

The Moral Thought of Kh. Ahmad Dahlan And Its Relevance to Contemporary Islamic Education

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Islamic education faces increasingly complex challenges, particularly those related to moral crises, character degradation, individualism, and the influence of digital technological developments on students' social behavior. These phenomena indicate that education has not yet been fully successful in shaping individuals who possess moral integrity, spirituality, and comprehensive social responsibility. Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze the moral thought of KH. Ahmad Dahlan and examine its relevance to contemporary Islamic education. This research employs a qualitative approach based on library research using historical and contextual hermeneutic approaches. Primary data were obtained from the works, thoughts, and documents related to KH. Ahmad Dahlan, while secondary data were derived from scientific journals, academic books, and various studies relevant to Islamic education and character education. The data analysis technique was conducted through content analysis and contextual interpretation to understand the construction of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's moral thought within the context of modern education. The findings reveal that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's concept of moral education is built upon the principles of tawhid (Islamic monotheism), the integration of knowledge and action, exemplary conduct, and social concern. Education is not only directed toward intellectual achievement but also toward the formation of humanistic, moderate, and transformative character. This study confirms that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's moral thought holds strong relevance as a paradigm of Islamic character education in addressing the challenges of the digital era, multiculturalism, and the moral crisis of modern society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Islamic education is facing increasingly complex challenges, not only related to the intellectual development of students, but also concerning moral issues, character building, and social awareness amid the rapid flow of globalization and the advancement of digital technology. Phenomena such as increasing juvenile delinquency, the weakening of social ethics, the culture of intolerance, and the misuse of digital media indicate that the educational process has not yet been fully capable of producing individuals who possess comprehensive moral and spiritual integrity. Under these circumstances, Islamic education should not merely be understood as a process of transferring knowledge, but must also function as a medium for internalizing values that are able to shape students' morality, spirituality, and social responsibility comprehensively (Agus, 2024).

On the other hand, the paradigm of modern education, which tends to emphasize academic achievement, competition, and materialistic orientation, often shifts the moral dimension away from the educational process. In practice, religious education is still largely understood in a formalistic and ritualistic manner, so that it has not fully touched upon the formation of students' social character. As a result, a gap emerges between the mastery of knowledge and the implementation of moral values in daily life. This reality demonstrates the need for a reconstruction of the Islamic education paradigm, one that is not only oriented toward cognitive aspects, but also places moral development at the core of the entire educational process (Lubis, 2021).

In this context, the thought of KH. Ahmad Dahlan becomes important to reexamine as a model of progressive Islamic education that emphasizes the integration of knowledge, morality, and social action. Ahmad Dahlan viewed education as a means of shaping individuals with noble character who are capable of implementing Islamic values in real social life. For Ahmad Dahlan, education was not merely aimed at producing intellectually intelligent individuals, but also human beings who possess social sensitivity, humanitarian concern, and moral responsibility toward society. His thought emphasized the importance of balancing spiritual, intellectual, and social dimensions as the foundation of modern Islamic education (Nugroho, 2022).

Various previous studies have shown that Ahmad Dahlan's thought made a significant contribution to the reform of Islamic education in Indonesia, particularly through the integration of religious and general sciences, the reform of educational systems, and the strengthening of Muhammadiyah's socio-religious movement (Jaelani et al., 2025). However, studies that specifically examine Ahmad Dahlan's concept of morality and its relevance to contemporary Islamic educational problems remain relatively limited. Most studies focus more on historical aspects, the Muhammadiyah organization, or the broader idea of modernizing Islamic education, so that the dimension of moral education as the core of Ahmad Dahlan's thought has not been deeply explored (Kuniasih, 2024).

In fact, the concept of morality offered by Ahmad Dahlan is progressive and transformative because it is not only oriented toward individual piety, but also emphasizes the importance of social responsibility, humanitarian concern, and service to society. According to Ahmad Dahlan, moral education is built through exemplary conduct, the habituation of moral behavior, the integration of knowledge and action, and the practical application of Islamic teachings in social life (Jamal, 2025). These values are highly relevant in addressing educational challenges in the digital era, which is marked by increasing individualism, identity crises, and the weakening of social solidarity.

