SPIRITUALLY LITERATE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: RECONSTRUCTING KH. AHMAD DAHLAN'S EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

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Article received Desember 12nd, 2025; Article revised October 8th, 2026; Article approved November 16th, 2026

Abstract

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Indonesian higher education often emphasizes cognitive mastery and ritual observance, creating a gap between students' religious knowledge and their ethical and social conduct. This conceptual study aims to develop a transformative learning model for PAI by integrating Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, spiritual literacy, and KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought, particularly his al-Ma'un-based pedagogy. The study employed a qualitative library research design. Thirty-one secondary sources and four primary works were selected through a PRISMA-informed protocol from Scopus, Google Scholar, Garuda, and SINTA for the period 2015–2026 and analyzed using content analysis and conceptual synthesis. Theoretical coherence was supported through source triangulation, a conceptual mapping matrix, and peer debriefing among the authors. The analysis resulted in the Spiritually Literate Transformative Learning Model (SLTLM), a cyclical framework comprising four stages: reflection (tafakkur), illumination (tazkiyah al-fikr), action ('amal shalih), and evaluation (muhasabah). The model positions spiritual literacy as a conceptual bridge between critical reflection and moral action, grounding perspective transformation in God-consciousness and social responsibility. In practice, SLTLM provides lecturers with a framework for designing reflective journaling, ethical dialogue, and al-Ma'un-inspired service-learning activities. It also offers universities and policymakers a conceptual reference for strengthening character formation through compulsory religious education courses. At the social level, the model encourages graduates to translate religious understanding into concrete acts of service for vulnerable communities. As a conceptual framework, however, SLTLM requires empirical validation through classroom-based and mixed-method research.

Keywords: *Islamic Religious Education, KH. Ahmad Dahlan, Moral Pedagogy, Spiritual Literacy, Transformative Learning*

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the digital era is expected to develop not only intellectual capacity but also moral awareness and social responsibility. In Islamic education, this entails adopting contemporary educational approaches while preserving its fundamental purpose: nurturing individuals who are ethical, honest, and spiritually mature (Sanzi et al., 2025). In Indonesian higher education, however, institutional success is still measured largely in terms of academic achievement, while the spiritual and relational dimensions of student well-being receive limited attention in campus policies and teaching practices (Zuhdi & Syarief, 2023). Al-Attas (1999) warned that when education is reduced to the transmission of information, it loses its essential purpose as *ta'dib*, the cultivation of *adab* through which knowledge, the self, and society are placed in their proper order.

These tensions are particularly evident in Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam*, PAI) at universities. PAI is often delivered primarily as the transmission of doctrinal content, making it more informative than transformative. Studies in Islamic higher education have reported a gap between lecturers' endorsement of higher-order learning and its implementation in the classroom (Muttaqin et al., 2025), persistent challenges in developing students' religious literacy (Sapdi & Ali, 2022), and uneven integration of religious and general knowledge (Suwendi et al., 2024). Interviews with lecturers further suggest that existing PAI learning models are overly theoretical and provide limited opportunities for meaningful spiritual experience (Jenuri et al., 2025). Similarly, Chanifah et al. (2021) observe that spirituality-based frameworks for Islamic education are relatively well developed in schools but remain limited at the university level.

Previous reform efforts have generated valuable pedagogical innovations. Problem-based learning integrated with Islamic practices has been shown to strengthen conceptual understanding, higher-order thinking, and religious engagement (Anugrah et al., 2025). Contextual learning models have also been developed to translate religious knowledge into virtuous conduct (Parhan et al., 2024). Contemplative and transformative learning has been proposed as an approach to character development in Islamic higher education (Alimah, 2020), while transformative religious education in *pesantren* has been associated with changes in students' attitudes toward inclusiveness and social responsibility (Jusubaidi et al., 2024). More recently, Abusyairi et al. (2026) integrated Mezirow's theory with *tazkiyat al-nafs* in a PAI model for university students experiencing a quarter-life crisis. These contributions, however, have not explicitly conceptualized spiritual literacy as a mediating capacity or incorporated Dahlan's al-Ma'un praxis. Consequently, the process linking critical reflection, spiritual awareness, and ethical action remains under-theorized.

