

Research Article

Reconstruction of Religious Orientation, Educational System, and Social Worship According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan: an Effort to Liberate Humanity from Backwardness

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Received : August 11, 2026

Revised : September 5, 2026

Accepted : October 2, 2026

Available online : October 15, 2026

How to Cite: Muji Haryono, Hendar Purnama, Dede Rahmat Hidayat, & Sutrisno. (2026). Reconstruction of Religious Orientation, Educational System, and Social Worship According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan: an Effort to Liberate Humanity from Backwardness. *Diplomasi : Jurnal Demokrasi, Pemerintahan Dan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat*, 4(4), 302–312. <https://doi.org/10.58355/dpl.v4i4.116>

Abstract

This article analyzes the reconstruction of religious orientation, the education system, and social worship within the thought of KH. Ahmad Dahlan, framing them as a paradigm for liberating the community from backwardness. This qualitative study—based on library research—examines KH. Ahmad Dahlan's intellectual works, the Qur'an, authentic hadiths, and relevant scholarly articles. Employing a historical-philosophical approach, the study utilizes a descriptive-analytical method to reveal the foundations and transformative implications of his ideas. Research findings indicate that the reforms initiated by KH. Ahmad Dahlan were not merely oriented toward the purification of

creed and acts of worship; they also encompassed a reconstruction of religious practice grounded in a contextual understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah. This reconstruction was realized through the reform of the Islamic education system—integrating religious studies with modern sciences—and the strengthening of the concept of "social worship" as a manifestation of faith that directly impacts community welfare. This paradigm gave rise to a progressive, inclusive, and transformative model of Islamic education, capable of serving as an instrument to liberate the community from ignorance, poverty, and backwardness. The implications of this research demonstrate that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's ideas remain relevant in addressing the challenges faced by contemporary Muslim society, particularly regarding the development of Islamic education, the strengthening of religious moderation, and social empowerment rooted in Qur'anic values.

Keywords: KH. Ahmad Dahlan, Reconstruction of Religious Practice, Islamic Education, Social Worship, Community Liberation.

INTRODUCTION

Islam was revealed as a religion that brings mercy to all creation (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*). Its presence regulates not only the relationship between humans and Allah (*hablum minallah*), but also guides humanity toward building a just social order (*hablum minannas*). The Qur'an emphasizes that the Muslim community is the best nation tasked with generating public welfare through enjoining good, forbidding evil, and strengthening faith, as Allah SWT states: "*You are the best community produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah.*" (Q.S. Ali 'Imran [3]: 110). Furthermore, Allah SWT asserts: "*Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.*" (Q.S. Ar-Ra'd [13]: 11).

This divine mandate demonstrates that social transformation is a direct consequence of shifts in mindset, educational systems, spiritual quality, and societal behavior. Consequently, education and proselytization (*da'wah*) serve as strategic instruments in constructing Islamic civilization.

Against this backdrop, the early 20th-century socio-religious landscape of the Indonesian archipelago—marked by colonial oppression, educational deprivation, and ritualistic stagnation entangled in superstition, heresy, and myths (*takhayyul*, *bid'ah*, and *khurafat*)—prompted KH. Ahmad Dahlan to spearhead a comprehensive *tajdid* (reform) movement (Rahmadani and Dewi 2025). Rather than restricting reform to ritual worship, his vision encompassed educational restructuring, social empowerment, and the cultivation of a progressive societal character.

KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought possesses an inherently transformative character. He posited that individual piety must translate into social piety capable of addressing structural inequalities. His contextual exegesis of Surah Al-Ma'un became the cornerstone for institutionalizing Islamic philanthropy through modernized social welfare institutions, orphanages, and community clinics (Dewi, Istiq'faroh, and Hendratno 2023). Furthermore, in the educational realm, he dismantled the epistemological dichotomy imposed by the colonial system by formulating an integrative model that bridged Islamic sciences with modern secular knowledge, aiming to foster faithful, intellectually adept, and socially responsible individuals (Armaijn et al. 2024).