Furthermore, Ahmad Dahlan's thought can be positioned as a paradigm of modern Islamic education that harmoniously integrates spirituality, rationality, and social praxis. Education is not only directed toward forming individuals who are ritually obedient, but also individuals who are adaptive to the development of the times, critical of social realities, and possess strong moral commitment. Therefore, moral education from Ahmad Dahlan's perspective offers a model of moderate Islamic character education that is relevant in addressing the challenges of multicultural societies and the development of modern technology (Hidayanto, 2024).

Based on the explanation above, this study aims to analyze the concept of morality in the thought of KH. Ahmad Dahlan and examine its relevance to contemporary Islamic education. This research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of the epistemology of

Islamic education, particularly in enriching the study of character education based on moderate and transformative Islamic values. In addition, this study also seeks to demonstrate that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought not only possesses historical significance, but is also relevant as a paradigm of moral education that is contextual, applicable, and adaptive to the challenges of the modern era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several recent studies are highly relevant to the theme of this research concerning the moral concepts of KH. Ahmad Dahlan and their relevance to contemporary Islamic education, including the following:

2.1 KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Character Education as a Solution to the Contemporary Moral Crisis

A recent study published in *Masterpiece: Journal of Islamic Studies and Social Sciences* in 2025 emphasizes that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational philosophy is holistic and integrative, as it focuses not only on students' cognitive development, but also on their spiritual, moral, and social dimensions. The study found that Ahmad Dahlan's concept of character education is highly relevant in addressing modern educational challenges such as moral degradation, the identity crisis among younger generations, radicalism, and digital disruption. These findings strengthen the argument that Ahmad Dahlan's moral education possesses a transformative and contextual orientation for modern society.

Furthermore, the study highlights that, according to Ahmad Dahlan, education is constructed through the integration of religious and general sciences, the habituation of moral values, and the exemplary role of teachers as the foundation for students' character formation. This demonstrates that Ahmad Dahlan's moral concept is not merely normative, but also possesses a practical social dimension applicable within contemporary educational systems.

2.2 The Relevance of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Thought in the Digital Era

Research conducted by Mangunwibawa et al. (2025) reveals that the synthesis of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's and Ki Hajar Dewantara's educational thought can serve as the basis for the transformation of Indonesian education in the digital era. The study demonstrates that Ahmad Dahlan's emphasis on the integration of faith, knowledge, and action remains highly relevant in responding to the challenges posed by technological disruption and educational globalization. Education should not merely produce individuals who are academically competitive, but also individuals who possess strong spirituality, character, and social responsibility.

The study further found that Ahmad Dahlan's educational paradigm can provide a foundation for an educational system that is adaptive to technological developments without losing moral and humanitarian values. These findings reinforce the position of this research that Ahmad Dahlan's moral concepts can be reconstructed as a model of moderate Islamic character education in the digital era.

2.3 Moral Education as the Core of Islamic Education

Research by Ramadhan (2024), entitled *The Concept of Moral Education of KH. Ahmad Dahlan and Its Relevance to Islamic Education in the Era 4.0*, demonstrates that moral education constitutes the core of the entire Islamic educational system according to Ahmad Dahlan. The study found that moral degradation in the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era can be addressed through education based on exemplary conduct, the integration of knowledge and practice, and the strengthening of socio-religious values.