In global educational discourse, Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory is one of the most influential accounts of how adults transform their frames of reference through critical reflection and discourse. Recent reviews have identified a spiritual or transpersonal strand among the approaches that have developed from his work (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023), while critics argue that the original theory is predominantly rational and gives insufficient attention to emotional and spiritual ways of knowing (MacKenzie, 2022; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Islamic pedagogy, by contrast, understands transformation as both intellectual and

spiritual: a process involving the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) and the refinement of character, in which knowledge (*'ilm*) is inseparable from faith and conduct (Al-Attas, 1999). Adapting transformative learning to PAI therefore requires re-grounding the theory in a theocentric paradigm that integrates reason (*'aql*), revelation (*wahy*), and action (*'amal*).

The educational thought of KH. Ahmad Dahlan offers an Indonesian Islamic exemplar of this integration. Dahlan reportedly taught Surah al-Ma'un repeatedly until his students translated its message into concrete acts of care for orphans and the poor, thereby connecting faith, knowledge, and action (Al Baidlo' et al., 2026; Hadjid, 2018). His modernization of Islamic education has also been interpreted as a form of critical consciousness comparable to Freire's concept of conscientization (Kamaludin & Muthohirin, 2021). Existing studies, however, have largely examined his ideas from descriptive or historical perspectives (Ikmah et al., 2025; Tentiasih et al., 2023), or translated them into institutional models for schools and *madrasahs* (Al Baidlo' et al., 2026). His pedagogy has yet to be articulated as a learning process for PAI in higher education. Spiritual literacy, understood as a capacity to engage with meaning, purpose, and transcendence that can be intentionally cultivated (Jirásek, 2023), offers a conceptual bridge between Mezirow's transformative learning process and Dahlan's praxis.

This study therefore aims to develop a conceptual model of transformative learning for PAI grounded in spiritual literacy and informed by selected elements of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought. It addresses the following question: How can Transformative Learning Theory, spiritual literacy, and Dahlan's al-Ma'un pedagogy be integrated into a coherent learning model for PAI in higher education, and what are the pedagogical and social implications of such integration? The study contributes theoretically by re-grounding transformative learning in an Islamic axiology, practically by offering lecturers a sequenced framework for designing PAI courses, and socially by demonstrating how religious learning can be translated into meaningful service to the wider community.

Literature Review

Transformative Learning and Its Spiritual Critique

Transformative Learning Theory explains how adults revise taken-for-granted frames of reference through critical reflection on assumptions, rational discourse, and action informed by new perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). Over the past four decades, the theory has evolved into several strands, including spiritual and transpersonal approaches (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023), partly in response to critiques that Mezirow placed greater emphasis on rational and cognitive processes than on affective, embodied, and spiritual ways of knowing (MacKenzie, 2022). Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) demonstrated that spirituality and cultural identity can play a central role in how adult learners in higher education construct meaning and experience transformation. In Islamic educational contexts, transformative approaches have been proposed for character development in Islamic higher education (Alimah, 2020), applied in *pesantren* and Islamic universities with reported changes in students' attitudes and religious understanding (Guefara et al., 2024; Jusubaidi et al., 2024), and integrated with *tazkiyat al-nafs* for students experiencing a quarter-life crisis (Abusyairi et al., 2026). These studies demonstrate the potential of Mezirow's framework for Islamic education, but they generally retain its core phases without fully reconsidering the underlying assumption that rational autonomy constitutes the ultimate aim of learning.

