

Revelation, Reason, and Social Praxis: The Theological Synthesis Underlying Muhammadiyah Modernism

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Abstract

This article examines the theological foundations that enabled Muhammadiyah to combine Islamic tradition with reformist modernism without reducing either term to a fixed ideological opposite. Using qualitative historical-theological document analysis, it interprets Muhammadiyah's foundational texts, tarjih methodology, and major historical studies through six categories: tawhid, revelation, ijtihad, social ethics, worldly affairs, and institutional action. The findings show that Muhammadiyah modernism rests on a selective synthesis rather than a wholesale rejection of tradition. Qur'an and Sunnah provide normative authority; inherited jurisprudence supplies intellectual resources but not binding finality; reason and empirical knowledge operate within a reformist hermeneutic; and the theology of al-Ma'un converts faith into organized welfare. This synthesis produced schools, hospitals, philanthropy, women's activism, and civic engagement as theological practices. Yet the same architecture creates tensions between scriptural purification and cultural plurality, centralized standardization and local interpretation, and institutional expansion and substantive social transformation. Muhammadiyah's modernism is therefore best understood as an evolving theological grammar that joins doctrinal discipline, epistemic openness, and public service.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah; Islamic modernism; theology; *tajdid*; social ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Muhammadiyah is routinely described as a modernist Islamic movement, yet the theological meaning of that modernism is often left underdeveloped. Institutional indicators are easy to identify: modern schools, universities, hospitals, charitable bodies, printed publications, bureaucratic administration, and a national organizational network. These features clearly distinguish Muhammadiyah from forms of religious authority centered primarily on hereditary clerical lineages, localized ritual communities, or pesantren-based transmission. However, institutional modernization does not by itself explain why modern forms were accepted as Islamic, why particular traditions were rejected while others were retained, or how religious authority was reconstructed without abandoning revelation. The central problem is theological before it is organizational. Muhammadiyah had to explain how fidelity to Islam could authorize reform, how a return to foundational sources could generate novelty, and how modern knowledge could be used without allowing secular rationality to become the final judge of revelation.

The conventional contrast between "tradition" and "reform" obscures this problem. In much writing on Indonesian Islam, tradition refers to inherited ritual practices, classical legal authority, local culture, Sufi symbolism, and the social power of the ulama. Reform, by contrast, refers to scriptural purification, ijtihad, education, organizational

rationalization, and engagement with science. These categories are useful as historical descriptions but misleading when treated as self-contained theological systems. Reform movements themselves inherit languages, methods, moral sensibilities, and institutional precedents from the Islamic tradition. Likewise, so-called traditionalist communities continually adapt to political, educational, technological, and economic change. The relevant question is not whether Muhammadiyah possesses tradition, but how it authorizes some inheritances, disqualifies others, and converts selected resources into a program of renewal (Burhani, 2010; Nakamura, 2012; Noer, 1973).

This article uses the term synthesis carefully. Synthesis does not mean an equal compromise between two complete and opposing blocs. Muhammadiyah has never regarded every inherited practice as normatively valid, nor has it treated modernity as an undifferentiated good. Its synthesis is asymmetrical and evaluative. Revelation retains normative primacy, while historical tradition and modern knowledge are subjected to criticism. Yet revelation is not applied without interpretation, and criticism is not possible without inherited disciplines, contemporary sciences, institutional procedures, and moral judgment. The result is a theological arrangement in which the Qur'an and Sunnah establish orientation, *ijtihad* mediates historical change, reason and empirical knowledge clarify reality, and social action tests whether religious understanding produces public benefit. This arrangement is neither classical traditionalism reproduced unchanged nor secular modernism expressed in Islamic vocabulary.

Ahmad Dahlan's reform provides the historical point of departure. Studies of Muhammadiyah's founding emphasize his dissatisfaction with religious formalism, social hierarchy, educational stagnation, and practices he considered inconsistent with monotheism. Yet Dahlan was not simply an iconoclast. He was trained within Javanese and Middle Eastern Islamic networks, used Qur'anic exegesis and devotional discipline, maintained relations across religious and social boundaries, and translated reform into schools, women's education, poor relief, and organizational learning. The famous pedagogical repetition of Surat al-Ma'un illustrates this orientation: scriptural understanding was considered incomplete until it generated sustained action for orphans, poor people, and those denied social protection. Theology was thus evaluated not only by doctrinal correctness but also by its capacity to reorganize conduct (Alfian, 1989; Mulkhan, 2010; Peacock, 1978).

Muhammadiyah's subsequent history complicated this founding orientation. The organization developed a stronger purification discourse, codified religious judgments through the Majelis Tarjih, and increasingly defined itself through reference to the Qur'an and authentic Sunnah. At the same time, it expanded social services, accepted modern professional knowledge, participated in nationalist politics, and produced formal ideological documents. The Muqaddimah of the Muhammadiyah Statutes, the Muhammadiyah Identity, the Matan Keyakinan dan Cita-cita Hidup Muhammadiyah (MKCH), the Pedomani Hidup Islami Warga Muhammadiyah (PHIWM), the Manhaj Tarjih, and the Risalah Islam Berkemajuan do not merely repeat one doctrine. They represent successive attempts to stabilize a theological identity while responding to new historical conditions (Anwar, 2018; Nashir, 2015; Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2022).