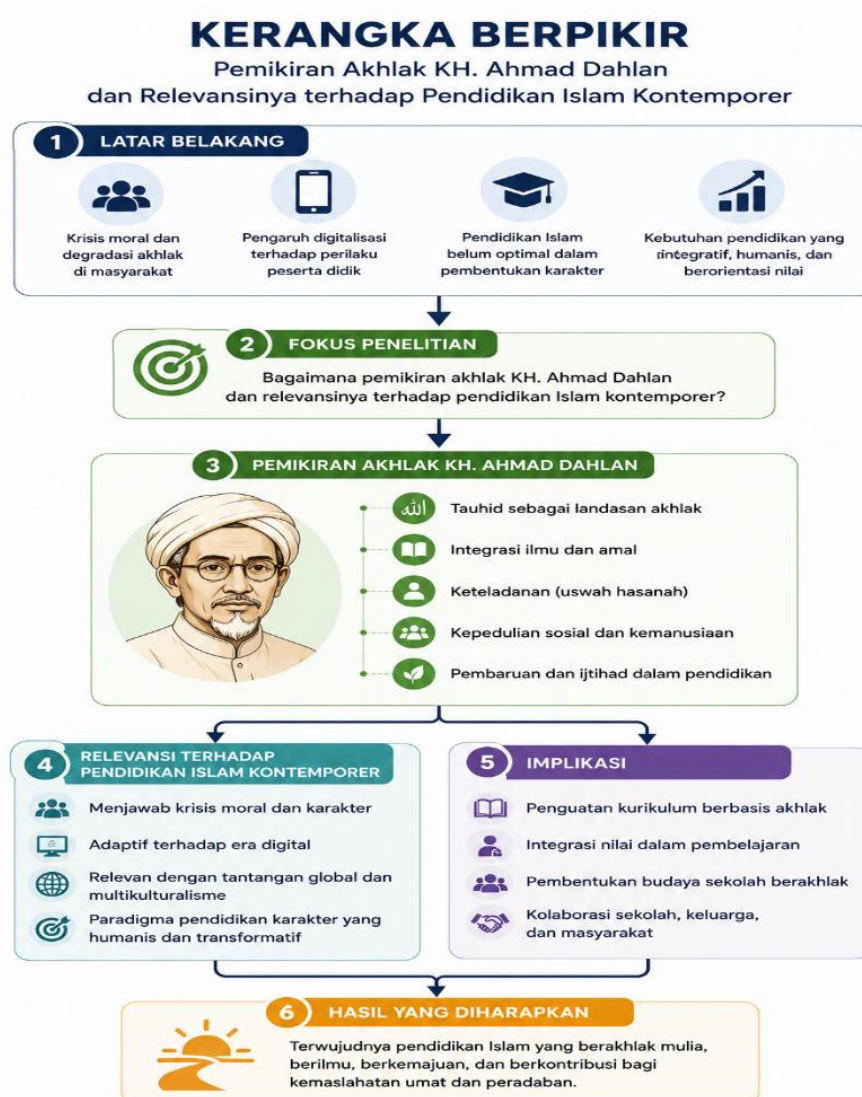
These findings are relevant to this study because they affirm that Ahmad Dahlan's thought is not only oriented toward the formation of individual piety, but also toward developing social awareness and humanitarian responsibility. Therefore, Ahmad Dahlan's moral education can be positioned as a humanistic and transformative paradigm of Islamic education.

2.4 The Integration of Knowledge and Character Education in the Modern Curriculum

A recent 2025 study on *The Philosophy of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Educational Thought and Its Implications for the Merdeka Curriculum* found that Ahmad Dahlan's ideas possess strong relevance to

modern character-based education. The study emphasizes that Ahmad Dahlan rejected the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences and advocated the formation of “intellectual-ulama” or “scholar-ulama” figures who possess balanced intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and social intelligence.

The study also demonstrates that Ahmad Dahlan’s educational concepts are aligned with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes contextual learning, character strengthening, and the development of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Pancasila Student Profile). These findings further strengthen the argument that Ahmad Dahlan’s thought is not only historically relevant, but also compatible with the direction of contemporary national educational policies.



3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research using historical and contextual hermeneutic approaches. These approaches were selected because the research focuses on the study of a prominent figure's thought, particularly the moral concepts of KH. Ahmad Dahlan within the perspective of Islamic education. Through the contextual hermeneutic approach, KH. Ahmad Dahlan's ideas are understood not merely as normative concepts, but also as intellectual responses to the social and educational conditions of Muslims during his era. Agus (2024) explains that Ahmad Dahlan's reform movement emerged from his concern over Islamic education, which tended to be stagnant, textual, and less capable of addressing the social needs of modern society. Therefore, this approach enables researchers to reinterpret KH. Ahmad Dahlan's concept of moral education in order to maintain its relevance to the challenges of contemporary Islamic education, particularly those related to moral crises, digitalization, and the character formation of students.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from works, thoughts, documents, and literature directly related to KH. Ahmad Dahlan and the Muhammadiyah educational reform movement. Meanwhile, secondary data were derived from scientific journals, academic books, research articles, and various scholarly publications relevant to moral education, character education, and contemporary Islamic education. Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques and systematic literature reviews in order to obtain valid, relevant, and research-focused data. Kuniasih (2024) explains that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought has strong relevance to the development of modern Islamic education because it emphasizes the integration of morality, spirituality, and the formation of students' social character.