Spiritual Literacy in Islamic Education

Spiritual intelligence has been defined as the capacity to address questions of meaning and value and to situate one's actions within a broader context of purpose (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). The more recent concept of spiritual literacy emphasizes that this capacity is not fixed but can be intentionally cultivated through education (Jirásek, 2023). Jirásek developed the concept for secular education and therefore distinguished it from formal religious instruction; however, Rodriguez (2025) has applied his definition in a religious education context, suggesting that the construct can be adapted to faith-based pedagogy. Within Islamic education, spiritual literacy can be understood as the capacity to interpret the signs (*ayat*) of God in revelation, the self (*anfus*), and the world (*afaq*), and to allow this understanding to inform one's conduct. Research in Indonesian higher education indicates that spirituality-based frameworks remain limited at the tertiary level (Chanifah et al., 2021), that lecturers perceive current PAI models as offering insufficient opportunities for spiritual experience (Jenuri et al., 2025), and that Islamic perspectives on student well-being point to a spiritual (*chaironic*) dimension that has not yet been fully addressed in campus practice (Zuhdi & Syarief, 2023). Much of this literature, however, treats spirituality primarily as an outcome to be cultivated rather than as a process that guides epistemic and moral transformation. The latter function constitutes the role of spiritual literacy in the present model.

KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Educational Thought

KH. Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923), the founder of Muhammadiyah, integrated religious and general knowledge, rational inquiry, and social action into his educational reform (Ikmah et al., 2025; Shodikin et al., 2025). His educational thought has also been characterized as a moderate, humanistic, and non-sectarian expression of Islam (Hasan & Taufiq, 2023). Because Dahlan placed greater emphasis on educational practice than on producing written works, his teachings were documented largely by his students, most notably in KRH Hadjid's account of seven philosophical teachings and seventeen groups of Qur'anic verses (Hadjid, 2018). Recent studies describe his progressive educational approach in terms of a trilogy of intelligence, experience, and progress, as well as the integration of faith, knowledge, and action through al-Ma'un theology (Akhyar et al., 2024; Al Baidlo' et al., 2026; Tentiasih et al., 2023). The al-Ma'un praxis continues to shape Muhammadiyah's social action, including poverty alleviation initiatives led by Muhammadiyah-affiliated groups (Rahman et al., 2021) and the philanthropic ethos promoted through its schools (Jatmiko et al., 2025). Much of this literature, however, remains descriptive, historical, institutional, or sociological. Few studies have examined Dahlan's pedagogy as a learning process that can be aligned with Transformative Learning Theory and translated into an instructional framework for university-level PAI.

Research Gap

Three gaps emerge from the preceding review. Philosophically, prevailing transformative learning models are predominantly secular and do not explicitly account for the divine orientation that is central to Islamic education. Theoretically, the relationship between transformative learning and spiritual literacy has received limited attention in PAI research. Contextually, Dahlan's spiritual-ethical pedagogy has yet to be articulated as a framework for transformative Islamic education in higher education. The present study addresses these three gaps by bringing them together within a single conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

The study brings together three constructs with distinct but complementary functions. Transformative Learning Theory provides the process logic, encompassing disorienting experiences, critical reflection, discourse, action, and the reintegration of transformed perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). Spiritual literacy provides a bridging capacity: the ability to interpret experience in relation to meaning, value, and transcendence (Jirásek, 2023; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought provides the axiological orientation and praxis, directing learning toward God-consciousness and social service through the unity of *iman*, *'ilm*, and *'amal*, as exemplified in al-Ma'un pedagogy (Al Baidlo' et al., 2026; Hadjid, 2018).

These constructs are situated within a *tawhidic* worldview in which knowledge is regarded as a trust (*amanah*) and education as the cultivation of *adab* (Al-Attas, 1999). This worldview is oriented toward the formation of the integrated person (*insan kamil*), a goal that continues to inform discussions of Indonesian Islamic higher education (Iskandar et al., 2025). The framework assumes that meaningful transformation in PAI is achieved only when cognitive, spiritual, and social dimensions are addressed in an integrated manner. This assumption guided both the selection and interpretation of the literature and the subsequent development of the conceptual model.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative conceptual design based on library research. Its object was not an empirical population but a body of texts and theoretical perspectives, and its purpose was to develop a conceptual model rather than test hypotheses. This design is appropriate because KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational ideas have been preserved largely through accounts written by his students and subsequent scholarship, while integrating three theoretical traditions requires interpretive and analytical inquiry. Although the study is not a systematic review, its literature-search and selection procedures were informed by PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021) to enhance transparency and reproducibility.

