Modernization of Islamic Education Curriculum Reform, Reformers (Muhammad Abduh and Ahmad Dahlan)

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Abstract

The modernization of Islamic education is a response to the challenges of the times that demand reforms in the system, curriculum, and teaching methods. This article discusses the process of reforming Islamic education through a modern approach initiated by two important figures, namely Muhammad Abduh in Egypt and Ahmad Dahlan in Indonesia. Both emphasized the importance of integration between religious science and general science, rationality in understanding Islamic teachings, and the formation of moral and progressive students' character. Their curriculum reforms rejected the stagnant traditional education system, and replaced it with a system that was more open to science, technology, and critical thinking. Through a literature review and a historical-comparative approach, this article shows that the modernization of Islamic education is not a form of secularization, but an effort to refresh Islamic values to be relevant to the contemporary social and intellectual context. Abduh and Dahlan's thoughts became the foundation for the modern Islamic education model that balances faith, knowledge, and charity, and is able to answer the challenges of globalization and the progress of modern civilization

Keywords: Modernization; Curriculum Reform; Muhammad Abduh; Ahmad Dahlan

Abstrak

Modernisasi pendidikan Islam merupakan respons terhadap tantangan zaman yang menuntut reformasi sistem, kurikulum, dan metode pengajaran. Artikel ini membahas proses reformasi pendidikan Islam melalui pendekatan modern yang diinisiasi oleh dua tokoh penting, yaitu Muhammad Abduh di Mesir dan Ahmad Dahlan di Indonesia. Keduanya menekankan pentingnya integrasi antara ilmu agama dan ilmu umum, rasionalitas dalam memahami ajaran Islam, serta pembentukan karakter moral dan progresif siswa. Reformasi kurikulum mereka menolak sistem pendidikan tradisional yang stagnan, dan menggantinya dengan sistem yang lebih terbuka terhadap sains, teknologi, dan pemikiran kritis. Melalui tinjauan literatur dan pendekatan historis-komparatif, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa modernisasi pendidikan Islam bukanlah bentuk sekularisasi, melainkan upaya menyegarkan nilai-nilai Islam agar relevan dengan konteks sosial dan intelektual kontemporer. Pemikiran Abduh dan Dahlan menjadi fondasi bagi model pendidikan Islam modern yang menyeimbangkan iman, pengetahuan, dan amal, serta mampu menjawab tantangan globalisasi dan kemajuan peradaban modern

Kata Kunci: Modernisasi; Reformasi Kurikulum; Muhammad Abduh; Ahmad Dahlan

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education from the classical period to the modern era has a central role in shaping the civilization of the people. In its long history, educational institutions such as *Kuttab*, *Madrasah*, to classical Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar have become scientific centers that have produced great scholars, scientists, and scholars (Daulay and Dalimunthe 2021). However, entering the 19th to 20th centuries, the Islamic world faced great challenges in the form of intellectual decline, Western colonialism, as well as the emergence of modernization and globalization that brought a new paradigm in science and the education system. This condition requires an update or *Tajdid* in Islamic education in order to be able to adapt to the dynamics of the times without losing the fundamental values of Islamic teachings (Rozali 2022).

Before the emergence of the modernization movement, the Islamic education system tended to be traditional and textual. The curriculum is more oriented towards mastering religious sciences such as fiqh, tafsir, hadith, and Sufism, but it does not provide space for general sciences such as science, mathematics, and technology. The learning method is also more memorized (*Taqlid*) rather than critical understanding (*ijtihad*). As a result, Islamic education loses its adaptability to social changes and modern science. When the West experienced the industrial revolution and technological advancement, the Islamic world was trapped in intellectual stagnation. This condition is what encourages the emergence of reformers who seek to restore the spirit of rationality and progress in Islamic education (Ependi 2019).

One of the central figures in the Islamic education modernization movement is **Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905)**, an Egyptian scholar known as a disciple of Jamaluddin al-Afghani. Abduh assessed that the decline of Muslims was caused by the closing of the door of ijtihad and the dominance of taklid over the opinions of past scholars. He argued that Islam is actually very rational and does not contradict modern science (Daulay and Dalimunthe 2021). Therefore, Abduh pushed for educational

reform at Al-Azhar University, updating the curriculum to include modern sciences such as logic, mathematics, and social sciences. He also emphasized the importance of moral education, rationality of thought, and intellectual freedom in building a generation of Muslims who are able to compete in the modern world. Abduh's thought became the starting point for the birth of the modernist movement in various parts of the Islamic world (Ruqoiyah 2019).