The data analysis technique employed content analysis and philosophical-contextual interpretation. Content analysis was used to identify the main concepts of moral education in KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought, such as the principles of tawhid (Islamic monotheism), the integration of knowledge and practice, exemplary conduct, and social responsibility. Furthermore, contextual interpretation was carried out to connect these ideas with the realities of modern Islamic education, particularly in the development of character education in the digital era and multicultural societies. Hidayanto (2024) states that "KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational teachings integrate spirituality, rationality, and social praxis as the foundation of modern Islamic education." Through this approach, the study seeks to produce a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's moral thought as a paradigm of Islamic education that is humanistic, moderate, and transformative.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Basic Concept of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Moral Education

KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought was built upon the paradigm of tawhid (Islamic monotheism), which positions human beings as both spiritual and social creatures who possess moral responsibility toward society. Within this framework, education is not merely understood as a process of knowledge transfer or intellectual mastery, but rather as a process of shaping human personality in an integral manner. Ahmad Dahlan viewed the primary goal of Islamic education as producing individuals who possess a balance between spiritual depth, broad knowledge, and social sensitivity. Therefore, education should be directed toward forming individuals who are not only academically intelligent, but who also possess moral integrity and strong humanitarian awareness. Nugroho (2022) explains that Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought is oriented toward the integration of knowledge and action, so that the knowledge acquired by students must be manifested in concrete actions that benefit society. From this perspective, morality (akhlak) becomes the core of the entire Islamic educational system because education essentially aims to form faithful individuals who are able to actualize Islamic values in social life concretely.

M. Quraish Shihab argues that Islamic education fundamentally aims to shape individuals who possess a balance between intellectual intelligence, spirituality, and noble character. According to Shihab, Qur'anic values should not only be understood as theological teachings, but must also be realized in social behavior and everyday humanitarian life. In the context of education, moral formation becomes a fundamental aspect because morality is the real manifestation of one's faith.

Shihab explains that “morality is the fruit of faith manifested in daily human behavior” (Shihab, 2021). He also emphasizes that Qur’anic education is not only intended to educate human beings intellectually, but also to shape moral and ethical personalities. This perspective is in line with KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s thought, which places moral education as the foundation for forming religious individuals who possess social concern and humanitarian responsibility.

The concept of morality in KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s thought possesses progressive and transformative dimensions that go beyond the normative moral approaches commonly found in traditional Islamic education. Morality is not merely interpreted as individual piety manifested through religious rituals, but also as the embodiment of Islamic values in the form of social concern, humanitarian spirit, and commitment to solving societal problems. Jaelani et al. (2025) affirm that “education according to KH. Ahmad Dahlan is directed toward forming individuals who possess social awareness, humanitarian spirit, and responsibility toward societal problems.” This statement demonstrates that Ahmad Dahlan’s moral education possesses a social praxis orientation because Islamic values should not stop at the conceptual level, but must be realized through concrete actions such as social services, education, and community empowerment. This perspective further illustrates that Islamic education according to Ahmad Dahlan contains a spirit of religious humanism that places morality as the foundation for social transformation.

In addition, KH. Ahmad Dahlan firmly rejected the dichotomy between religious sciences and general sciences, which at the time was one of the causes of the stagnation of Muslim education. According to Ahmad Dahlan, the separation of knowledge would only create intellectual imbalance and cause education to lose its spiritual and moral dimensions. Kuniasih (2024) explains that Ahmad Dahlan emphasized the importance of integrating knowledge with religious values so that education could shape individuals who possess both intellectual intelligence and spiritual depth. Thus, moral education is built through exemplary conduct, the habituation of moral behavior, and the active involvement of students in community social life. In this context, teachers function not only as instructors, but also as moral figures who provide real examples of implementing Islamic values in daily life.