Primary sources were purposively selected to represent each theoretical domain: Mezirow (1991) for transformative learning; Zohar and Marshall (2000) and Jirásek (2023) for spiritual intelligence and spiritual literacy; and Hadjid (2018), a record of Dahlan's teachings compiled by his student, for Dahlan's educational thought. Secondary sources were searched in Scopus, Google Scholar, Garuda (Garba Rujukan Digital), and the SINTA portal, which was also used to verify the accreditation status of Indonesian journals. Searches covered publications from January 2015 to September 2026 and employed five search strings: (1) "transformative learning" AND ("Islamic education" OR "Islamic religious education" OR "Pendidikan Agama Islam"); (2) "spiritual literacy"; (3) "spiritual intelligence" AND ("Islamic education" OR "religious education"); (4) "KH. Ahmad Dahlan" AND education; and (5) "al-Ma'un" AND education.

In Scopus, searches were conducted in titles, abstracts, and keywords and limited to articles and reviews in the social sciences and arts and humanities. In Google Scholar, results were sorted by relevance, and the first 60 records retrieved for each search string were screened. This cap was more restrictive than the 200–300 records suggested by Haddaway et al. (2015) and was adopted to maintain a focused corpus appropriate for a conceptual study. Garuda was searched using the title field and Indonesian equivalents of the search terms, including "pembelajaran transformatif," "literasi spiritual," "kecerdasan spiritual," and "pendidikan Islam." The literature-

selection protocol is summarized in Table 1, and the selection flow is presented in Figure 1.

Table 1. Literature Selection Protocol

Component	Specification
Sources	Scopus; Google Scholar (first 60 records per search string, sorted by relevance); Garuda (title field); SINTA portal (record identification and journal accreditation verification); core theoretical and primary works: Mezirow (1991), Zohar and Marshall (2000), Jirásek (2023), and Hadjid (2018)
Search strings	(1) "transformative learning" AND ("Islamic education" OR "Islamic religious education" OR "Pendidikan Agama Islam"); (2) "spiritual literacy"; (3) "spiritual intelligence" AND ("Islamic education" OR "religious education"); (4) "KH. Ahmad Dahlan" AND education; (5) "al-Ma'un" AND education; Indonesian equivalents were used in Garuda and SINTA
Period and limits	January 2015 – September 2026; English- and Indonesian-language sources; journal articles, review articles, and scholarly books or book chapters; pre-2015 works were included only as foundational sources identified through citation tracking
Inclusion criteria	(a) peer-reviewed articles published in Scopus-indexed, SINTA 1–4, or other verifiably peer-reviewed journals, or scholarly books and primary records; (b) sources that theorized, critically discussed, or applied at least one core construct: transformative learning, spiritual literacy or spiritual intelligence, Dahlan's educational thought, or al-Ma'un praxis; (c) relevance to Islamic or religious education, preferably in higher education, or clear conceptual transferability to that context; and (d) full-text availability
Exclusion criteria	(a) sources in which a core construct was mentioned but not substantively discussed; (b) theses, opinion pieces, or conference proceedings without documented peer review; (c) journals without verifiable editorial and peer-review processes; (d) records retrieved solely because of an affiliation or journal name (e.g., "Universitas Ahmad Dahlan"); (e) school-level surveys without transferable theoretical or conceptual relevance; and (f) repetitive biographical accounts of Dahlan
Screening results	612 records identified (Scopus = 87; Google Scholar = 300; Garuda = 142; SINTA = 83) → 168 duplicates removed → 444 records screened → 351 excluded → 93 reports sought for retrieval → 6 not retrieved → 87 assessed for eligibility → 69 excluded → 18 included from database searches; additional identification through other methods yielded 16 records, of which 13 were included; final corpus: 31 secondary sources and 4 core works
Validity procedures	Source triangulation across the three theoretical traditions; conceptual mapping matrix (Table 2); independent screening by two authors, with disagreements resolved by the third author; peer debriefing involving the international co-author; and maintenance of an audit trail

