

## Fazlur Rahman's Thought on Islamic Education: Its Relevance to the Concept of Meaningful Learning

Alfi Noer Diana Hafidah<sup>1</sup>, Masnu'atul Khoiriyah<sup>2</sup>, A. Ansorullah<sup>3</sup>, Dwy Anggara<sup>4</sup>, Khoiriyah<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo; [alfinurdiana31@gmail.com](mailto:alfinurdiana31@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo; [khoiriyahmasnuah@gmail.com](mailto:khoiriyahmasnuah@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo; [ansorullahmdr@gmail.com](mailto:ansorullahmdr@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup> Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo; [088227127708n@gmail.com](mailto:088227127708n@gmail.com)

<sup>5</sup> Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo; [riyaahmad89@gmail.com](mailto:riyaahmad89@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine Fazlur Rahman's thought on Islamic education and to analyze its relevance to the concept of meaningful learning. This study employs a qualitative method with a library research approach. Primary data are derived from Rahman's major works, such as *Islam and Modernity* and *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, while secondary data are drawn from books and journal articles discussing Islamic education and meaningful learning. The data are analyzed using content analysis with a thematic approach. The findings indicate that Rahman emphasizes the integration of revelation and reason, a contextual understanding of Islamic teachings, and the development of moral and intellectual capacities as the primary objectives of Islamic education. These principles strongly correspond to the characteristics of meaningful learning, which stress deep understanding, critical reflection, and the application of knowledge in real-life contexts. This study contributes theoretically by strengthening the philosophical foundation of meaningful learning within Islamic education and contributes practically by proposing a more reflective, contextual, and character oriented paradigm for Islamic Religious Education instruction.

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### Corresponding Author:

Alfi Noer Diana Hafidah

Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo; [alfinurdiana31@gmail.com](mailto:alfinurdiana31@gmail.com)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education plays a strategic role in shaping learners who are not only academically competent but also possess moral integrity, ethical understanding, and the ability to apply religious teachings in real-life contexts. However, numerous studies indicate that, to date, the practice of PAI instruction across various educational levels continues to face fundamental methodological challenges. One such challenge is the dominance of rote-based learning and the verbalistic transmission of knowledge, which often leaves limited space for students' active engagement in developing a profound understanding of religious meaning. In practice, the learning process tends to emphasize the mastery of rote knowledge rather than the cultivation of reflective and applicable conceptual understanding in students' everyday lives (Ifo et al., 2025).

This phenomenon is reflected in numerous contemporary studies indicating that Islamic Religious Education remains predominantly characterized by teacher-centered and methodologically traditional approaches, such as lecturing and memorization. As a result, the learning process is often less effective in fostering critical thinking skills and in facilitating the internalization of Islamic moral values. Systematic reviews of Islamic education have found that Qur'anic memorization is a common practice in primary schools; however, its implementation entails various pedagogical challenges that affect the overall learning process (Arifi, 2026). This problem impacts not only students' cognitive attainment but also creates a gap between their academic achievement and their actual moral conduct in everyday life.

The implications of this memorization-based learning paradigm cannot be separated from the demands of the times. In the modern and globalized era, educational expectations extend beyond mere content mastery to include critical thinking skills, contextual understanding, and the capacity to apply moral values in responding to social dynamics. A number of educational studies suggest that a more meaningful learning approach one that promotes active engagement, reflective thinking, and connections between instructional materials and students' lived experiences holds significant potential for enhancing both comprehension and the internalization of Islamic values among learners (Azmi et al., 2025). Contextual learning strategies, for instance, have been shown to increase student engagement, strengthen critical thinking skills, and deepen students' understanding of Islamic values that are directly relevant to their everyday lives (Widodo & Irawan, 2024).

This condition warrants serious examination, as the methodological problems in Islamic Religious Education may hinder the very objectives of Islamic education itself. Broadly speaking, the goal of Islamic education is to form the *insan kamil* the complete or holistic human being who possesses not only knowledge but also moral courage, social responsibility, and the capacity to apply Islamic teachings wisely, critically, and contextually (Sholihah, 2020). When learning orientations remain excessively textual and memorization-centered, the transformational dimension of Islamic education tends to weaken, thereby creating a gap between the theoretical ideals of Islamic education and the lived realities of students' daily lives.