While numerous scholarly works have explored KH. Ahmad Dahlan's legacy primarily through the lenses of institutional history, educational reform, or the foundational narrative of Muhammadiyah, a notable limitation persists in existing literature. Most

studies isolate these domains, leaving a scarcity of research that synthesizes the reconstruction of religious orientation (*kiblat beragama*), the educational system, and social worship into a unified, cohesive paradigm of human liberation.

Consequently, a clear theoretical gap emerges: the absence of a comprehensive framework that interconnects theological reform, educational restructuring, and social action as an integrated strategy for societal transformation under KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought.

To address this gap, the novelty of this study lies in its systematic, integrative analysis of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's three primary pillars of reform: the redirection of religious orientation, the modernization of Islamic education, and the operationalization of social worship as a liberation strategy against backwardness. Rather than merely offering a historical description, this study provides a conceptual reinterpretation tailored to contemporary challenges in Islamic education and community development in the 21st century.

This study aims to comprehensively analyze KH. Ahmad Dahlan's reform paradigm across the domains of religiosity, education, and social worship, as well as to articulate its relevance as a model for progressive Islamic societal transformation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing library research, relying on the examination, analysis, and synthesis of various literature sources relevant to the focus of the study. This approach was selected because the object of research consists of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought regarding the reconstruction of religious orientation (*kiblat beragama*), the Islamic educational system, and social worship as a paradigm for liberating humanity from backwardness (Rahmadani and Dewi 2025).

The data sources in this study comprise primary and secondary data. Primary data include the Qur'an, authentic hadiths (*hadith sahih*), and primary literature containing the thought and historical struggles of KH. Ahmad Dahlan. Meanwhile, secondary data are derived from national and international scientific journal articles, academic books, previous research findings, conference proceedings, and relevant documents, particularly publications from the last ten years to strengthen the novelty and relevance of the study.

Data collection was conducted through documentation study—specifically by identifying, inventorying, classifying, and reviewing various scientific documents related to the research focus (Universitas Medan Area Repository 2022). All sources were critically analyzed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the conceptual framework of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought in the fields of religion, education, and social empowerment.

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive analysis model consisting of four stages:

1. **Data collection**, through searching and selecting credible literature;
2. **Data reduction**, by sorting relevant information in accordance with the research focus;
3. **Data display**, through systematically organizing concepts and findings; and
4. **Conclusion drawing**, by interpreting the interrelationships among the reconstruction of religious orientation, the Islamic educational system, and social worship from the perspective of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought.

To enhance the validity of the research findings, source triangulation was applied by cross-referencing information derived from the Qur'an, authentic hadiths, biographical and analytical works on KH. Ahmad Dahlan, and various published scientific studies. Additionally, this study applies a historical-philosophical approach to comprehend the socio-religious context surrounding the emergence of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's reformist ideas, alongside a content analysis approach to identify the substantive values embedded in the concepts of *tajdīd* (reform), Islamic education, and social worship.

Through these methodological approaches, this study aims to produce an objective, systematic, and in-depth analysis of the relevance of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought in constructing a progress-oriented religious paradigm, an enlightening educational framework, and transformative social worship as a strategic effort to liberate humanity from various forms of backwardness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reconstruction of Religious Orientation According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan

The reconstruction of religious orientation (*kiblat beragama*) is a fundamental concept in KH. Ahmad Dahlan's *tajdīd* (reform) movement. The term "religious orientation" in this study is not merely defined as the physical direction faced during prayer (*ṣalāt*), but as a framework of thinking, acting, and behaving in understanding and practicing Islamic teachings. According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan, religiosity must return to the authentic sources of Islam—the Qur'an and As-Sunnah—so that Muslims have a clear foundation for personal and social life (Tri Prasetyowati et al. 2024).

The primary foundation of this reconstruction is Allah's revelation:

"O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day." (Q.S. An-Nisa' [4]: 59).

This verse indicates that the Qur'an and As-Sunnah serve as the ultimate reference points in all aspects of life. This understanding underpins KH. Ahmad Dahlan's reform movement. He posited that the decline of the Muslim community was caused not by Islamic teachings themselves, but by their departure from the authentic values of the Qur'an and Sunnah, alongside the prevalence of ungrounded religious practices.

This perspective aligns with the narration of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ:

"I have left among you two things; you will never go astray as long as you hold fast to them: the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger."