Several interpretive models have been used to explain this trajectory. Purification-centered accounts emphasize opposition to *bid'ah*, superstition, saint veneration, and ritual accretions. Modernization accounts focus on education, bureaucracy, urban middle-class ethics, and organizational efficiency. Social-theological accounts emphasize *al-Ma'un*, welfare provision, philanthropy, health, and public service. Civic accounts locate Muhammadiyah within Indonesian nationalism, democracy, religious pluralism, and civil society. Each model captures a real dimension, but each becomes reductive when treated as the whole. Purification alone cannot explain the extensive acceptance of science and professional institutions. Modernization alone cannot explain the enduring authority of revelation. Welfare activism alone cannot explain ritual standardization. Civic engagement alone cannot explain internal debates over creed, worship, and cultural practice.

The article therefore asks three questions. First, what theological principles allow Muhammadiyah to combine doctrinal continuity with reformist change? Second, how are tradition, reason, modern knowledge, and social action ordered within this theological architecture? Third, what tensions emerge when this synthesis is institutionalized across a large and diverse organization? The central argument is that Muhammadiyah modernism is grounded in a theological grammar composed of tawhidic normativity, scriptural orientation, open *ijtihad*, differentiated worldly autonomy, and socially verifiable piety. This grammar enabled the organization to adopt modern institutions while maintaining an Islamic account of authority and purpose. It also generated recurring contradictions: purity can narrow cultural recognition, organizational certainty can suppress interpretive plurality, and institutional success can be mistaken for the realization of justice.

By reconstructing this theological grammar, the article contributes to the study of Islamic modernism in three ways. It avoids treating modernism as imitation of Western institutions, identifies the Islamic tradition as a contested resource rather than the external opposite of reform, and connects theology to institutional practice. The analysis also challenges celebratory narratives. Muhammadiyah's synthesis has been historically productive, but it is not automatically coherent or socially emancipatory. Its validity depends on whether doctrinal discipline remains open to knowledge, whether institutions serve rather than merely represent moral purposes, and whether claims of progress can be tested against the experiences of marginalized communities.

METHOD

This study employs qualitative historical-theological document analysis. It is not a systematic literature review and does not claim exhaustive coverage of all writings on Muhammadiyah. The purpose is interpretive reconstruction: to identify the theological concepts that recur across authoritative organizational texts, locate them within historical transformations, and examine how they structure Muhammadiyah's relation to tradition and modernity. Historical theology is used here in a broad sense. It attends to doctrinal propositions, hermeneutical methods, moral vocabularies, institutional embodiments, and changes in the practical meaning of religious concepts over time.

The primary corpus consists of Muhammadiyah's foundational and ideological documents: the *Muqaddimah Anggaran Dasar Muhammadiyah*; *Kepribadian Muhammadiyah*; *Matan Keyakinan dan Cita-cita Hidup Muhammadiyah*; *Pedoman Hidup Islami Warga Muhammadiyah*; *Manhaj Tarjih Muhammadiyah*; *Pernyataan Pikiran Muhammadiyah Abad Kedua*; *Negara Pancasila sebagai Dar al-'Ahd wa al-Shahadah*; and *Risalah Islam Berkemajuan*. These texts were selected because they carry organizational authority and cover different historical periods. They also address distinct levels of religious life: creed, interpretation, worship, ethics, social relations, organizational identity, citizenship, and global responsibility. Official texts are treated as normative claims rather than transparent descriptions of actual practice.

The secondary corpus includes major historical, ethnographic, and sociological studies of Muhammadiyah and Indonesian Islamic reform. Works by Alfian, Burhani, Jainuri, Latief, Mulkhan, Nakamura, Nashir, Noer, Peacock, Saleh, and Shihab were used to contextualize official formulations and identify discrepancies between doctrinal self-description and lived history. Broader studies of Indonesian Islam, Islamic civil society, pluralism, and reformist thought were used comparatively (Azra, 2004; Hefner, 2000; Kersten, 2015; Menchik, 2016; Ricklefs, 2012). The analysis prioritizes established scholarship and primary organizational documents over recent derivative summaries.

Documents were coded through six analytical categories. The first was normative authority: how tawhid, revelation, prophecy, and the Qur'an-Sunnah relationship are defined. The second was tradition: how classical jurisprudence, schools of law, inherited customs, and local culture are evaluated. The third was epistemology: the roles assigned to *ijtihad*, reason, empirical knowledge, intuition, and collective deliberation. The fourth was social ethics: the relation between faith, *al-Ma'un*, justice, welfare, and service. The fifth was institutional mediation: how schools, hospitals, charitable agencies, women's organizations, and councils become carriers of theology. The sixth was political and civil orientation: how the movement relates Islam to the nation-state, plural society, and universal humanity.

Interpretation proceeded in three stages. First, concepts were read synchronically within each document to determine their internal hierarchy. Second, they were read diachronically to trace changes from early reform and purification to methodological pluralization and Progressive Islam. Third, theological claims were compared with institutional and social evidence in the secondary literature. This final stage prevented official doctrine from being equated with uniform organizational reality. The study distinguishes between a theological principle, an organizational rule, and an empirically demonstrated outcome.