Within the context of contemporary educational development, the discourse on meaningful learning has become one of the central focuses in educational literature. Meaningful learning positions students as active agents in the learning process, whereby understanding emerges through the integration of prior life experiences with new knowledge, reflective inquiry, and contextual problem-solving. This paradigm differs significantly from rote-based approaches, as it emphasizes not merely the acquisition of information but also the integration of values and higher-order thinking skills (Gustina et al., 2025). Such an approach is considered highly relevant to the fundamental objectives of Islamic education, which extend beyond textual mastery toward fostering comprehensive understanding and the practical application of teachings within moral and social contexts.

However, although the concept of meaningful learning possesses a strong conceptual foundation within general educational theory, its implementation in the domain of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) remains varied and requires a solid philosophical grounding. It is at this juncture that the thought of contemporary Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman becomes particularly relevant to this study. Rahman is one of the prominent Muslim intellectuals who conceptually situates Islamic education within a framework that is not merely dogmatic or textual, but also contextual and reflective. According to Rahman, Islamic education must dynamically integrate revelation and reason, ensuring that the understanding of religious teachings remains closely connected to social context, moral considerations, and the lived realities of learners (Ali & Marasabessy, 2025).

Fazlur Rahman's thought emphasizes that the primary objective of Islamic education is not merely the mastery of textual knowledge, but a contextual and meaningful understanding of Islamic sources that can guide learners toward moral action reflecting Islamic values in a holistic manner. Accordingly, Rahman's perspective offers a significant opportunity to transform the practice of Islamic Religious Education from a predominantly memorization-based approach into a form of learning that is meaningful, contextual, and capable of fostering students' moral and social competencies in an integrated and comprehensive way.

Based on the foregoing discussion, a more in-depth study is required to examine the relationship between Fazlur Rahman's thought on Islamic education and its relevance to the concept of meaningful learning. Such an inquiry is expected to bridge the gap between the traditional learning paradigm that continues to characterize much of current PAI practice and the need for more meaningful and contextual learning approaches. Accordingly, the contribution of this research is not only theoretical by enriching contemporary Islamic educational discourse but also practical, in providing direction for educators and policymakers to formulate PAI learning models that are more responsive to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research design. The focus of the research is directed toward examining Fazlur Rahman's thought on Islamic education as articulated in his major works. Primary data consist of Rahman's books, while secondary data are drawn from scholarly journal articles, books, and other academic publications relevant to the topics of meaningful learning and Islamic education. The data analysis technique utilized in this study is content analysis. Through this method, the researcher identifies, classifies, and interprets Rahman's key ideas related to educational objectives, instructional methods, and the relationship between knowledge and morality. The analysis is conducted systematically to uncover patterns and themes that are relevant to the concept of meaningful learning. To ensure the validity of the analysis, this research adopts a thematic analysis approach, which includes stages of data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretative synthesis (Fathonah et al., 2018). The findings are subsequently examined in relation to theories of meaningful learning within contemporary education in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of Rahman's thought to current Islamic educational discourse.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. The Concept of Islamic Education According to Fazlur Rahman

Fazlur Rahman's thought on Islamic education originates from a fundamental critique of how Muslims understand and transmit religious teachings. Rahman rejects the dichotomy between revelation and reason in Islamic education. According to him, revelation particularly the Qur'an cannot be comprehensively understood without engaging human reason as an active and contextual instrument of interpretation. He asserts that the Qur'an was revealed in response to the moral and social problems of society; therefore, its interpretation must be directed toward ethical objectives and social transformation, rather than confined to literal textual mastery (Rahman, 1982).

In the educational context, Rahman views Islamic education as a process of cultivating moral understanding rather than merely transmitting religious knowledge. Education, in his perspective, should encourage learners to grasp the values, purposes, and spirit of Islamic teachings in depth so that they can be meaningfully applied in real-life situations. He maintains

that knowledge in Islam ought to culminate in morally responsible action, rather than stopping at memorization or the mere acquisition of information (Ismail et al., 2021).