This hadith serves as a normative foundation demonstrating that societal progress depends on maintaining divine revelation as the primary guide.

In early 20th-century Indonesia, KH. Ahmad Dahlan observed that religious practices were heavily influenced by blind imitation (*taqlīd*), syncretism, and traditions entangled with superstition, heresy, and myths (*takhayyul*, *bid'ah*, and *khurafat*). Consequently, religion was largely reduced to symbolic rituals, while the social-transformative values embedded in the Qur'an remained unfulfilled. Thus, KH. Ahmad Dahlan's reconstruction was not a complete rejection of local tradition, but rather a dual

process of purification and reform (tajdīd) (Yuliana Hermawanti, Nisrokha Nisrokha, and Wahyudin 2020).

Traditions consistent with Islamic principles were maintained, whereas practices contradicting the Qur'an and As-Sunnah were corrected through education, proselytization (da'wah), and intellectual dialogue. This demonstrates that tajdīd according to KH. Ahmad Dahlan was constructive and educational rather than confrontational (Parhan 2024).

Reconstructing religious orientation also signaled a shift from individualistic religiosity toward an orientation generating social responsibility. According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan, the quality of worship is measured not only by ritual performance, but also by the degree to which it fosters compassion for the poor, orphans, the underprivileged (ḍu'afā'), and the marginalized. Thus, monotheism (tawḥīd) extends beyond theological assent into a moral force driving social transformation (Dewi, Istiq'faroh, and Hendratno 2023).

This paradigm shares a close affinity with Q.S. Al-Ma'un [107]: 1–7, which critiques those who deny the faith by ignoring orphans and neglecting the poor. KH. Ahmad Dahlan established this surah as the cornerstone of his social-service movement, establishing that religious success is demonstrated by concrete societal benefits rather than ritual precision alone.

From an Islamic educational perspective, reconstructing religious orientation yielded an integrative framework encompassing faith (ʿaqīdah), worship (ʿibādah), ethics (akhlāq), knowledge, and social responsibility. This orientation aims to cultivate balanced individuals possessing both individual piety and social piety. Consequently, KH. Ahmad Dahlan's efforts represented not merely a religious reform, but a civilizational reconstruction establishing Islam as a liberating force (Rahmadani and Dewi 2025).

In summary, reconstructing religious orientation according to KH. Ahmad Dahlan signifies realigning the community's life around the Qur'an and As-Sunnah. This includes purifying faith, reforming mindsets, fostering an intellectual culture, and developing social piety through action—a framework that continues to guide the educational and social movements of Muhammadiyah.

Reconstruction of the Educational System According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan

Education served as a primary instrument in KH. Ahmad Dahlan's reform movement. He believed that the decline of the Muslim community stemmed not only from political and economic factors, but also from educational systems that failed to develop faithful, knowledgeable, ethical, and socially conscious individuals. Therefore, educational reconstruction was an essential pillar of his tajdīd movement, rooted in Allah's command:

"Recite in the name of your Lord who created." (Q.S. Al-'Alaq [96]: 1).

This initial revelation illustrates that reading, studying, and expanding knowledge form the foundation of Islamic civilizational renewal. The command iqra' encompasses reading written texts as well as analyzing social realities, history, and natural phenomena. Thus, education in Islam integrates spiritual, intellectual, and social dimensions.

This principle is further reinforced by:

"Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees." (Q.S. Al-Mujadilah [58]: 11).

This verse highlights faith and knowledge as two central pillars of progress.

Consequently, Islamic education must balance religious instruction with intellectual, professional, and moral capacity building.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized the imperative of seeking knowledge:

"Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim." (Sunan Ibn Majah; graded ḥasan).

KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Critique of the Colonial Educational System

During the colonial era, education in Indonesia was sharply dichotomized. Colonial government schools emphasized secular subjects while excluding religious instruction. Conversely, traditional Islamic educational institutions focused almost exclusively on religious sciences, largely ignoring modern sciences and practical skills.

According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan, this dichotomy produced two imbalanced groups: intellectually skilled individuals lacking spiritual grounding, and religiously devoted individuals ill-equipped to navigate scientific advances and social change. This division hindered collective progress and widened the development gap (Armaijn et al. 2024).