In Indonesia, the idea of modernizing Islamic education found its form through **Kyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923),** founder of Muhammadiyah. Inspired by the thoughts of Islamic reformers in the Middle East, especially Muhammad Abduh, Ahmad Dahlan sought to reform the traditional Islamic education system which at that time was still separate from the general education system (Yusnita et al. 2022). He established schools that combined religious curriculum with modern science. Muhammadiyah's educational model emphasizes the importance of morality, rationality, discipline, and social work as a tangible manifestation of Islamic teachings. Through this approach, Ahmad Dahlan succeeded in bringing Indonesian Islamic education in a more open, modern, and relevant direction to the needs of the community (Rohman and Muafatun 2022).

The modernization of Islamic education is not only limited to curriculum reform, but also includes a paradigm transformation of Muslim thinking towards science and education. In the global context, modern education requires the ability to think critically, innovatively, and adaptively to technological developments and the challenges of globalization. Therefore, Islamic education needs to balance between *Faith* and *Science*, between spiritual values and rationality, so as not to get caught up in the dichotomy of religious science and world science. The reforms carried out by Abduh and Dahlan prove that Islam does not reject progress, but instead encourages its people to become pioneers of civilization based on divine values (Yasti, Saputra, and Rafika 2023).

In addition, curriculum reform is an important aspect in the modernization of Islamic education. The curriculum is not only a list of subjects, but also a representation of the educational vision of a nation. In modern Islamic education, the curriculum must be able to integrate the values of monotheism with the development of science and technology. This educational model aims to form human beings who have character, faith, knowledge, and competitiveness. The modern curriculum no longer separates religious science and general science, but views the two as a complementary unit in building kamil people. In the context of today's Indonesia, the idea of modernizing Islamic education is increasingly relevant amid the challenges of the digital era and globalization (Scott, 2019). Many Islamic educational institutions such as madrasas, Islamic boarding schools, and Islamic universities have innovated the curriculum by combining information technology, science, and Islamic values. This effort is actually a continuation of the spirit of reform that has been initiated by reformers such as Abduh and Dahlan. However, challenges remain, especially in maintaining a balance between modernity and spirituality, and in avoiding the secularization of education that can erode Islamic values (Halimatussaddiyah et al. 2025).

Thus, the modernization of Islamic education must be understood as a continuous process that refers to the spirit of *Tajdid* (update) without leaving *Turats* (Islamic scientific tradition). The reforms carried out by Muhammad Abduh and Ahmad Dahlan are proof that Islamic education is able to adapt to the changing times without losing its identity. They affirm that Islam is a religion that is in line with reason, science, and the progress of civilization. Therefore, the modernization of Islamic education in the contemporary era needs to be continued through curriculum innovation, improving the quality of teachers, and strengthening Islamic values in facing increasingly complex global challenges (Scott, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of library research. Literature research was chosen because the focus of the study is on the ideas, thoughts, and concepts of Islamic education from reformist figures, namely Muhammad Abduh and Ahmad Dahlan (Born 2023). The research data was not obtained through field observation, but through an in-depth study of various relevant literature sources. A historical approach is used to understand the social, political, and intellectual context behind the emergence of the idea of Islamic educational reform by Muhammad Abduh in Egypt and Ahmad Dahlan in Indonesia (Sari, Susmita, and Ikhlas 2025). This approach helps explain why the thought of both was born in certain social conditions and how those ideas developed. Primary sources, namely original works and documents written by or about the figures being studied, include: *Risalat al-Tauhid* by Muhammad Abduh *Al-Manar* (a journal of the thoughts of Abduh and Rasyid Ridha), Early Documents of the Establishment of Muhammadiyah, A collection of speeches, writings, and teachings of Ahmad Dahlan compiled by the Muhammadiyah organization. Secondary sources are supporting literature such as books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and other research results that discuss the modernization of Islamic education, curriculum reform, and biographies of the two figures. The works of Azyumardi Azra, Nurcholish Madjid, Haidar Nashir, and contemporary writers on Islamic modernism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. a. The Concept of Modernization of Islamic Education

Modernization in the context of Islamic education is a renewal process that aims to adjust the system, methods, and curriculum of Islamic education to be relevant to the times without eliminating the basic values of Islam. According to Nurcholish Madjid (1992), modernization does not mean secularization, but

an effort to reinterpret Islamic teachings to suit the demands of scientific and technological progress. In this case, the modernization of Islamic education can be understood as an integration between Islamic values and the spirit of rationality, science, and social progress (Wahdaniya, Sumiati, and Pratama 2023).

