

The Educational Philosophy of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan: An Answer to the Crisis of Educational Dualism in the Colonial Era

Athar Abdullatif Husain¹, Ludfi Robiatul Adawiyah², Muhammad Al Haariz³, Rifqi Khairul Anam⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo

E-mail: 4tharhusain@gmail.com¹, ludfirobiatuladawiyah@gmail.com², muhammad.alhaariz@gmail.com³, rifqistaimpro@iad-probolinggo.ac.id⁴

Article History:

Received: 04 Januari 2026

Revised: 13 Januari 2026

Accepted: 19 Januari 2026

Keywords: K.H. Ahmad Dahlan; Educational Philosophy; Dualism; Epistemology; Tawhid

Abstract: This study addresses the 20th-century educational dualism crisis in colonial Indonesia, a pathology split between stagnant religious traditionalism and alienated secular modernity. This article aims to demonstrate that K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's educational philosophy was the valid and coherent epistemological answer to this crisis. Using a qualitative library method and a dialectical-analytical framework, this research diagnoses the pathologies of both poles. The results show that Dahlan's synthesis—grounded in Tawhid (Divine Unity) as an epistemological unifier and Al-Ma'un praxis as its axiology—is not a mere compromise but a re-foundation. This is proven by demonstrating the fundamental categorical errors within both the traditionalist objection and the modernist-secular objection. The study concludes that this dualism is a the schism of knowledge and that Dahlan's synthesis remains a critical therapeutic model for contemporary education.

INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the 20th century, Islamic education was confronted by a fundamental and dualistic crisis. This reality bifurcated the *ummah* (community) into two extreme, yet equally problematic, poles. On one hand, the reality of traditional Islamic education (the *Pesantren*) stood firm in safeguarding spiritual tradition but was diagnosed as experiencing *kejumudan* (stagnation) and isolation from the challenges of the age. On the other hand, the reality of modern education (the Dutch Colonial School) offered mastery of general sciences and administration as a path to material progress, yet it operated within a secular epistemological framework that systematically *alienated* participants from their creedal (*aqidah*) and cultural roots (Iqbal, 2019). This dualistic pathology—between stagnant piety and alienated progress—created a fundamental question for reformers: How could this crisis be answered conclusively? And was the philosophical synthesis offered by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan an epistemologically valid answer?

Answering this question was not straightforward, as the proposed synthesis (integration) was opposed by both poles. The first objection (*objectiones*), articulated by the traditionalist-puritan camp, argued that Dahlan's synthesis was both unnecessary and dangerous. From this perspective, the primary aim of education was *hifdz ad-din* (the preservation of religion) and the formation of morality (*akhlaqul karimah*). The *Pesantren*, with its focus on otherworldly sciences (*ukhrawi*),

was deemed entirely sufficient for this purpose. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's effort to adopt elements of colonial education—such as classrooms, blackboards, and a curriculum of "general knowledge"—was considered a *bid'ah* (heretical innovation) and *tasyabbuh* (imitation) of the colonisers, a compromise feared to corrupt the purity of the creed (Fanani, 2019).

The second objection (*objectiones*) came from the opposing camp: the modernist-secular proponents and the colonial elite. For them, the synthesis offered by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan was, on the contrary, insufficient and a step backwards. In this view, the only path out of backwardness was the *total* adoption of Western rationality, science, and educational methods, which were demonstrably superior. Dahlan's attempt to "mix" a modern curriculum with religious "dogma" (Tawhid) was considered an irrational act. This act was judged to taint the pure objectivity of science and to perpetuate the very stagnation it claimed to fight, thereby impeding material progress (Nabil Amir & Abdul Rahman, 2025).

These two contradictory objections, when analysed simultaneously, expose the true "related issues": a *false dichotomy* that was profoundly paralysing. The *ummah* was faced with an impossible choice: to become pious Muslims who were "backward" and ahistorical (the *Pesantren* option); or, to become "advanced" modernists who were "secular" and detached from their spiritual roots (the Colonial School option). Both paths, in diagnostic terminology, were *pathological* because both failed to produce a complete human being—a person fully functional as both a servant of God and a steward upon the earth (Hasan, 2023).