Azyumardi Azra emphasized the importance of integrating intellectual development and students’ moral formation within Islamic education. According to Azra, Islamic education should not stop at merely transferring knowledge, but must also be directed toward shaping character and personality based on Islamic spiritual values. In the context of modern society, Islamic education is required to respond to the challenges of globalization, modernization, and technological development without losing its moral and religious identity. Therefore, Islamic education must remain rooted in ethical and spiritual values in order to produce generations who are intellectually capable and morally virtuous. Azra asserted that “Islamic education is not sufficient merely to transmit knowledge, but must also shape students’ morality and personality” (Azra, 2020). This perspective has strong relevance to KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s concept of moral education, which positions morality and social responsibility as the core of modern Islamic education.

4.2 Principles of Hermeneutics and Scientific Approach

This study employs a contextual hermeneutic approach to understand KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s thought regarding moral education. This approach places the thinker’s ideas within the historical relations and social contexts that shaped the emergence of those ideas. Therefore, Ahmad Dahlan’s thought is not understood as a static normative doctrine, but rather as an intellectual response to the social and educational problems faced by Muslims during the colonial era. Agus (2024) explains that Ahmad Dahlan’s reform movement emerged from concerns regarding the stagnant, textual, and socially unresponsive condition of Islamic education. Consequently, moral education according to Ahmad Dahlan must be understood as part of the *tajdid* (Islamic reform) movement aimed at reconstructing Islamic education so that it becomes more relevant to social realities.

Through the contextual hermeneutic approach, KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s concept of moral education can be reinterpreted as a dynamic and adaptive educational paradigm responsive to contemporary developments. Hidayanto (2024) states that “KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s educational teachings integrate spirituality, rationality, and social praxis as the foundation of modern Islamic

education.” This statement demonstrates that Ahmad Dahlan’s thought possesses a progressive character because it attempts to reconcile religiosity with modern rationality. In this context, moral education is not only understood as the process of internalizing moral values theoretically, but also as an effort to build students’ social awareness and ability to face social changes without losing their spiritual and moral identity.

4.3 Contextual Analysis of Contemporary Islamic Education

The development of digital technology and globalization has brought fundamental changes to modern society, including the field of Islamic education. Technological advancement has indeed facilitated access to information and expanded social interaction, but at the same time it has also generated various moral problems such as cyberbullying, hate speech, intolerance, identity crises, and the strengthening of individualistic culture among younger generations. In this context, Islamic education faces serious challenges because educational processes often place greater emphasis on academic achievement than on character formation and students’ moral awareness. Lubis (2021) explains that the modern educational orientation, which overly emphasizes intellectual achievement, has caused education to lose its ethical and spiritual dimensions. Therefore, KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s concept of moral education becomes highly relevant because it positions morality as the core of the entire educational process.

The relevance of Ahmad Dahlan’s thought to contemporary educational problems is further reinforced by a recent study published in *Masterpiece: Journal of Islamic Studies and Social Sciences* in 2025, which states that Ahmad Dahlan’s educational philosophy possesses a holistic and integrative character because it encompasses students’ intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions. The study emphasizes that “the moral crisis among younger generations in the digital era requires education based on exemplary conduct and the internalization of moral values.” These findings demonstrate that Ahmad Dahlan’s moral education possesses not only normative-theological value, but also practical relevance in addressing the moral degradation of modern society. Exemplary teachers, moral habituation, and the integration of knowledge and action become important approaches in shaping the character of younger generations amid rapid digitalization.

Suyanto explains that digital technological development has brought major changes to modern social life, particularly in relation to the behavior and character of younger generations. The ease of access to information, social media, and communication technologies has positively contributed to scientific development, but it has also generated moral problems such as individualism, declining social ethics, instant culture, and identity crises among digital generations. Under such conditions, character education becomes highly important as an effort to build students’ moral awareness and social responsibility amid modernization and globalization. Suyanto emphasizes that modern education should not merely focus on academic aspects and intellectual competence, but must also strengthen students’ ethical, moral, and spiritual dimensions so they can wisely face the challenges of the digital era (Suyanto, 2023).