The method has limitations. Ahmad Dahlan left no systematic theological treatise, so his thought must be reconstructed from reports, pedagogical practices, early organizational initiatives, and later memory. Official documents often harmonize disagreements that were sharper in practice. Muhammadiyah is also internally diverse across regions, generations, professional fields, and social classes. A historical-theological analysis can identify a dominant grammar but cannot establish how consistently it is understood by

members or implemented by institutions. The findings should therefore be read as an account of authoritative orientation and historical tendency, not a claim of complete doctrinal or behavioral uniformity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Tawhid as Doctrinal Boundary and Social Emancipation

The first foundation of Muhammadiyah modernism is tawhid, understood not only as a proposition about divine unity but as a principle of emancipation and moral ordering. Official formulations place faith in God at the beginning of individual, organizational, and social life. The Muqaddimah Anggaran Dasar links devotion to God with justice, honesty, fraternity, cooperation, and the creation of a prosperous society. The MKCH similarly presents Islam as divine guidance and mercy that secures material and spiritual well-being. In this framework, tawhid rejects worship of anything other than God, but it also contests human domination, fatalism, and moral dependence on authorities whose claims cannot be justified.

This social extension of tawhid is essential. A purely doctrinal reading would interpret purification mainly as eliminating theological error. Muhammadiyah's wider history shows a second movement: purification is intended to free religious agency. Removing sacred status from objects, intermediaries, hereditary authorities, or unverifiable customs makes individuals responsible for learning, judgment, and action. Peacock (1978) identified the ethical discipline produced by this reform, while Nakamura (2012) showed how it generated a vital Muslim community rather than simply erasing Javanese culture. Tawhid therefore operates as both boundary and capacity. It sets limits on legitimate devotion and creates a subject expected to read, deliberate, organize, and serve.

The modernist implications are significant. If no human authority is absolute, inherited legal opinions cannot be treated as revelation itself. If the world is God's creation governed by intelligible patterns, scientific inquiry need not threaten faith. If human beings are accountable agents, poverty and ignorance cannot be explained only as destiny. These conclusions are not external liberal additions to theology; they arise from a particular expansion of monotheism. Yet the expansion is not automatic. Tawhid can support critical agency, but it can also be narrowed into doctrinal policing. The history of Muhammadiyah contains both possibilities.

A second dimension is the concept of human trusteeship. Muhammadiyah's later documents increasingly connect worship with responsibility for civilization, public welfare, peace, and the environment. The Risalah Islam Berkemajuan describes Islam as a source of progress and mercy for all creation, while PHIWM links personal piety to family, organizational, economic, professional, and ecological ethics. Human beings are neither autonomous creators of value nor passive recipients of fate. They are servants of God and agents entrusted with cultivating life. This dual identity prevents modern agency from becoming self-deifying while preventing obedience from becoming social passivity.

The synthesis of servanthood and trusteeship also explains why Muhammadiyah can accept organizational discipline. Collective action is not merely administrative convenience; it is a method for fulfilling obligations too large for isolated individuals.

Hospitals, schools, disaster response, and philanthropy become forms of accountable stewardship. Theologically, the institution is legitimate because it extends the capacity to perform good. It loses legitimacy when self-preservation, prestige, or accumulation displaces service. This criterion becomes important when evaluating the contemporary scale of Muhammadiyah's amal usaha.

2. Scriptural Authority and the Critical Retrieval of Tradition

The second foundation is scriptural orientation. Muhammadiyah's appeal to the Qur'an and Sunnah is often represented as a rejection of tradition. More precisely, it is a reordering of tradition. The movement distinguishes revelation from its historical interpretations and refuses to grant any school, scholar, or custom unconditional authority. The MKCH affirms the Qur'an as God's revelation and the Sunnah as prophetic explanation, while the Manhaj Tarjih treats these sources as the principal basis of religious judgment. The slogan of returning to the Qur'an and Sunnah is therefore an argument about hierarchy, not an assertion that Muslims can interpret without inherited knowledge.

Classical Islamic disciplines remain present in the process. Tarjih requires Arabic, Qur'anic sciences, hadith criticism, legal theory, and familiarity with juristic disagreement. The organization has issued detailed rulings through procedures that are recognizably part of the Islamic scholarly tradition. What changes is the finality of inherited conclusions. Madhhab opinions are evidence and intellectual resources, but not binding endpoints. Anwar (2018) describes tarjih as a system of perspectives, sources, approaches, and technical methods rather than the simple selection of the strongest opinion. This development makes the relation to tradition critical and reconstructive rather than merely oppositional.

The distinction between al-thawabit and al-mutaghayyirat - enduring principles and changeable applications - is implicit in much Muhammadiyah reasoning. Creed and prescribed worship are treated with stronger textual discipline, while social transactions and worldly affairs allow greater innovation. This differentiation protects a core of religious continuity while opening broad areas of life to experimentation. It explains why Muhammadiyah can be strict about ritual evidence and simultaneously enthusiastic about modern schools, medical technology, banking debates, professional management, and digital communication.

However, the scriptural hierarchy also produces a recurrent asymmetry. Practices associated with local custom may be required to demonstrate explicit religious legitimacy, while imported organizational or technological forms are often accepted under the presumption of permissibility in worldly affairs. A communal ritual can be scrutinized as bid'ah, whereas a bureaucratic system may be treated as neutral technique. This asymmetry is theologically defensible only if the supposedly neutral institution is also evaluated ethically. Modern forms can embody domination, exclusion, commodification, and inequality. A consistent reformist hermeneutic must therefore apply moral criticism to modern institutions as seriously as textual criticism is applied to inherited rituals.