But on the contrary, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan explicitly rejected this false dichotomy. The authority for his argument was not derived from stagnant tradition nor from secular modernity, but from his *praxis*-oriented and revolutionary understanding of the Qur'an, crystallised in the spirit of the 'Theology of Al-Ma'un'. For Dahlan, true faith (Tawhid) could not cease at passive, personal piety; it demanded manifestation as social *amal* (praxis). This transformative social praxis, in turn, was impossible to realise without mastering two sets of tools simultaneously: (a) religious knowledge (Qur'an and Sunnah) as the *foundation* and *aim* (*hujjah*), and (b) "general knowledge" (science, medicine, management) as the *instrument* (*'iddah*) to actualise the function of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a mercy to all creation) (Burhani, 2020).

Therefore, this article argues that the educational philosophy of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan constitutes a valid and conclusive answer to the crisis. The validity of Dahlan's solution lies not in a superficial "compromise" (as both *objectiones* accused), but in his diagnostic precision in identifying the root *pathology* of *both* systems. He perceived that traditional education had failed in actualising the human function as *khalifah fil ardh* (vicegerent on earth, steward of social-material reality), while colonial-secular education had failed in actualising the fundamental human function as *'abdullah* (servant of God, rooted in faith) .

This article, aims to *demonstrate* how Dahlan's philosophy offers an epistemological *therapy* to heal this dualism. His project was not "mixing", but "integrating". He performed a *re-foundation*: taking the neutral-instrumental *methods* and *sciences* of modernity, uprooting them from their *secular* foundations, and replanting them firmly in the *foundation of Tawhid* (Divine Unity). Through dialectical analysis, this article will prove that this integrative synthesis is the most coherent philosophical answer, precisely by deconstructing the logical flaws within both of the objections (traditionalist and modernist-secular) presented.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a qualitative inquiry employing a library research approach. This section is precise and straightforward, adhering to the journal's requirements (Zed, 2008).

Objects of Study The research is structured around two distinct objects of study:

.....

1. Material Object: The material object is the concrete historical reality of the educational dualism crisis during the colonial era, specifically the phenomenon of the *Pesantren* (traditionalist pole) versus the Dutch Colonial School (modernist-secular pole).
2. Formal Object: The formal object is the educational philosophy of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, which is utilised as the critical-analytical lens to diagnose and offer a solution to the crisis defined by the material object.

Data Analysis Technique The analysis is conducted using two primary techniques:

1. Content Analysis: This research utilises content analysis of primary literature (extant works or documented ideas of Dahlan) and relevant secondary literature (scholarly studies on Dahlan, Muhammadiyah, and colonial-era education).
2. Dialectical Analysis: Informed by the Scholastic method, the core of the analysis employs a dialectical framework. This framework juxtaposes the central thesis (Dahlan's philosophical view) against its historical antitheses (the *Objectiones* from the traditionalist and modernist-secular camps, as established in the Introduction) to demonstrate the logical coherence and superiority of the thesis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Diagnosis of the Dualistic Crisis

This section analyses the "results" of a historical-philosophical inquiry into the *material object* of the crisis: the two dominant, yet pathological, educational poles of the era.

The first pole, traditionalist education, was embodied by the *Pesantren*. Its primary virtue was its role as a bastion for the preservation of spiritual and textual traditions (*turats*). However, this virtue, when divorced from its socio-historical context, calcified into its primary pathology: *kejumudan* (stagnation). The pedagogical emphasis shifted from dynamic *ijtihad* (critical reasoning) to static *taqlid* (rote imitation), creating a closed intellectual ecosystem that valued textual repetition over contextual application (Jayadi, 2019).

This intellectual stagnation led directly to a profound disconnection from social praxis. The knowledge imparted, while deeply valuable in its own *ukhrawi* (otherworldly) domain, became socially inert. It failed to equip students with the necessary tools to diagnose or treat the immediate material-historical conditions of colonialism, poverty, and ignorance. The *Pesantren* system became, in effect, a "sanctuary" that isolated its inhabitants from the very world they were meant to serve (Abidin, 2015).

This disconnect between spiritual knowledge and social reality is the precise condition that gave rise to the first objection. The *Pesantren* system, in its well-intentioned quest for purity, mistook isolation for piety. It produced individuals who were personally pious but collectively powerless, unable to fully actualise the Qur'anic mandate of *khalifah fil ardh* (stewardship on earth). This failure was not of *intention*, but of *methodology*; it was a piety that had become ahistorical (Abidin, 2015).