1. Integration of Religious and Secular Knowledge

To resolve this dichotomy, KH. Ahmad Dahlan developed an educational system integrating Islamic sciences with general sciences. He posited that all beneficial knowledge originates from Allah SWT and should not be compartmentalized. Religious knowledge provides moral and spiritual direction, while modern knowledge serves as a tool for civilizational advancement (Parhan 2024).

This paradigm reflects Qur'anic calls to contemplate (*tafakkur*), reason (*ta'aqqul*), observe nature (*naẓar*), and reflect (*tadabbur*). Consequently, Islamic education aimed to graduate individuals knowledgeable in Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) while possessing academic competence and problem-solving skills.

This integrative approach became a defining feature of Muhammadiyah institutions. Curricula combined faith, worship, ethics, science, languages, mathematics, natural sciences, and vocational skills, representing a significant shift from traditional models of the era.

2. Education as a Medium for Cultivating Progressive Individuals

For KH. Ahmad Dahlan, the goal of education extended beyond individual intelligence to cultivating holistic human beings balancing faith, knowledge, virtue, and social dedication (*insān kāmil*). Education was designed to prepare individuals for their dual roles as servants of Allah (*'abd Allāh*) and stewards on Earth (*khalīfah*).

This aligns with Allah's revelation:

"And [remember] when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority.'" (Q.S. Al-Baqarah [2]: 30).

As stewards, humans carry the responsibility to build a just, knowledgeable, and honorable society. Thus, Islamic education must move beyond the mere transfer of knowledge to include the transfer of values and transformative action (Radjendra et al. 2025). In this context, educators function not only as instructors, but as mentors, moral exemplars, and agents of change (Muid et al. 2023).

Relevance of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Educational Reconstruction in the 21st Century

Amid global integration, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and digital transformation, KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational model remains relevant. Modern challenges extend beyond technical mastery to include moral crises, diminished social cohesion, and ethical decline.

His integrative model addresses these challenges by strengthening four dimensions: faith, scholarship, ethics, and social service. This holistic approach prepares competitive, empathetic, and responsible individuals equipped to contribute to national development (Tri Prasetyowati et al. 2024).

Reconstruction of Social Worship According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan: Manifestation of Tawhīd in Human Liberation

A central contribution of KH. Ahmad Dahlan was the redefinition of worship (*'ibādah*) from individual ritual performance toward active social responsibility. In his view, authentic religiosity encompasses prayer, fasting, and charity alongside active engagement in humanitarian efforts, community empowerment, and social justice. Thus, worship integrates vertical devotion (*ḥablum minallāh*) with horizontal responsibility (*ḥablum minannās*) (David Ricardo and Mahmud Arif 2026).

This model is rooted in Surah Al-Ma'un:

"Have you seen the one who denies the Recompense? That is the one who drives away the orphan, and does not encourage the feeding of the poor. So woe to those who pray, [but] who are heedless of their prayer—those who make a show [of their deeds] and withhold simple assistance." (Q.S. Al-Ma'un [107]: 1–7).

KH. Ahmad Dahlan interpreted this surah as a direct critique of ritual performance devoid of social impact. Neglecting orphans and the poor was identified as a functional denial of faith. Thus, religious devotion is evaluated by actions benefiting the vulnerable (*mustaḍ'afīn*) alongside ritual compliance.

This is supported by the prophetic tradition:

"The best of people are those who are most beneficial to people." (Al-Mu'jam al-Awsat; graded *ḥasan*).

1. Al-Ma'un Theology as a Paradigm for Social Action

Rather than teaching Surah Al-Ma'un solely as a theoretical lesson, KH. Ahmad Dahlan applied it as an operational framework. Historical accounts record him repeating lessons on this surah until his students translated its principles into practice by assisting orphans, aiding the poor, caring for the sick, and establishing social institutions (Parhan 2024).

This practical interpretation led to the establishment of Muhammadiyah's charitable endeavors (*amal usaha*) in education, healthcare, and social services. Schools, hospitals, orphanages, and clinics were established as direct implementations of Qur'anic commands, operationalizing *da'wah* into social action.