Muhammadiyah's relation to the Sunnah further illustrates synthesis. The movement's emphasis on hadith authenticity reflects participation in a long Islamic tradition of

verification, but modern printing, standardized education, committees, and national dissemination transformed how that tradition operates. Religious authority moved from dispersed teacher-student chains toward collective organizational decisions. This did not eliminate scholars, but placed scholarship inside a legal-rational structure. The Majelis Tarjih became a modern institution precisely by institutionalizing premodern scholarly concerns: source reliability, argument, consensus, disagreement, and moral responsibility.

The result is not traditionless scripturalism. It is a new regime of tradition in which religious memory is curated through organizational processes. Texts are selected, authenticated, translated, systematized, and circulated. This regime increases consistency and public accessibility, but it can also create the impression that a committee's standardized conclusion is identical with the totality of Islam. Muhammadiyah's official recognition of openness, tolerance in disagreement, and non-attachment to a single madhhab is therefore not a decorative principle. It is necessary to prevent organizational authority from reproducing the closure that reform originally criticized.

3. Ijtihad, Tarjih, and Epistemic Plurality

The third foundation is *ijtihad* as disciplined openness. Muhammadiyah modernism depends on the proposition that interpretation cannot be permanently closed because new circumstances generate questions not exhausted by inherited rulings. *Tajdid* includes both purification and dynamic development. In matters of creed and worship, renewal may mean restoring normative clarity. In social affairs, it means generating new arrangements that realize Islamic purposes under changed conditions. This dual meaning allows continuity and novelty to be articulated within one theological vocabulary (Jainuri, 2002; Nashir, 2015).

The institutionalization of *ijtihad* through *tarjih* is a distinctive feature. Rather than grounding reform in the charisma of a single thinker, Muhammadiyah created deliberative councils. Collective reasoning gives modern expertise a formal place: physicians, astronomers, economists, social scientists, and legal scholars can contribute to religious decisions. The expansion from a predominantly jurisprudential method toward *bayani*, *burhani*, and *irfani* approaches formalized this epistemic plurality. *Bayani* emphasizes textual and linguistic evidence; *burhani* uses rational and empirical demonstration; *irfani* attends to moral-spiritual insight. In principle, no single approach is sufficient for every problem (Anwar, 2018; Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2022).

This epistemological triad is important because it corrects a caricature of Muhammadiyah as exclusively rationalist or literalist. The movement does not formally place reason above revelation. It gives reason a necessary mediating role in understanding texts and reality. Empirical knowledge identifies causal structures, consequences, and technical possibilities that scripture does not describe in detail. Moral intuition guards against decisions that are technically defensible but spiritually destructive. The synthesis is therefore ordered but plural: revelation orients, reason analyzes, experience tests, and conscience evaluates.

The modernist character lies less in celebrating reason than in making knowledge publicly contestable. Arguments must be presented, evidence compared, and decisions revised

when stronger reasons emerge. Tarjih is intended to produce authoritative guidance, but its authority is procedural and fallible. This differs from both unstructured individualism and unchallengeable clericalism. It resembles modern deliberative institutions while remaining anchored in Islamic legal and moral traditions.

Nevertheless, epistemic openness remains uneven. The burhani approach is often praised in principle, but integrating social-scientific evidence into religious judgment is more difficult than citing medical or astronomical facts. Social realities are contested, power-laden, and interpreted through competing theories. The experiences of women, workers, religious minorities, indigenous communities, and poor people do not enter deliberation automatically. If expertise is limited to credentialed elites, collective *ijtihad* may reproduce institutional blind spots. The theological claim of openness therefore requires participatory mechanisms, not only multidisciplinary committees.

A further tension concerns *irfani* knowledge. Muhammadiyah historically criticized mystical claims that could not be normatively controlled, yet the adoption of an *irfani* approach acknowledges that ethical and spiritual perception cannot be reduced to textual deduction or instrumental reason. This recognition is a significant internal synthesis. It permits humility, compassion, and purification of motive to function as epistemic conditions. However, *irfani* must not become an unreviewable appeal to personal inspiration. Its role is to deepen moral sensitivity within a framework still accountable to revelation, evidence, and deliberation.

The combination of *bayani*, *burhani*, and *irfani* thus represents a mature theological response to modernity. It neither capitulates to positivism nor retreats into textual self-sufficiency. Its success, however, depends on how the three approaches are operationalized. If *bayani* always overrides the others without genuine engagement, plural epistemology becomes rhetorical. If *burhani* is reduced to technical efficiency, it loses critical power. If *irfani* is reduced to pious sentiment, it cannot challenge institutional interests. The synthesis must remain a practice of mutual correction.

4. Al-Ma'un and the Institutionalization of Social Piety

The fourth foundation is practical theology, most clearly expressed through the interpretation of Surat al-Ma'un. The chapter condemns those who deny religion by neglecting orphans, failing to encourage feeding the poor, and performing prayer without social sincerity. In Muhammadiyah memory, Ahmad Dahlan repeatedly taught this text until students understood that recitation had to become organized assistance. Whether every detail of the story can be historically verified is less important than the durable theological rule it communicates: worship that does not transform social relations is religiously deficient.

Al-Ma'un theology joins doctrine, ethics, and institution. It begins with a Qur'anic judgment, identifies concrete victims of social neglect, and requires durable mechanisms of care. Charity is not only an expression of private generosity; it becomes education, health care, orphan support, disaster relief, and organized philanthropy. Latief's studies show how modernist welfare ideology translated Islamic giving into clinics, agencies, and professional services, while also revealing tensions concerning target groups, institutional interests, and the limits of charitable intervention (Latief, 2010, 2012).