The second pole, colonial modern education, presented the antithesis. Its virtue was its efficacy in imparting "general knowledge"—rational sciences, medicine, and administrative skills. Its primary pathology, however, was its foundational *epistemological hegemony*. This system was not a neutral conduit for "knowledge"; it was an ideological apparatus built on a secular-positivist framework that treated religion as, at best, a private affair, and at worst, an obstacle to rational thought (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

The "result" was the creation of an alienated native elite. Graduates of the colonial schools were technically proficient but spiritually vacant and culturally uprooted. They were trained to become efficient cogs in the colonial administrative machine, serving the interests of the coloniser

rather than the needs of their own *ummah*. This system systematically severed the link between intellect and faith, directly failing the human function of '*abdullah* (servant of God) (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

The "progress" offered by this pole was, therefore, an instrument of control. The knowledge it disseminated was inextricably linked to power, designed to produce a docile, Westernised, and manageable subject. The modernist-secular objection, which championed this system as "purely rational," failed to diagnose this insidious political-ideological function. It mistook the *instrument* of rationality for the *ideology* of colonialism (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

In summary, the *material object* of the crisis was this profound, dualistic pathology. The *ummah* was trapped in a *false dichotomy* between a past that was spiritually rich but socially inert (stagnation), and a future that was materially advanced but spiritually empty (alienation). Both systems were half-systems, incapable of producing a whole human being. This diagnosis confirms the urgent *necessity* for a third-way synthesis, an epistemological *therapy* that could heal this schism (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

The Integrative Synthesis of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan

This section constitutes the primary argument, demonstrating *how* Dahlan's philosophy provides the required therapeutic synthesis.

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's *Respondeo* (Answer) begins not with curriculum, but with ontology. His first revolutionary act was to redefine the very *purpose* of education. He rejected the traditionalist model of *ta'lim* (knowledge transfer) and the colonial model of *training* (skill acquisition). For Dahlan, education is *Tarbiyah*—the holistic formation and nurturing of a complete human being (*Insan Kamil*). The goal is not merely to create a "knower" ('*alim*) or a "worker", but to *form* a human who embodies both '*abdullah* and *khalifah* (Sulistyo, 2022).

The indestructible foundation for this formation is *Tawhid* (the absolute Oneness of God). This is the central thesis of Dahlan's entire philosophical project. *Tawhid* is not simply one theological subject among many; it is the *central organising principle* of all reality, all knowledge, and all human action. It is the absolute *epistemological* and *axiological* core from which all education must flow (Sulistyo, 2022).

Herein lies the genius of his synthesis: *Tawhid*, as an epistemology, *demolishes* the dualism. If God is One, His "revelation" (the source of knowledge) cannot be fundamentally divided. Dahlan perceived God's revelation as one reality manifested in two forms: the *Qauliyah* (the 'said' verses, i.e., the Qur'an and Sunnah) and the *Kauniyah* (the 'cosmic' verses, i.e., the natural world, society, and the laws of science) (Peacock, 2022).

This epistemological unification has profound pedagogical consequences. To study *only* the Qur'an (as in the *Pesantren*) while ignoring the cosmos (science) is to read only *half* of God's book. Conversely, to study *only* the cosmos (as in the Colonial School) while ignoring the Qur'an is to read God's creation without understanding its Author or its purpose. Therefore, studying mathematics, biology, or sociology is not a *bid'ah* (heresy); it is an essential act of *tafakkur* (reflection), a form of *ibadah* (worship) to understand God's creation (Jannah, 2023).

This integrative epistemology is what this article terms Dahlan's "re-foundation". He did not "mix" two opposing systems. Rather, he identified the *instrumental* value of modern methods (science, classical organisation, pedagogy), *uprooted* them from their secular-positivist soil, and *replanted* them in the rich, life-giving soil of *Tawhid*. This act gave these modern tools a new, profound *telos* (purpose) that was entirely Islamic (Jannah, 2023).

If *Tawhid* is the foundation (epistemology), then the *Praxis of Al-Ma'un* is the *telos* or ultimate goal (axiology) (Anam, 2023). Dahlan's philosophy is rigorously anti-contemplative in the sense of passive isolation. Faith (*iman*) that does not manifest as transformative social action (*amal*)

is, for Dahlan, an incomplete or even false faith. His reading of Surah Al-Ma'un was a direct critique of the stagnant piety diagnosed (Alifuddin et al., 2021).