Meanwhile, Azyumardi Azra (2002) explained that the modernization of Islamic education is a form of revitalization of the spirit of ijtihad in the world of education. This is done by updating the curriculum, learning methods, and management of educational institutions so that they are not left behind by the times. Modern Islamic education is no longer focused on dogmatic teaching alone, but also equips students with the ability to think critically, creatively, and adaptively to global social changes (Maksum 2022). The modernization of Islamic education is an effort to build an education system that balances the spiritual dimension (faith and morals) with the rational and pragmatic dimension (science and skills). The goal is to produce people who have faith, knowledge, and charity, in accordance with the principles *"Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin"*.

b. **Curriculum Reform Theory**

The curriculum is the heart of the education system. In the view of Hilda Taba (1962), the curriculum is a systematic learning plan that includes educational objectives, content, methods, and evaluation. Curriculum reform means making changes to these components to be more in line with the needs of students and the times. In the context of Islamic education, curriculum reform means integrating religious science with general knowledge, as well as updating learning methods to be more interactive and contextual (Rohman and Muafatun 2022). According to Zamroni (2011), Islamic education needs to transform from a traditional teacher-centered approach to a modern student-centered

approach (*student-centered learning*). A modern curriculum must also contain aspects of character, moral values, and critical and innovative thinking skills.

Abdurrahman Mas'ud (2002) added that the reform of the Islamic education curriculum must be carried out with the principle of balance between *Faith, Knowledge, and Charity*. This means that Islamic education not only forms intellectual intelligence, but also spiritual and social intelligence. Therefore, the curriculum must reflect the integration of revelation (the Qur'an and the Sunnah) with empirical science as a way to build a whole human being.

c. **Muhammad Abduh's Thoughts on Education Reform**

Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) was a major figure in the Islamic modernism movement in Egypt. His thoughts were very influential on the reform of Islamic education in the Islamic world, including Indonesia. Abduh emphasized that the root of the decline of Muslims lies in the loss of the spirit of rationality and the dominance of taklid over old traditions. He tried to revive the spirit of ijtihad and think critically in understanding the teachings of Islam. In the field of education, Abduh proposed reforms at Al-Azhar University by introducing modern sciences such as logic, mathematics, science, and social sciences. He rejected the dichotomy between religious science and worldly science, because according to him, all knowledge comes from Allah and must be used for the benefit of the ummah. Abduh also emphasized the importance of moral education and freedom of thought as a means of forming a civilized society (Wahdaniya, Sumiati, and Pratama 2023).

Abduh's thinking is rooted in Islamic rationalism, which is the belief that Islamic teachings are in line with reason. He believes that the progress of Muslims can only be achieved through a rational, open, and socially progress-oriented education. His thinking became the theoretical basis for the modernization of Islamic education in various Muslim countries.

d. Ahmad Dahlan's Thoughts on Modern Education

Kyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923) was a figure who reformed Islamic education in Indonesia who brought the idea of modernization through the Muhammadiyah movement. Inspired by the thoughts of Abduh and other Middle Eastern reformers, Dahlan saw that the decline of Indonesian Muslims was caused by educational underdevelopment and the dichotomy between religious science and general science.

Ahmad Dahlan combines the Islamic boarding school education system with the modern Western school model. He established a Muhammadiyah educational institution that uses classical methods, an integrated curriculum (religious and general), and emphasizes the importance of discipline, cleanliness, and social charity. Through this approach, Islamic education in Indonesia transformed from a traditional system to a modern system that was relevant to the needs of the colonial society at that time (Halimatussaddiyah et al. 2025).

Dahlan also emphasized the importance of *pious deeds* as a tangible form of Islamic education. According to him, education is not enough to produce knowledgeable people, but also to give birth to individuals who care about society and are able to contribute to the progress of the people. Therefore, the concept of Muhammadiyah education is built on three pillars: monotheism, knowledge, and charity.

e. Theoretical Synthesis: Integration of Faith, Knowledge, and Charity

Based on the above theories, it can be concluded that the modernization of Islamic education is rooted in the spirit of tajdid (renewal) which aims to integrate faith and *knowledge*. Modern Islamic education must be able to build

kamil people who are not only spiritually pious, but also intellectually and socially capable. Curriculum reform is the main instrument to achieve this goal, by emphasizing the integration of religious and modern sciences, as well as character development and critical thinking skills.