This practical orientation distinguishes Muhammadiyah modernism from intellectual reform confined to debates over theology or law. The truth of religious interpretation is partly disclosed in its social fruit. Schools embody the obligation to overcome ignorance. Hospitals embody the protection of life. 'Aisiyah's educational, health, and social programs embody the claim that women are responsible religious agents and public actors. Disaster organizations embody solidarity beyond routine congregational boundaries. These are not secular activities subsequently blessed by religion; they are institutional forms of worship and da'wah.

The theological synthesis is visible in the relation between purification and service. Purification removes practices believed to divert devotion from God, while al-Ma'un redirects religious energy toward human need. Without the second movement, purification can become negative identity: a community defined by what it does not perform. Without the first, social service can lose its account of transcendence and obligation. Muhammadiyah's most productive moments occur when doctrinal critique releases resources for organized compassion.

Yet welfare institutions create new moral risks. Professionalization can improve competence, accountability, and scale, but it can also separate service providers from the poor. Hospitals and universities may become expensive, status-conscious, or market-driven. Administrative success can be counted through buildings, enrollment, assets, and accreditation while distributive justice remains uncertain. A theological institution cannot be evaluated only by whether it is owned by Muhammadiyah or uses Islamic symbols. It must be evaluated by access, quality, dignity, labor relations, environmental impact, and benefit to vulnerable groups.

Al-Ma'un therefore functions as an internal critique of Muhammadiyah itself. The verse does not permit institutional prestige to substitute for care. It asks whether those who are socially weak are recognized as subjects rather than objects of charity. It also pushes beyond relief toward structural justice. Feeding the poor is necessary, but a modern theology must investigate why deprivation persists, how policy and markets distribute risk, and whether charitable systems unintentionally preserve inequality. Progressive Islam extends al-Ma'un when it connects compassion to transformation rather than episodic assistance.

5. Worldly Affairs and the Theological Authorization of Modern Institutions

The fifth foundation is the differentiation of worship from mu'amalah dunyawiyah, or worldly social affairs. Muhammadiyah's religious reasoning commonly treats prescribed worship as requiring positive textual authorization, whereas worldly affairs are generally permissible unless prohibited or harmful. This distinction is one of the most important theological conditions of institutional modernism. It creates space for innovation without requiring every administrative or technological form to appear in classical sources.

Modern schools are the clearest example. Muhammadiyah combined religious instruction with classrooms, graded curricula, schedules, examinations, textbooks, and subjects associated with colonial and modern education. This was not simply imitation. The form was appropriated to achieve an Islamic objective: producing knowledgeable, disciplined, socially capable Muslims. The same logic supported hospitals, orphanages, scouting,

publishing, universities, financial administration, and professional associations. A technical form could be borrowed because its moral status depended on purpose, content, and consequences rather than origin alone (Alfian, 1989; Noer, 1973).

This differentiated theology avoids two extremes. It rejects the idea that religious authenticity requires reproducing the social forms of seventh-century Arabia, and it rejects the secular claim that institutions and technologies are morally self-governing. Worldly affairs possess relative autonomy, not independence from ethics. Expertise determines how a hospital operates, but theology asks whom it serves and what conception of human dignity guides it. Science determines astronomical calculation, but religious deliberation determines how knowledge is used in communal worship. Economics explains incentives, while Islamic ethics evaluates justice, exploitation, and social obligation.

The relative autonomy of worldly knowledge also changes religious authority. A scholar cannot decide a medical question without medical evidence, and a physician cannot determine the normative meaning of life, death, and responsibility through clinical expertise alone. Collective *ijtihad* becomes necessary because modern problems cross disciplinary boundaries. This explains why Muhammadiyah's institutional structure includes specialized councils and professional networks. Theology is not displaced by expertise; it coordinates expertise within a moral horizon.

However, the boundary between technical and normative questions is rarely clean. Technologies encode values, bureaucracies distribute power, and markets shape access. Treating modern systems as neutral may allow efficiency to become an unquestioned norm. Muhammadiyah's theology of worldly affairs must therefore move from permissive adoption to ethical design. The relevant question is not merely whether a technology is allowed, but whether its architecture promotes justice, autonomy, accountability, and public benefit. This issue is increasingly visible in artificial intelligence, data governance, commercialized education, and health technology.

The tradition-reform synthesis in worldly affairs is therefore dynamic. Classical concepts such as *maslahah*, *maqasid*, *amanah*, *'adl*, *shura*, and *la darar* provide moral criteria. Modern sciences provide knowledge of systems and consequences. Organizational experience reveals implementation problems. Public participation identifies harms invisible to experts. Theologically responsible modernism integrates all four. It does not sanctify either inherited forms or contemporary innovation.

6. Civic Covenant, Wasatiyyah, and Universal Humanity

The sixth foundation concerns community, nation, and universal humanity. Muhammadiyah emerged under colonial rule, participated in nationalist networks, and later articulated a constructive relationship with the Indonesian state. The MKCH calls citizens to build a just and prosperous country blessed by God, while the formulation of Indonesia as *Dar al-'Ahd wa al-Shahadah* presents the Pancasila state as a national covenant and field of ethical witness. This position does not identify Islam with a particular party or demand a formal religious state as the sole expression of fidelity. It

frames citizenship, constitutional participation, and social contribution as religious responsibilities.