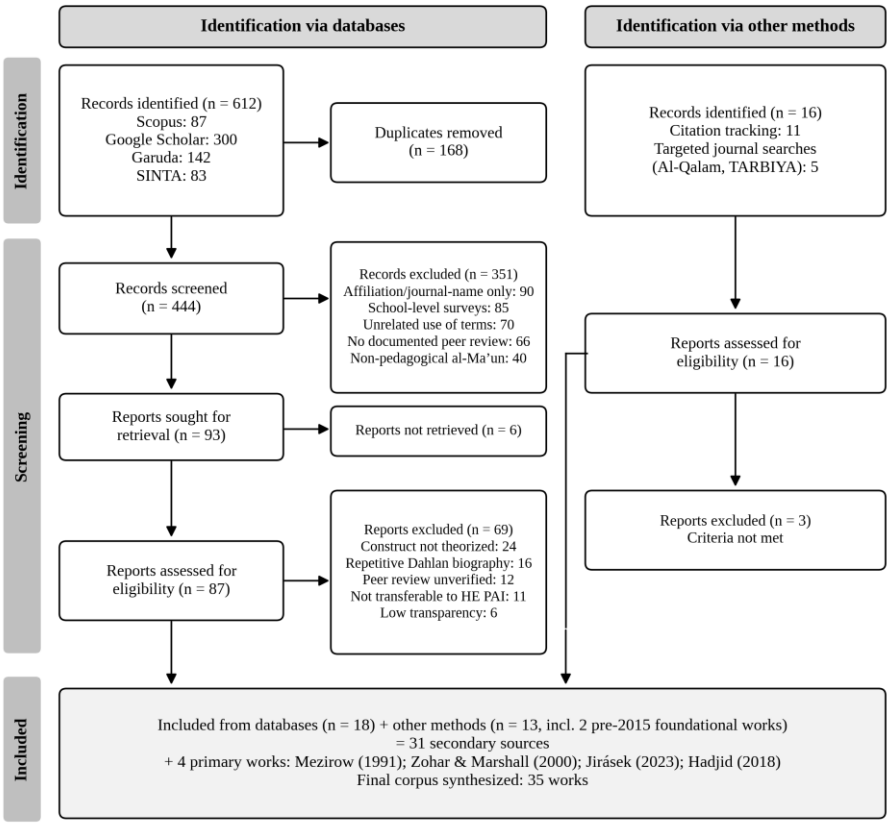
Source**:** Authors' research protocol

The database searches identified 612 records (Scopus = 87; Google Scholar = 300; Garuda = 142; SINTA = 83). After 168 duplicates were removed, 444 titles and abstracts were screened. Of these, 351 were excluded because "Ahmad Dahlan" matched only an affiliation or journal name (n = 90), the record was a school-level survey without transferable conceptual content (n = 85), "transformative" or "literacy" was used in an unrelated sense (n = 70), peer review was not documented (n = 66), or al-Ma'un was examined sociologically without a pedagogical focus (n = 40). Of the 93 reports sought for retrieval, six could not be retrieved. The remaining 87 reports were assessed in full text, and 69 were excluded because the construct was mentioned but not theorized (n = 24), the account of Dahlan duplicated material already represented in the corpus (n = 16), peer review could not be verified (n = 12), the content was not transferable to higher-education PAI (n = 11), or the methodological description was insufficiently transparent (n = 6). Eighteen studies were therefore retained from the database searches.