The thoughts of Muhammad Abduh and Ahmad Dahlan became a strong foundation for the modern Islamic education model that rejects the dichotomy of science, upholds rationality, and places education as a means of social transformation. Thus, the theory of modernization of Islamic education can be formulated as an effort to build an education system that is based on universal Islamic values but still adaptive to the development of the times (Surya and Kholik 2020).

The modernization of Islamic education is an effort to adapt the Islamic education system to the development of science, technology, and social dynamics. Modernization does not mean replacing Islamic values with Western values, but reinterpreting Islamic teachings to remain contextual and relevant to the needs of the times (AZZAHRA and YANIZ 2024). In a historical perspective, modernization was born from the awareness of Muslims of the intellectual and social deterioration that has plagued the Islamic world since the 18th century. During this period of decline, many Islamic educational institutions such as madrassas and pesantren were trapped in dogmatic and textual scientific routines. Education emphasizes more book memorization without the encouragement of critical thinking or mastery of modern science. As a result, Muslims are lagging behind in the fields of science, economics, and politics. The modernization of Islamic education emerged as a solution to restore the spirit of progress of the ummah. This idea carries the principle of integration between faith, knowledge, and charity, by rejecting the separation between religious science and worldly science. Islamic education must produce

people who are faithful, have noble character, but also master science and technology (Symbolon 2024).

2. Curriculum Reform as the Core of Modernization

One of the most important aspects of the modernization of Islamic education is curriculum reform. The curriculum serves as a tool to achieve educational goals. Curriculum reform is carried out to update the content and learning methods to suit the needs of the times. In classical Islamic education, the curriculum generally contains religious sciences such as tafsir, hadith, fiqh, and monotheism. However, in modern times, there is an awareness that these sciences need to be combined with social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics, and technology so that students have comprehensive insights. Curriculum reform does not intend to reduce Islamic values, but to broaden the horizons of the people's thinking in order to be able to adapt to changes (Rosmayani 2023).

This reform also emphasizes the importance of active, dialogical, and rational learning methods, not just memorization. Students are invited to think critically about social realities and find solutions based on Islamic values. It is in this context that the ideas of reformers such as Muhammad Abduh and Ahmad Dahlan become very relevant (AZZAHRA and YANIZ 2024).

3. The Thought of Modernizing Islamic Education According to Muhammad Abduh

Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) is known as the pioneer of Islamic modernism in Egypt. He sought to renew Islamic thought to suit the demands of modern times. Abduh opposes the practice of blind taqlid against the opinions of classical scholars and calls for a return to the spirit of ijtihad. In the field of education, Abduh assessed that the decline of Muslims was caused by a closed and irrational education system. He argued that Islam has never contradicted modern science, because both are God-sourced: revelation (religious science) and nature (empirical science). Therefore, Islamic education must combine the two in

harmony. Abduh carried out reforms at Al-Azhar University by expanding the curriculum that originally only focused on religious science to include logic, philosophy, mathematics, and social sciences. He also proposed a teaching method that fosters critical thinking and rejects mere memorization(Laughter, n.d.).

Abduh's thought emphasizes four main principles of modernization of Islamic education:

a) Rationalization of Islamic teachings – understanding Islam with a rational and contextual approach, not just textual.

b) The integration of religious science and general science – rejecting the dichotomy of science.

c) Reform of educational institutions – transforming the Islamic education system to be responsive to modernity.

d) Independence of Muslims – building social and political awareness through education.

Through this idea, Abduh succeeded in inspiring the renewal of Islamic education in various Islamic worlds, including Indonesia.

4. Ahmad Dahlan's Thoughts and the Indonesian Context

The movement to modernize Islamic education in Indonesia cannot be separated from the figure of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923), the founder of the Muhammadiyah organization. He brought the spirit of reform that was in line with Muhammad Abduh's ideas, but adapted it to the social, cultural, and religious conditions of the Indonesian people. Ahmad Dahlan saw that Indonesian Muslims in the early 20th century faced two major challenges: backwardness in education and Dutch colonial colonialism (Qohin, 2007.). The traditional education system (pesantren) at that time paid less attention to general science, while the colonial education system only taught worldly knowledge without religious value (Scott, 2025).

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To answer these challenges, Dahlan established a Muhammadiyah school, which combines religious and general education in one curriculum. He introduced subjects such as mathematics, earth sciences, Dutch, and natural sciences in Islamic educational institutions. He also applies modern teaching methods such as the use of whiteboards, benches, class divisions, and learning evaluations — something that is not common in traditional madrasas. The main goal of education, according to Ahmad Dahlan, is not only to produce people of faith, but also to build people who are faithful, knowledgeable, and useful to society. Therefore, the Muhammadiyah curriculum is always directed at the formation of morals and social concern.