This civic theology extends the synthesis beyond internal Muslim reform. Tradition provides concepts of covenant, justice, consultation, and public good. Modern constitutionalism provides institutions for plural citizenship. Indonesian history supplies a concrete national agreement. Muhammadiyah combines these elements without declaring Pancasila a religion or treating Islam as politically irrelevant. The state is legitimate insofar as it protects justice, participation, dignity, and common welfare; Muslims witness to their faith through ethical contribution rather than domination.

The *Risalah Islam Berkemajuan* broadens this orientation through *wasatiyyah*, peace, knowledge, protection of the environment, women's dignity, and humanitarian concern. Progressive Islam is presented as a worldview rooted in *tawhid*, the Qur'an and Sunnah, *ijtihad*, moderation, and mercy for all creation. This formulation signals movement beyond a defensive modernism preoccupied with Muslim backwardness. The horizon becomes civilizational and universal: Islam should contribute to resolving inequality, violence, ecological crisis, and dehumanizing forms of technology.

Relations with religious others reveal both the promise and limits of this theology. Muhammadiyah's educational and humanitarian activities often serve broader publics, and leaders have participated in interreligious and civic cooperation. Historical studies also show that competition with Christian missions shaped early institutional development and Muslim solidarity (Shihab, 1995). Theologically, cooperation is justified through justice, shared humanity, covenant, and public benefit. Yet pluralism remains contested when it is interpreted as relativizing truth claims. Muhammadiyah generally supports social tolerance and equal citizenship without adopting theological relativism (Menchik, 2016).

This distinction is coherent but demanding. A community may maintain its truth commitments while protecting the dignity and freedom of others. The difficulty is practical: majority confidence can turn doctrinal certainty into social privilege. Civic synthesis requires that non-Muslim citizens are treated not merely as tolerated guests but as equal participants in the national covenant. It also requires internal protection for Muslim minorities and dissenting interpretations. *Wasatiyyah* is substantive only when it constrains power.

The civic dimension confirms that Muhammadiyah modernism is not reducible to private piety or institutional efficiency. Its theology contains a public theory: revelation supplies moral orientation, citizens cooperate across difference, the state is judged by justice, and organizations mediate social responsibility. Hefner's concept of civil Islam helps illuminate this contribution, though Muhammadiyah's civic practice should not be idealized. Organizational proximity to political elites, internal conservatism, and uneven advocacy can limit its critical role. The theological standard remains higher than institutional performance.

7. Historical Layers of the Theological Synthesis

The historical development of this synthesis can be understood in four broad phases. The first, associated with Ahmad Dahlan and the early movement, was experimental and pedagogical. Qur'anic interpretation, educational innovation, social service, women's organization, and intercommunal engagement were combined without an elaborate doctrinal system. The second phase involved consolidation and purification. As Muhammadiyah expanded, it required clearer ritual guidance, organizational identity, and mechanisms for resolving disputes. The Majelis Tarjih, established in 1927, institutionalized religious judgment and strengthened scriptural standardization.

The third phase, especially after independence, involved ideological codification and national adaptation. The Muqaddimah, Kepribadian Muhammadiyah, and MKCH clarified the movement's creed, social mission, and relationship to the Indonesian state. These documents responded to political contestation, ideological polarization, and the need to maintain organizational unity. They also translated founding intuitions into propositions that could be taught across a national bureaucracy. Theology became an explicit organizational curriculum.

The fourth phase involves methodological and cosmopolitan expansion. PHIWM addressed ethical life across multiple domains. Tarjih methodology incorporated multidimensional approaches. The second-century statement, Dar al-'Ahd wa al-Shahadah, and Risalah Islam Berkemajuan articulated civilizational, ecological, humanitarian, and global concerns. Burhani (2016) interprets this as movement from puritanism toward cosmopolitanism, although the shift is incomplete and contested. Purification has not disappeared; it has been placed within a broader vocabulary of progress, moderation, and universal mercy.

These phases should not be treated as a linear replacement of one theology by another. Early practical reform remains active in al-Ma'un discourse. Purification continues in ritual and creedal guidance. Ideological codification still shapes cadre education. Progressive Islam adds rather than erases layers. Muhammadiyah's theological identity is sedimented: different periods remain available and can be emphasized by different actors. One group may prioritize ritual standardization, another institutional growth, another social justice, and another civic pluralism, all while claiming organizational authenticity.

The sedimented character explains internal disputes. They are not simply conflicts between loyalists and deviants, or conservatives and progressives. They are contests over which authorized layer should organize the whole. A purification-centered reading worries that cultural accommodation weakens doctrinal clarity. A socially transformative reading worries that ritual preoccupation abandons al-Ma'un. An institutional reading values discipline and scale. A cosmopolitan reading emphasizes dialogue and global ethics. The theological challenge is to establish relations of priority without suppressing legitimate plurality.

The most defensible synthesis gives tawhid and revelation normative priority, ijtihad and epistemic plurality interpretive responsibility, and social justice practical verification. Purification protects transcendence and accountability; reform prevents historical interpretations from becoming idols; institutions sustain collective action; and public ethics tests whether religious claims produce mercy. When one component becomes

autonomous, distortion follows. Purification without social ethics becomes sectarian boundary-making. Reform without revelation becomes religiously ungrounded adaptation. Institutions without critique become bureaucratic interests. Social activism without disciplined knowledge becomes moral improvisation.