Furthermore, Suyanto explains that character education must be developed through exemplary conduct, the habituation of moral values, and the strengthening of positive social culture within educational environments. Education that is excessively oriented toward academic competition without character reinforcement risks producing generations who excel intellectually but lack social empathy and moral integrity. This perspective strongly aligns with KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s moral educational thought, which places morality and social concern as the core of Islamic education. In modern society, KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s concept of moral education becomes significant because it offers an educational model that integrates intellectual intelligence, spirituality, and social responsibility in a balanced manner. Thus, character education based on Islamic moral values can become a solution to the moral degradation of the digital generation and the challenges of contemporary social life.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that KH. Ahmad Dahlan’s moral thought positions Islamic education as a means of shaping human beings integrally through the

strengthening of spirituality, intellectuality, and social responsibility. Education, from Ahmad Dahlan's perspective, is not merely oriented toward the mastery of knowledge, but is also directed toward forming individuals with noble character, humanitarian awareness, and the ability to implement Islamic values concretely within social life. The concept of moral education developed by Ahmad Dahlan is built upon the principles of tawhid (Islamic monotheism), the integration of knowledge and practice, exemplary conduct, and concern for societal problems. Thus, moral education according to KH. Ahmad Dahlan is not merely a process of individual moralization, but rather a transformative educational paradigm that places morality as the foundation for civilizational development and the progress of the Muslim community.

This study demonstrates that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought has significant scholarly contributions, both theoretically and practically, to the development of contemporary Islamic education. Theoretically, this study confirms that Ahmad Dahlan's concept of moral education can be reconstructed as a paradigm of moderate Islamic character education that harmoniously integrates spirituality, rationality, and social action. This perspective illustrates that Islamic education should not be trapped within purely normative and ritualistic approaches, but must also be capable of responding to modern social problems such as moral degradation, individualism, intolerance, and the identity crisis among younger generations. Practically, Ahmad Dahlan's thought offers an educational model that is relevant to the development of character education in the digital era through strengthening exemplary conduct, moral habituation, the integration of scientific knowledge with religious values, and the cultivation of students' social awareness. Therefore, KH. Ahmad Dahlan's moral education is not only theological and historical in nature, but also constitutes an epistemological paradigm of modern Islamic education capable of integrating religiosity, humanism, and the needs of contemporary society.

In the future, research on KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought needs to be further developed through more empirical, multidisciplinary, and contextual approaches, particularly regarding the implementation of moral education within modern educational institutions and digital societies. Future studies should also focus on examining character education models based on Ahmad Dahlan's thought in addressing the challenges of globalization, the development of artificial intelligence technology, social crises, and the dynamics of multicultural societies. In addition, further research is needed to connect Ahmad Dahlan's thought with national educational policies and the development of character-based curricula so that the values of humanistic, moderate, and transformative Islamic education can be implemented more systematically within contemporary education. Thus, KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought should not only be positioned as the historical legacy of an Indonesian Islamic reformer, but also as a source of intellectual inspiration in constructing an adaptive, inclusive, and civilization-oriented paradigm of Islamic education.

CLOSING

As a closing statement, this study emphasizes that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's moral thought not only possesses historical significance as the intellectual legacy of an Indonesian Islamic reformer, but also presents an educational paradigm that remains relevant in responding to the challenges of the modern era. The integration of spirituality, knowledge, and social responsibility that he advocated demonstrates that Islamic education is essentially directed toward shaping individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, morally virtuous, and capable of contributing to the welfare of society. Amid moral crises, digitalization, and increasingly complex social changes, the values of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's moral education serve as a reminder that civilizational progress will be meaningless without strong moral and spiritual foundations. Therefore, Islamic education must continue to be developed as a pathway for nurturing *insan kamil* (the complete human being), who is not only intellectually intelligent, but also possesses humanitarian sensitivity, steadfast faith, and a commitment to spreading the values of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy to all creation) in social, national, and civilizational life.

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