The principles of education modernization according to Ahmad Dahlan include:

a) Integration of religious science and general science.

b) The application of modern educational methods.

c) Education is oriented towards charity and social service.

d) Education for the empowerment of the people and the progress of the nation.

Thus, Ahmad Dahlan not only updated the content and methods of education, but also changed the social orientation of Islamic education to be more dynamic and progressive.

5. **Similarities and Differences in Thought of Abduh and Dahlan**

Despite living in different contexts, there are many similarities between the thoughts of Muhammad Abduh and Ahmad Dahlan. Both of them carry the spirit of ijtihad, reject taqlid, and emphasize the importance of rationality in understanding religion. They also reject the dichotomy between religious science and general science. However, there is also an important difference that Abduh focuses more on intellectual and institutional reform at the university level (Al-Azhar), while Dahlan emphasizes more on social practices and primary-secondary

education in society. Abduh struggles in the realm of theological and philosophical thought, while Dahlan is engaged in the implementation of education and social movements. Abduh is more theoretical and elitist, while Dahlan is pragmatic and populist(Azryan et al. 2024).

However, both are important pillars in the history of modernization of global Islamic education. Their ideas succeeded in inspiring the birth of an Islamic education system that was rational, progressive, and oriented towards the progress of the ummah.

6. **The Relevance of Islamic Education Modernization in the Contemporary Era**

In the era of globalization and the industrial revolution 4.0, the modernization of Islamic education is becoming increasingly relevant. The world is now faced with advances in digital technology, socio-cultural changes, and moral and spiritual challenges. In this situation, Islamic education is required to be able to adapt without losing its identity. The modernization of Islamic education today needs to be directed at several things: The integration of science and spiritual values. Islamic education must produce a generation that is able to master science and technology without abandoning Islamic ethics and values. The use of technology in learning. The use of digital media, e-learning, and AI can increase the effectiveness of learning. Character education is based on Islamic values. In the midst of a global moral crisis, Islamic education must be a fortress for the formation of morals and personality. Islamic schools and universities need to innovate in management, funding, and international cooperation. Modernization does not mean westernization, but Islamization of science — that is, the effort to make modern science a means to serve Allah and the benefit of man.

7. **Challenges and Expectations**

Although the modernization of Islamic education has a positive impact, there are a number of challenges that are still faced, including:

a) There is resistance from conservative groups who reject change.

b) The quality gap between traditional and modern Islamic educational institutions.

c) Limited human resources and educational infrastructure.

d) Lack of integration between religious and general education in the national system.

However, with the spirit inherited by Abduh and Dahlan, Islamic education has a great opportunity to continue to grow. If modernization is carried out wisely and based on Islamic values, then Islamic education can become the driving force for the progress of the nation and world civilization

CONCLUSION

The modernization of Islamic education is an intellectual and social movement that seeks to restore the spirit of rationality, openness, and progress in the world of Islamic education without abandoning fundamental Islamic values. Modernization is not a form of secularization, but the actualization of Islamic teachings in order to be able to answer the challenges of the times. The thoughts of Muhammad Abduh and Ahmad Dahlan are two clear examples of efforts to modernize Islamic education in different contexts but have the same spirit. Muhammad Abduh in Egypt emphasized the importance of reforming the curriculum in Islamic educational institutions by incorporating modern sciences, as well as fostering a critical and rational way of thinking in understanding religious teachings. He seeks to free Muslims from the shackles of taklid and ignorance through a balanced education between revelation and reason.

Meanwhile, Ahmad Dahlan in Indonesia implemented the idea of modernization into the social and educational movement through Muhammadiyah. He combines the religious and general education systems, changing the teaching method

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to be more rational, structured, and instilling social and moral values in every learning process. For Dahlan, education is not only the transmission of knowledge, but also a means of character formation and social service. Both of these figures reject the dichotomy between religious science and secular science, and believe that Islam is a religion that is in line with the progress of science. They also emphasized that the renewal of Islamic education must be based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, with the spirit of *ijtihad* to adapt to the changing times. In the current context, Abduh and Dahlan's ideas remain relevant. Islamic educational institutions in the modern era need to continue to innovate in curriculum reform, learning methods, and the use of digital technology, in order to be able to form a generation of Muslims who are characterful, knowledgeable, and able to contribute to global civilization.

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