The "Theology of Al-Ma'un" thus becomes the engine of his educational system. It demands that the *integrated* knowledge (Tawhid-based science and Tawhid-based religion) must be *used* as an instrument for social liberation: to fight ignorance (via schools), poverty (via social welfare), and sickness (via hospitals). This *praxis* is what creates the *Insan Kamil*—the individual who is both a devout Muslim-Modernist and a modern-Muslim, fulfilling the dual roles of '*abdullah* and *khalifah* simultaneously. This is the *therapy* that directly answers the *diagnosis* (Daib Insan Labib, 2024).

Ad objectiones: Answering the Objections

This section completes the *Disputatio* by demonstrating, in light of the *Respondeo*, why the *Objectiones* presented in the Introduction are logically and philosophically flawed.

First, let us address the traditionalist objection, which claims Dahlan's synthesis is a *bid'ah* (heresy) and *tasyabbuh* (imitation). This argument suffers from a fundamental category error: it fails to make the classical *fiqh* (jurisprudential) distinction between the *unchangeable* domain of *ibadah mahdhah* (ritual worship) and the *dynamic* domain of *muamalah* (social transaction), of which education is a part (Nashir, 2015).

Dahlan's adoption of "methods"—such as classrooms, curricula, and even "general knowledge"—belongs to the domain of *muamalah*. These are neutral *instruments* or *containers* for knowledge. The argument of *tasyabbuh* is invalid because Dahlan was not imitating the *ideology* (secularism) of the coloniser; he was appropriating a useful *method*. The *safeguard* against the ideological corruption that the traditionalists rightly feared was precisely Dahlan's *re-foundation* of these methods on the non-negotiable bedrock of *Tawhid* (Nashir, 2015).

Furthermore, the traditionalist claim to "purity" by *excluding* general knowledge is, in fact, contradictory to the foundational Qur'anic command of *Iqra'*. This command is universal, implying the reading of *both* revelation and creation. By limiting "reading" to only the textual *Qauliyah* and ignoring the cosmic *Kauniyah*, the traditionalist position is, ironically, an *incomplete* application of the divine command. Dahlan's synthesis is, therefore, *more* Qur'anically complete, not less (Nashir, 2015).

Second, let us address the modernist-secular objection, which claims that integrating religion makes education "irrational". This argument also commits a profound category error: it falsely conflates *rationality* (the instrument) with *secularism* (a specific, Western-historical ideology). It assumes, without proof, that reason can *only* operate within a secular framework (Nashir, 2015).

Dahlan's philosophy *demonstrates* that this assumption is false. Science and rational thought are not the exclusive property of the West; they are universal tools, the inheritance of all humanity (and, in Islamic history, were once championed by Muslim civilisation). By grounding rationality in *Tawhid*, Dahlan does not *negate* reason; he *liberates* it from its narrow, positivist cage and gives it a *higher moral purpose* (axiology) beyond mere material accumulation (Nashir, 2015).

Indeed, the very *pathology* of alienation diagnosed in section 4.1—the spiritual emptiness and "crisis of meaning" of the secularly educated elite—is the *direct empirical proof* that rationality *without* a spiritual foundation is *itself* problematic and, in a human sense, "irrational". It creates "advanced" individuals who are disconnected from their own purpose. Therefore, Dahlan's synthesis is not a retreat from rationality; it is the *only* rational path towards *holistic* human progress, which integrates the material and the spiritual (Nashir, 2015).

This dialectical analysis demonstrates that both objections are rooted in the very dualistic thinking that Dahlan sought to transcend. The *Respondeo*—his synthesis of Tawhid-based *Tarbiyah* and Al-Ma'un-based *praxis*—remains the only logically coherent and philosophically

robust position. It successfully avoids the pathologies of *both* stagnation and alienation, thereby *demonstrating* itself as the valid and conclusive answer to the *Quaestio* posed at the beginning of this inquiry (Nashir, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Based on the preceding dialectical analysis, this article concludes that the *Quaestio* posed in the introduction has been affirmatively answered, as the *demonstration* has proven that K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's educational philosophy *is* the valid and coherent epistemological answer to the colonial-era crisis of educational dualism. This superiority is not a mere assertion but a logical proof, established by demonstrating the fundamental categorical errors and internal contradictions within both the traditionalist objection and the modernist-secular objection. The theoretical reflection derived from this proof is significant: the dualistic crisis diagnosed by Dahlan—stagnant piety versus alienated secularity—is not merely a historical artefact but the *prototypical symptom* of a timeless epistemological *pathology*, namely the schism between revealed and acquired knowledge. Dahlan's synthesis of *Tawhid* as the epistemological unifier and Al-Ma'un as the axiological *praxis* is, therefore, not just a historical "event" but a timeless *therapeutic model*. Consequently, this study's recommendation is both critical and urgent: any contemporary educational institution, especially those claiming his lineage, that continues to operate under a *de facto* dualism between "religious" and "general" sciences is not honouring Dahlan's legacy but is merely *perpetuating the very pathology* he diagnosed, demanding a move beyond ceremonial invocation towards the radical, continuous application of his epistemological therapy.