Table 2. Historical development of Muhammadiyah's theological synthesis

Historical layer	Dominant emphasis	Institutional expression	Theological risk
Founding experimentation, 1912-1920s	Qur'anic pedagogy, social reform, education	Schools, welfare, al-Ma'un women's organization	Later memory may idealize an unsystematic period
Consolidation and purification, 1920s-1940s	Ritual guidance, source criticism, organizational unity	Majelis Tarjih, standardized worship and teaching	Purification may overshadow social experimentation
Ideological codification, 1940s-1990s	Creed, identity, national responsibility	Muqaddimah, Kepribadian, MKCH, expanding amal usaha	Bureaucratic uniformity and institutional self-preservation
Methodological and cosmopolitan expansion, 2000s-present	Ethical guidance, epistemic plurality, Progressive Islam	PHIWM, bayani-burhani-irfani, civic and global agendas	Normative breadth without consistent implementation

Discussion

The findings suggest that Muhammadiyah modernism should be understood as a theological synthesis rather than a sociological label. The term modernist often describes observable characteristics - schools, educated urban constituencies, print culture, bureaucratic organization, scientific calculation, and reformist preaching. These characteristics are real, but the deeper structure is a theory of religious authority. Muhammadiyah separates revelation from historical interpretation, makes ijtihad an enduring obligation, differentiates prescribed worship from worldly affairs, and treats organized social benefit as evidence of lived faith. This theological arrangement explains why modern institutions could be appropriated without accepting secularism as their necessary philosophy.

The synthesis also revises the meaning of tradition. Tradition in Muhammadiyah is not absent; it is filtered and reorganized. The movement inherits the Qur'an, Sunnah, Arabic scholarly disciplines, legal theory, ethical concepts, devotional practices, and the historical memory of reform. It also inherits Indonesian forms of association, mutual assistance, and cultural communication, even when official discourse is cautious about local ritual. The decisive issue is authorization. Traditions are accepted when they can be connected to legitimate sources, purposes, or harmless custom; they are rejected when considered contradictory to tawhid, unsupported in worship, or socially harmful.

This evaluative relation is one source of Muhammadiyah's dynamism. No inherited interpretation is immune to revision, and no modern innovation is legitimate merely because it is new. Yet the criteria are not always applied symmetrically. Local religious practices have often faced intense demands for textual proof, while modern organizational forms have enjoyed broad presumptive acceptance. A more consistent theology would subject both to maqasid-oriented evaluation. A ritual should be assessed for theological meaning, social function, and evidence; a marketized university should be

assessed for access, justice, and educational integrity. The category of *bid'ah* cannot carry the entire burden of reform, because contemporary harms frequently arise from institutions with no ritual character.

Muhammadiyah's contribution to Islamic modernism lies in making theology organizational. Many modernist thinkers produced influential texts but lacked durable institutions. Muhammadiyah created councils, schools, hospitals, women's organizations, youth movements, philanthropic agencies, universities, media, and disaster-response structures. These institutions preserve and reproduce a particular religious rationality. They train individuals to see knowledge, discipline, service, and association as Islamic duties. Nakamura's ethnography demonstrates how organizational Islam can become embedded in everyday community life, while Latief's research shows how welfare activism generates modern Muslim citizenship.

Institutionalization, however, changes theology. Once a movement owns large organizations, theological priorities can be shaped by managerial needs. Stability, accreditation, regulation, finance, and reputation become powerful concerns. These are legitimate, but they may encourage conservative decision-making and reduce prophetic critique. A hospital facing market competition may privilege paying patients. A university may celebrate research metrics while underpaying staff. A charitable agency may professionalize fundraising while beneficiaries have little voice. The problem is not professionalism itself; it is the displacement of moral ends by organizational survival.

Al-Ma'un offers a criterion for resisting this displacement. It locates denial of religion in social indifference, including piety performed for appearance. Applied institutionally, the warning concerns organizations that display Islamic identity while failing vulnerable people. The theology of al-Ma'un therefore demands impact assessment, distributive analysis, and accountability to users. It supports professional management precisely because incompetence harms people, but it also challenges professional closure. The poor are not merely recipients; their knowledge and agency should shape programs.

The relationship between purification and culture is another unresolved issue. Muhammadiyah's critique of superstition and coercive custom contributed to individual agency and doctrinal clarity. It also sometimes produced a thin understanding of culture as residue to be removed. Burhani's work demonstrates that early Muhammadiyah was more deeply entangled with Javanese culture than later puritan narratives acknowledged. Modern religious universalism can itself become culturally specific when it privileges urban, educated, standardized forms. A mature synthesis must distinguish theological criticism from cultural erasure.

Cultural engagement does not require accepting every inherited practice. It requires interpreting symbols, social memories, and local moral worlds before judging them. Dakwah kultural and Progressive Islam move in this direction by emphasizing wisdom, dialogue, and contextualization. The bayani-burhani-irfani framework can support it: textual analysis clarifies norms, social knowledge explains function and history, and spiritual sensitivity recognizes meaning. Cultural plurality then becomes a field of *ijtihad* rather than a threat to purity.

The synthesis also has implications for gender. 'Aisyiyah's early organization and extensive public work demonstrate that Muhammadiyah modernism expanded women's educational and social agency. This is a major theological achievement, not a secondary organizational fact. It emerged from the claim that women share responsibility for knowledge, *da'wah*, and social reform. Yet formal participation does not eliminate patriarchal interpretation, unequal leadership, or gendered labor. The theological principles of human dignity, justice, and trusteeship require continuous reinterpretation of family, authority, and institutional practice.