Backward and forward citation tracking (n = 11) and targeted searches of the *Al-Qalam* and *TARBIYA* archives (n = 5) identified 16 additional records, of

which 13 met the inclusion criteria. These included two foundational works published before 2015. The final corpus comprised 31 secondary sources and four core works (Figure 1).

Figure 1. PRISMA-Informed Flow of Literature Selection



Source: Authors' search and screening records, adapted from the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page et al., 2021)

Data were analyzed using content analysis and conceptual synthesis in five stages: (1) identifying core constructs within each tradition; (2) reducing the data by coding statements related to reflection, spirituality, and moral praxis; (3) mapping theoretical correspondences and tensions across the three traditions; (4) synthesizing the mapped constructs into a sequenced model; and (5) assessing theoretical coherence.

The scope of the analysis was limited to texts in English and Indonesian and to the three domains described above. The study assumes that concepts from different intellectual traditions can be compared at the level of function, for example, the function of reflection within a learning process, without implying that they share identical metaphysical foundations. This assumption is made explicit so that readers can distinguish between points at which the synthesis translates concepts across traditions and those at which it re-ground them within an Islamic framework.

Four procedures were used to enhance the credibility and theoretical coherence of the analysis. First, source triangulation required each major analytical claim to be supported by sources from at least two of the three traditions and, where possible, by both foundational and secondary sources. This was particularly important for Dahlan, whose ideas were transmitted primarily through accounts by his students. Second, a conceptual mapping matrix (Table 2) was used to code each retained source against the core constructs: the disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, discourse, and

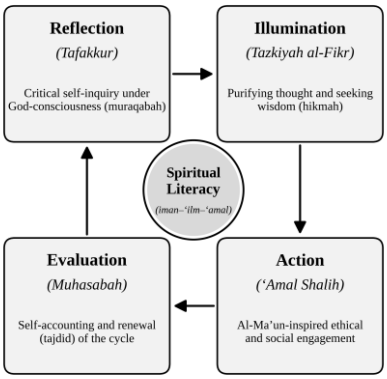
reintegration in Mezirow's theory; the relational domains of spiritual literacy in Jirásek's framework; meaning- and value-making in Zohar and Marshall's account of spiritual intelligence; and the philosophical teachings, Qur'anic verse groups, and al-Ma'un praxis recorded by Hadjid. A stage was retained in the model only when a corresponding function could be identified across all three traditions. Third, two authors screened the records independently, and disagreements were resolved by the third author. The latter's position outside Indonesia also provided an additional perspective on whether the synthesis remained intelligible beyond its original cultural context. Fourth, an audit trail documenting search dates, search strings, result counts, screening decisions and exclusion reasons, and successive versions of the conceptual matrix was maintained to support transparency and reproducibility.

DISCUSSION

The Spiritually Literate Transformative Learning Model

The synthesis resulted in the Spiritually Literate Transformative Learning Model (SLTLM), a faith-centered learning cycle comprising four interrelated stages: Reflection (*tafakkur*), Illumination (*tazkiyah al-fikr*), Action (*'amal shalih*), and Evaluation (*muhasabah*) (Figure 2). Spiritual literacy is positioned at the center of the cycle rather than treated as a discrete stage because it provides the capacity through which each stage is interpreted in relation to God, the self, others, and the world. The cycle addresses the research question by showing how Mezirow's process logic, spiritual literacy as a bridging capacity, and Dahlan's praxis can be integrated into a coherent pedagogical sequence. The stages are cyclical: evaluation does not mark the end of learning but opens the way for renewed reflection, consistent with Dahlan's ethos of continuous renewal (*tajdid*) (Al Baidlo' et al., 2026).