REFERENCE

- Abidin, Z. (2015). *MENAPAKI DISTINGSI GENEALOGIS PEMIKIRAN PENDIDIKAN (MUHAMMADIYAH DAN NAHDLATUL ULAMA)*. 4(2).
- Al-Hamdi, R. (2020). THE ORIGIN OF THE POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MUHAMMADIYAH: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS TOWARD INDONESIA'S MUSLIM-REFORMIST MOVEMENT. *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Literature and Muslim Society*, 5(2), 187–206. <https://doi.org/10.22515/islimus.v5i2.2706>
- Alifuddin, M., Suud, F. M., & Chaer, Moh. T. (2021). IMPLEMENTATION OF AL-MA'UN THEOLOGY: MEASURING MUHAMMADIYAH SOCIAL ACTION AT THE CENTER OF WAKATOBI WORLD'S CORAL TRIANGLE. *Al-A'raf: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam Dan Filsafat*, 18(2), 307–334. <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajpif.v18i2.4262>
- Anam, R. K. (2023). PERAN MUHAMMADIYAH DALAM PENGUATAN MODAL SOSIAL TERKAIT HUBUNGAN ANTAR KOMUNITAS MUSLIM DI ASEAN. *IMTIYAZ: Jurnal Ilmu Keislaman*, 7(2), 59–70.
- Burhani, A. N. (2020). Torn between Muhammadiyah and Ahmadiyah in Indonesia: Discussing Erfaan Dahlan's religious affiliation and self-exile. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 48(140), 60–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2019.1663678>
- Daib Insan Labib, M. A. (2024). Implementation of al-Ma'un Theology in the concept of educational equality in Indonesia (Study of Ahmad Dahlan's Thoughts in the Social Aspects of Education). *Proceeding International Conference on Religion, Science and Education*, 3, 19–26. <http://sunankalijaga.org/prosiding/index.php/icrse/article/view/1076>
- Fanani, A. (2019). Ahmad Dahlan's Perspective about the Model of Modern Integration Islamic Education. *Nadwa*, 1(1), 95. <https://doi.org/10.21580/nw.2019.1.1.3624>
- Hasan, M. (2023). Ahmad Dahlan and the Moderate, Humanist, and Non-Sectarian Islam. *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, 24(1). <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.24.2023.272>

-
- Iqbal, M. (2019). Dualism System of Higher Education in Indonesia. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Educational Sciences and Teacher Profession (ICETeP 2018)*. Proceedings of the International Conference on Educational Sciences and Teacher Profession (ICETeP 2018), Bengkulu City, Indonesia. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icetep-18.2019.33>
- Jannah, M. (2023). Analysis of Muhammadiyah educational concepts: A historical and philosophical review. *ATTARBIYAH: Journal of Islamic Culture and Education*, 8(1), 31–46. <https://doi.org/10.18326/attarbiyah.v8i1.31-46>
- Jayadi, H. M. (2019). *Fundamentalisme Muhammadiyah*.
- Nabil Amir, A., & Abdul Rahman, T. (2025). Muhammadiyah's Influence on Reform and Modernism in Indonesia. *Addabani: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education*, 3(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.52593/adb.03.1.01>
- Nashir, H. (2015). *Understanding the ideology of Muhammadiyah*. Muhammadiyah University Press.
- Peacock, J. L. (2022). *Muslim Puritans: Reformist Psychology in Southeast Asian Islam* (1st ed). University of California Press.
- Sulistiyono, T. (2022). Muhammadiyah's Philosophy of Education. *Interdisciplinary Social Studies*, 1(6), 766–772. <https://doi.org/10.55324/iss.v1i6.154>
- Zed, M. (2008). *Metode penelitian kepustakaan*. Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia.
-