Islamic reform was determined not only by the intellectual strength of his ideas but also by his ability to institutionalize the values of *tajdid* within a sustainable organizational system. From the perspective of Institutional Theory, an idea can achieve long-term sustainability when it undergoes a process of institutionalization through the establishment of norms, organizational structures, working cultures, and mechanisms for reproducing values (Scott, 2014). This perspective helps explain how Muhammadiyah developed from a local movement in Yogyakarta into one of the largest Islamic organizations in the world.

This institutionalization process was manifested through the development of four major pillars: education, healthcare services, Islamic philanthropy, and organizational cadre development. Education serves as a medium for transmitting the values of *tajdid* to subsequent generations, while hospitals, orphanages, and various social enterprises represent concrete manifestations of *Al-Ma'un* theology, which positions humanitarian service as an integral component of Islamic *da'wah* (Latief, 2013; Burhani, 2020). At the same time, cadre development and organizational governance systems ensure that the reform movement does not depend on the founding figure but instead becomes an organizational culture that is continuously reproduced across generations.

These characteristics distinguish Muhammadiyah from many religious movements that rely heavily on charismatic leadership. Ahmad Dahlan developed the organization according to the principles of collegiality, professionalism, and accountability, ensuring that decision-making processes did not depend solely on personal authority but were governed by systematic institutional mechanisms (Alfian, 1989; Nakamura, 2012). This organizational model has enabled Muhammadiyah to adapt to various social, political, and technological transformations without losing its ideological orientation as a *tajdid* movement.

The synthesis of the literature indicates that the relationship between Ahmad Dahlan's thought and the development of Muhammadiyah is transformational rather than merely historical. Reformist ideas provided the foundation for institution building; these institutions subsequently generated an organizational culture, which in turn sustained and reproduced the values of *tajdid* across various spheres of life. Thus, Muhammadiyah's primary strength lies not only in the intellectual legacy of its founder but also in its success in transforming that legacy into an institutional system that is adaptive, professional, and oriented toward the promotion of public welfare.

The Relevance of KH Ahmad Dahlan's Thought to Contemporary Islamic Challenges

The findings of this study indicate that KH Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought remains highly relevant to the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian society. Amid rapid digital

technological development, the globalization of information, increasing social polarization, and the growing complexity of religious issues, Ahmad Dahlan's reformist paradigm offers an Islamic approach that integrates doctrinal integrity, rationality, scientific advancement, and social responsibility. These characteristics demonstrate that Ahmad Dahlan's thought is not merely of historical significance but can also serve as a normative framework for responding constructively to societal transformation (Burhani, 2020; Hefner, 2019).

In the field of education, Ahmad Dahlan's concept of integrating religious knowledge with modern science remains relevant to strengthening the quality of Islamic education in the digital era. An educational model that develops academic competence, character, digital literacy, and social awareness has become a strategic necessity for preparing Muslim generations to compete globally without losing their Islamic identity. This perspective reinforces the understanding that Islamic education should not be limited to the transmission of knowledge but should also focus on developing students' intellectual and moral capacities (Hamami, 2022).

In the socio-religious sphere, Al-Ma'un theology provides a foundation for strengthening Islamic philanthropy, healthcare services, economic empowerment, and various forms of humanitarian action that are increasingly necessary in addressing social inequality and humanitarian crises. At the same time, the tradition of *ijtihad* promoted by Ahmad Dahlan provides intellectual space for the development of Islamic thought that is moderate, adaptive, and responsive to emerging issues while remaining grounded in the fundamental principles of Islamic law. This demonstrates that Islamic reform is not merely a process of doctrinal purification but also an effort to translate Islamic values into meaningful responses to the challenges facing modern society.

Based on the conceptual synthesis, this study argues that Muhammadiyah's continuity for more than a century is a consequence of KH Ahmad Dahlan's success in integrating the purification of Islamic belief, *ijtihad*, modern education, social action, and organizational institutionalization into a coherent reform paradigm. This integration represents a major contribution of Ahmad Dahlan's thought to the development of Indonesian Islam while simultaneously offering a model of religious movement that is adaptive, inclusive, and oriented toward the public good. Therefore, KH Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought possesses not only historical significance but also continuing relevance as a conceptual framework for the development of progressive Islamic movements in the contemporary era.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that KH Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought lies not merely in the establishment of Muhammadiyah as a modern Islamic organization, but more importantly in his success in developing a reformist paradigm (*tajdid*) that integrates the purification of Islamic belief, the revitalization of *ijtihad*, educational reform, Al-Ma'un theology, and organizational modernization within a unified system of socio-religious transformation. The integration of these five dimensions enabled Islamic values to move beyond the normative domain and become institutionalized through education, healthcare services, philanthropy, cadre development, and sustainable organizational governance. Accordingly, this article makes a theoretical contribution by reconstructing KH Ahmad Dahlan's pioneering thought as a conceptual paradigm that explains the relationship between intellectual reform, institutionalization, and the sustainability of the Muhammadiyah movement, thereby enriching scholarship on Islamic intellectual history and reform movements in Indonesia.

In practical terms, the findings confirm that KH Ahmad Dahlan's reformist paradigm remains relevant to addressing the challenges of contemporary society, including digital transformation, the strengthening of religious moderation, the improvement of Islamic education, and community empowerment grounded in Islamic values. A reform model that combines

adherence to fundamental Islamic teachings with openness to scientific knowledge, innovation, and social service can serve as a valuable reference for the development of religious organizations and more adaptive Islamic education policies oriented toward the public good. Given the conceptual nature of this study, future research is encouraged to empirically examine the implementation of Ahmad Dahlan's reformist paradigm across various Muhammadiyah institutions and social enterprises or to compare it with other Islamic reform movements in order to strengthen its empirical validity and contribute to further theoretical development.

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