2. Social Tawhīd as the Implementation of Faith

For KH. Ahmad Dahlan, monotheism (*tawhīd*) encompasses both theological affirmation (*rubūbiyyah* and *ulūhiyyah*) and moral obligation toward humanity. Genuine

faith manifests through honesty, integrity, justice, and social action (Azzaro et al. 2026), reflecting the divine command:

"And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression." (Q.S. Al-Ma'idah [5]: 2).

Under this framework, poverty, ignorance, and injustice represent societal challenges that require an active faith-based response.

3. Social Worship as an Instrument of Liberation

KH. Ahmad Dahlan's approach to social worship contains a strong liberatory dimension. Educational access for the underprivileged, healthcare for the vulnerable, and economic empowerment were structured as acts of worship (Armaijn et al. 2024). This aligns with the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid ash-sharī'ah*)—safeguarding faith, life, intellect, lineage, and wealth.

4. Relevance of Social Worship in the Contemporary Era

In the 21st century, communities face structural poverty, educational disparities, ethical crises, and digital disruption (Nurmaidah 2022). In this context, social worship expands from short-term charity toward sustainable empowerment—including institutional philanthropy, healthcare expansion, environmental stewardship, and digital literacy (Parhan 2024).

Reconstruction of Religious Orientation, Educational System, and Social Worship as an Effort for Human Liberation from Backwardness

KH. Ahmad Dahlan's reform movement links religious orientation, educational reform, and social worship into an integrated framework for human liberation. These three pillars aim to build a progressive society characterized by pure faith, broad knowledge, noble character, and active social responsibility (Yuliana Hermawanti, Nisrokha Nisrokha, and Wahyudin 2020).

This paradigm posits that internal factors—such as rigid adherence to tradition (*taqlīd*), limited educational quality, and diminished social concern—contribute significantly to societal decline. Thus, reform requires systematic intervention across religious, educational, and social domains (Parhan 2024), fulfilling the principle:

"Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves." (Q.S. Ar-Ra'd [13]: 11).

This transformation proceeds through three interconnected phases:

1. Reconstruction of Religious Orientation: Realigning religious practice with the Qur'an and As-Sunnah to serve as a moral foundation for personal and social development.
2. Reconstruction of Education: Establishing integrative education to break cycles of ignorance and develop balanced spiritual, intellectual, and social capabilities.
3. Reconstruction of Social Worship: Translating faith into sustained social service, healthcare, educational outreach, and economic empowerment.

Reconstruction of Religious Orientation, Educational System, and Social Worship According to KH. Ahmad Dahlan: an Effort to Liberate Humanity from Backwardness

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[Reconstruction of Religious Orientation]

(Pure Faith / Qur'an & As-Sunnah)



[Reconstruction of Islamic Education]

(Integrative Knowledge & Ethics)



[Reconstruction of Social Worship]

(Community Action & Empowerment)



[Progressive Islamic Civilization]

Synthesis of the Liberation Paradigm This study synthesizes KH. Ahmad Dahlan's framework into four structural components:

1. Tawḥīd as the Spiritual Foundation: Directing all life orientations toward Allah based on divine revelation.
2. Education as the Transformative Instrument: Developing faithful, knowledgeable, and ethically grounded individuals.
3. Social Worship as the Actualization of Faith: Translating belief into social service and empowerment.
4. Progressive Civilization as the Ultimate Goal: Establishing a just, self-reliant, and ethical society.

Relevance to Contemporary Challenges Amid global integration, modern challenges require multifaceted responses (David Ricardo and Mahmud Arif 2026). Reconstructing religious orientation supports religious moderation; educational reform enhances human resource capabilities; and social worship strengthens institutional philanthropy and community resilience.

Together, these pillars provide a comprehensive model for addressing contemporary social and educational challenges, demonstrating the enduring relevance of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's reform movement.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought offers an integrated reform paradigm (*tajdid*) combining religious orientation, educational systems, and social worship to address societal backwardness. Reconstructing religious orientation realigns practice with the Qur'an and As-Sunnah; educational reform synthesizes religious and modern sciences; and social worship translates faith into structured community action. Together, these pillars establish a framework where *tawhīd* serves as the spiritual foundation, education acts as the transformative medium, and social service actualizes religious values in contemporary society.

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