Rahman also firmly criticizes Islamic educational practices that are verbalistic and textualistic in nature. He argues that learning approaches which emphasize the memorization of Qur'anic verses, hadith, and doctrinal formulations without contextual understanding tend to produce rigid religious perspectives detached from social realities. This critique aligns with findings from various contemporary studies in Islamic education, which indicate that the dominance of lecture-based and memorization-oriented methods in PAI contributes to the weakness of students' reflective and moral capacities (Hidayah et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the goal of Islamic education according to Rahman is the formation of individuals who are both morally grounded and intellectually capable persons who possess critical thinking skills, contextual religious understanding, and ethical commitment in social life (Tika et al., 2025). Thus, Islamic education is not merely tasked with producing individuals who "know" religion, but those who are able to embody religion as a meaningful and responsible guide for life.

### 3.2. The Concept of Meaningful Learning

Meaningful learning is a concept that emphasizes the connection between new knowledge and learners' existing cognitive structures and prior experiences. In meaningful learning, students do not merely receive information; rather, they actively construct understanding through reflection, dialogue, and the application of concepts within real-life contexts. This approach stands in contrast to rote learning, which focuses primarily on the repetition of information without deep comprehension (Dewi et al., 2025).

The principal characteristics of meaningful learning include its reflective, contextual, and applicative nature. Reflective learning encourages students to think critically about the material being studied. Contextual learning connects instructional content to learners' social situations and lived experiences. The applicative dimension implies that acquired knowledge does not remain at the cognitive level but is manifested in concrete actions and attitudinal change. Numerous studies indicate that meaningful learning approaches can enhance conceptual understanding, learning motivation, and the internalization of values among students (Hattie, 2009; Suryani et al., 2021).

The fundamental difference between meaningful learning and rote learning lies in their objectives and processes. Rote learning is oriented toward short-term cognitive outcomes, such as the ability to recall facts or texts, whereas meaningful learning aims at deep understanding and the transfer of knowledge to new situations. In the context of religious education, meaningful learning is considered more relevant because religious teachings require the internalization and practice of values, not merely textual mastery (Hidayah et al., 2022).

The concept of meaningful learning is also closely related to the deep learning approach, which emphasizes conceptual understanding, problem solving, and critical reflection. Deep learning encourages students to explore the "why" and "how," rather than merely the "what," thereby aligning with the objectives of Islamic education that focus on the cultivation of moral and intellectual awareness (Syayidah & Sodik, 2025).

### 3.3. The Relevance of Fazlur Rahman's Thought to Meaningful Learning

The relevance of Fazlur Rahman's thought to the concept of meaningful learning is clearly reflected in his emphasis on understanding rather than memorization. Rahman rejects educational models that position learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, he underscores the importance of critical thinking in comprehending Islamic teachings, enabling students to grasp the moral objectives underlying religious texts (Diatika et al., 2025). This

principle aligns closely with meaningful learning, which places learners as active subjects in the learning process.

Furthermore, Rahman's idea of contextualizing Islamic teachings strongly resonates with the contextual learning principle embedded in meaningful learning. He asserts that understanding the Qur'an requires careful consideration of its historical and social contexts so that its values may be applied meaningfully in modern life (Rahman, 2022). Such an approach supports the practice of Islamic Religious Education that connects instructional content with the lived realities and experiences of students.

## DISCUSSION

Fazlur Rahman's conception of Islamic education is rooted in a fundamental critique of the epistemological framework through which Muslims have historically understood and transmitted religious teachings. He firmly rejects the dichotomy between revelation and reason that has characterized certain strands of Islamic intellectual tradition. For Rahman, revelation particularly the Qur'an cannot be adequately understood without the active engagement of human reason as a contextual and interpretive instrument. He contends that the Qur'an was revealed in response to concrete moral and social challenges; therefore, its interpretation must be oriented toward ethical objectives and social transformation rather than confined to literal textualism (Arifin et al., 2025).

Within the educational sphere, Rahman conceptualizes Islamic education as a process aimed at cultivating moral understanding rather than merely transmitting religious knowledge. Education, in this sense, should facilitate learners' deep comprehension of the values, purposes, and ethical spirit underlying Islamic teachings, enabling their meaningful application in everyday life. Knowledge, from Rahman's perspective, is teleological; it must culminate in morally responsible action and not remain limited to memorization or the accumulation of information (Bachtiar et al., 2024).