In relation to pluralism, Muhammadiyah's approach can be described as committed civic inclusivism. It maintains Islamic truth claims while affirming cooperation, constitutional equality, and public service. This position differs from both exclusivist domination and theological relativism. Its strength is that it grounds tolerance in conviction rather than indifference. Its weakness is that tolerance may remain conditional if the majority defines the limits of acceptable difference. *Dar al-'Ahd wa al-Shahadah* provides a stronger basis by treating citizenship as covenant: equal status follows from the political-moral agreement, not from majority generosity.

The concept of Progressive Islam represents the latest attempt to integrate these dimensions. Its foundations - *tawhid*, *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, *ijtihad* and *tajdid*, *wasatiyyah*, and mercy for all creation - restate the older grammar while expanding its scope. The concept places knowledge, social liberation, women's empowerment, ecological responsibility, peace, and global humanity inside Muhammadiyah's religious worldview. This is not a departure from tradition but a claim about the deepest trajectory of Islam. Progress is defined normatively, not merely technologically or economically.

That definition is crucial. Modernity offers science, administrative capacity, communication, and institutional scale, but it also produces ecological destruction, commodification, surveillance, militarization, and extreme inequality. A movement that equates progress with growth or technological adoption would surrender its critical theology. Muhammadiyah's synthesis is credible only if *tawhid* relativizes the power of markets and states, *al-Ma'un* centers the excluded, and *ijtihad* confronts new systems of harm. Progressive Islam must be able to criticize modernity, not only participate in it.

The analytical model developed here can be summarized as a sequence of theological mediation. Revelation supplies orientation and limits. Tradition supplies accumulated methods and meanings. Reason and empirical knowledge interpret changing reality. Moral-spiritual judgment evaluates intention and human consequence. Institutions organize sustained action. Social outcomes return as evidence for critique and revision. The sequence is circular rather than linear: institutional experience can reveal failures that require reinterpretation, while new knowledge can alter how purposes are pursued.

This model clarifies why Muhammadiyah is neither simply Salafi nor liberal, neither traditionalist nor secular modernist. Its scriptural purification shares features with broader reformist currents, but its institutional welfare orientation, national embeddedness, collective *tarjih*, and acceptance of epistemic plurality produce a distinct configuration. Labels such as puritan, modernist, moderate, or progressive identify tendencies, not the complete structure. The movement's identity lies in the relations among these tendencies.

The model also identifies criteria for future development. First, scriptural fidelity should be measured by the quality of interpretation, not by textual citation alone. Second, *ijtihad* should include affected communities and not only professional elites. Third, organizational growth should be evaluated through justice and public accessibility. Fourth, cultural criticism should avoid humiliating communities whose practices are being reformed. Fifth, technological adoption should undergo ethical assessment. Sixth, civic theology should protect equal citizenship even when unpopular. These are not external demands; they follow from Muhammadiyah's own theological principles.

A final caution concerns historical continuity. Contemporary official discourse often presents Progressive Islam as the direct fulfillment of Ahmad Dahlan's thought. The connection is plausible but should not erase historical change. Dahlan's experimental pedagogy, later ritual purification, post-independence ideological codification, and contemporary cosmopolitanism emerged under different conditions. Continuity is interpretive, not mechanical. A responsible tradition acknowledges development rather than projecting present formulations unchanged into the past.

Understanding continuity as reconstruction strengthens rather than weakens Muhammadiyah. It shows that the movement has survived because it repeatedly translated its sources into new conceptual and institutional forms. Tradition is faithful when it remains capable of self-correction. Reform is Islamic when it remains answerable to revelation, justice, and mercy. The synthesis is therefore not a finished doctrinal formula. It is a disciplined process of receiving, criticizing, and actualizing Islam under changing historical conditions.

CONCLUSION

Muhammadiyah modernism is grounded in a theological synthesis of tradition and reform. Its modern institutions are not adequately explained as imitation of Western organizational forms, and its purification cannot be understood as rejection of the Islamic tradition as a whole. The movement reorganizes authority: revelation is normatively primary; inherited scholarship is respected but revisable; *ijtihad* remains open; reason, science, and spiritual judgment contribute to interpretation; and social action verifies the ethical seriousness of faith.

Six foundations sustain this synthesis. *Tawhid* generates doctrinal discipline and human responsibility. Scriptural orientation distinguishes revelation from historical interpretation. *Ijtihad* and *tarjih* make reform collective and accountable. *Al-Ma'un* turns worship into organized care and social critique. The relative autonomy of worldly affairs permits institutional and technological innovation under moral limits. Civic and universal ethics connect Islamic commitment to the Indonesian covenant and humanity beyond communal boundaries. Together, these foundations form the theological grammar of Muhammadiyah modernism.

The grammar has produced substantial historical achievements, including modern education, health services, philanthropy, women's activism, professional organization, and civic participation. It has also produced tensions that cannot be dismissed: purification may narrow cultural recognition; standardization may constrain

interpretive plurality; professional institutions may become market-oriented; and claims of progress may conceal unequal outcomes. These are internal theological problems because they concern the relation between divine orientation and institutional practice.

The most defensible future for Muhammadiyah lies neither in abandoning purification nor in celebrating modernization without criticism. It lies in maintaining a reciprocal discipline: revelation critiques tradition and modernity; knowledge critiques inadequate interpretation; al-Ma'un critiques institutional self-interest; and civic equality critiques communal power. In this sense, synthesis is not compromise. It is the continuing work of making doctrinal fidelity, intellectual openness, and social mercy correct one another.

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