Moreover, Rahman offers a critical assessment of Islamic educational practices that are predominantly verbalistic and textualistic. He argues that instructional models centered on the memorization of Qur'anic verses, hadith, and doctrinal formulations without contextual engagement risk producing rigid religious orientations detached from social realities. This critique is supported by contemporary research indicating that the dominance of lecture-based and memorization-oriented approaches in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) tends to weaken students' reflective capacity and moral internalization (Akbar et al., 2024).

Ultimately, Rahman envisions the goal of Islamic education as the formation of individuals who are simultaneously morally grounded and intellectually competent individuals endowed with critical thinking skills, contextual religious insight, and ethical commitment in social life. Islamic education, therefore, is not merely tasked with producing individuals who "know" religion, but those who embody religion as a meaningful and responsible guide for life (Franklin, 2020).

Meaningful learning is a pedagogical concept that emphasizes the integration of new knowledge with learners' existing cognitive structures and prior experiences. In this framework, learners are not passive recipients of information; rather, they actively construct understanding through reflective engagement, dialogical interaction, and the contextual application of concepts (Hidayah, 2025). This paradigm stands in contrast to rote learning, which prioritizes repetition and recall without ensuring deep comprehension.

The defining characteristics of meaningful learning include its reflective, contextual, and applicative dimensions. Reflective learning encourages critical examination of ideas and concepts. Contextual learning situates instructional content within learners' social realities and lived experiences (Hidayah, 2020). The applicative dimension ensures that knowledge extends beyond

cognitive acquisition to influence behavior and attitudinal transformation. Empirical studies demonstrate that meaningful learning approaches contribute significantly to enhanced conceptual understanding, increased learning motivation, and stronger value internalization.

A key distinction between meaningful and rote learning lies in their respective orientations. Rote learning is typically directed toward short-term cognitive outcomes, such as factual recall, whereas meaningful learning seeks deep understanding and the transferability of knowledge to new contexts (Khoirudin, 2020). Within religious education, this distinction becomes particularly salient, as religious teachings demand value internalization and ethical enactment rather than mere textual mastery. Furthermore, meaningful learning is closely associated with the deep learning approach, which prioritizes conceptual comprehension, problem-solving, and critical reflection. By encouraging learners to explore the “why” and “how” of knowledge, deep learning aligns with the broader objectives of Islamic education, particularly the cultivation of moral awareness and intellectual maturity.

The convergence between Fazlur Rahman’s educational thought and the paradigm of meaningful learning is evident in their shared emphasis on understanding over memorization. Rahman explicitly critiques educational models that position learners as passive recipients of doctrinal content. Instead, he advocates for an educational process that stimulates critical reasoning and enables learners to discern the moral objectives underlying religious texts (Kusmanto, 2021). This orientation parallels the foundational principle of meaningful learning, which situates learners as active agents in knowledge construction.

In addition, Rahman’s insistence on contextualizing Islamic teachings resonates strongly with the contextual dimension of meaningful learning. He maintains that Qur’anic interpretation requires sensitivity to historical and social contexts in order to render its values applicable to contemporary realities (Mahzumi, 2025). Such an approach substantiates pedagogical practices in Islamic Religious Education that connect instructional material to students’ lived experiences. Taken together, these conceptual intersections indicate that Rahman’s educational philosophy provides a robust theoretical foundation for the implementation of meaningful learning within Islamic education. His integration of revelation and reason, emphasis on ethical transformation, and commitment to contextual understanding collectively reinforce the relevance of meaningful learning as a transformative paradigm for contemporary.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing conceptual analysis, it can be concluded that Fazlur Rahman’s thought on Islamic education emphasizes the integration of revelation and reason, the cultivation of moral understanding, and a critique of verbalistic and memorization-based educational practices. These core ideas demonstrate strong conceptual compatibility with the paradigm of meaningful learning, which prioritizes deep understanding, reflective inquiry, and the practical application of values in real-life contexts. The relevance of Rahman’s thought to meaningful learning underscores the urgent need to transform Islamic Religious Education from a predominantly rote based approach toward a more contextual and reflective model of instruction. Rahman’s framework provides a substantive theoretical foundation for developing PAI learning models that are more humanistic, critical, and responsive to the demands of contemporary education. The implications of this study for PAI practice include the necessity of redefining the teacher’s role, advancing contextual learning strategies, and strengthening the internalization of moral values within the learning process. Through such shifts, Islamic education is expected to cultivate learners who are not only intellectually competent but also endowed with strong and actionable moral consciousness.

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