Figure 2. The Spiritually Literate Transformative Learning Model (SLTLM)



Source: Authors' synthesis based on Mezirow (1991), Zohar and Marshall (2000), Jirásek (2023), and Hadjid (2018)

Reflection (*Tafakkur*)

The cycle begins with an experience that unsettles a learner's taken-for-granted frame of reference, which Mezirow (1991) identifies as a trigger for perspective transformation. In PAI, such triggers can be deliberately designed through experiences such as encountering poverty in the surrounding community, analyzing a case of corruption, or confronting a discrepancy between one's ritual observance and one's social indifference. MacKenzie (2022) notes that even religious doubt can serve as a critical incident that initiates transformative learning, provided that learners are supported in working through it rather than encouraged to suppress it. In Islamic pedagogy, however, reflection is not value-neutral. *Tafakkur* is undertaken with an awareness of being observed by God (*muraqabah*), so that examining one's assumptions also involves examining the state of the heart (Al-Attas, 1999). Dahlan's emphasis on grounding religious teaching in reason (Al Baidlo' et al., 2026) gives this stage its critical dimension: learners are encouraged to question inherited interpretations (*taqlid*) without abandoning revelation as the horizon within which such questioning takes place.

Illumination (*Tazkiyah al-Fikr*)

Reflection alone may lead to skepticism or rationalization. The second stage therefore directs critical insight toward meaning and moral orientation. Zohar and Marshall (2000) describe spiritual intelligence as the capacity to address questions of meaning and value, while Jirásek (2023) emphasizes that this capacity can be cultivated through education. In SLTLM, this cultivation takes the form of *tazkiyah al-fikr*, understood here as the purification and refinement of thought, through which learners examine emerging perspectives in light of Qur'anic guidance and prophetic ethics in pursuit of wisdom (*hikmah*) and insight (*basirah*). This stage corresponds to Mezirow's emphasis on rational discourse but extends it: dialogue occurs not only among peers but also through engagement with revelation, and the adequacy of a new perspective is assessed not only in terms of inclusiveness and coherence but also in relation to God-consciousness. In this respect, the model departs most clearly from the secular framing of transformative learning while retaining its reflective and dialogical procedures, consistent with the integration of revelation and reason in Dahlan's educational thought (Shodikin et al., 2025).

Action (*'Amal Shalih*)

Transformation must ultimately be enacted. Dahlan reportedly taught Surah al-Ma'un repeatedly and refused to move on to another surah until his students had put its message into practice (Al Baidlo' et al., 2026; Hadjid, 2018). This episode captures a central pedagogical principle of SLTLM: religious knowledge reaches its fullest educational significance when it is translated into *'amal shalih*. In Mezirow's (1991) framework, this stage corresponds to planning and taking action based on a new perspective; in Dahlan's pedagogy, it represents faith and knowledge translated into social service. In university-level PAI, this stage can be operationalized through service-learning, community-based projects, and advocacy on behalf of vulnerable groups. Evidence from *pesantren* illustrates the importance of this connection: when reflection on social issues is not accompanied by engagement with the surrounding community, transformative learning may remain superficial (Jusubaidi et al., 2024). Jatmiko et al. (2025) further show that the al-Ma'un ethos in Muhammadiyah schools must be actively sustained amid market pressures, suggesting that the action stage should be embedded in the curriculum rather than left to optional extracurricular activities.

Evaluation (*Muhasabah*)

The final stage involves continuous self-accounting. Learners examine whether their transformed perspectives and actions are consistent with Islamic ethical values, whether their intentions remain sincere (*ikhlas*), and what new questions emerge from their experiences. *Muhasabah* differs from conventional assessment in that its primary point of reference is accountability before God, although it can be supported by concrete instruments such as reflective portfolios, peer feedback, and testimony from community partners. It corresponds to Mezirow's (1991) reintegration of a transformed perspective into one's life while adding a cyclical dimension: the outcomes of one learning cycle become material for renewed reflection in the next. In this way, the model supports lifelong learning and reflects the ethos of continuous renewal in Dahlan's progressive educational thought (Tentiasih et al., 2023).

Conceptual Mapping and Theoretical Coherence

Table 2 summarizes how each SLTLM stage is anchored in identifiable constructs from the three theoretical traditions. The matrix served as the coherence criterion described in the

methods section: a stage was retained only when a corresponding function could be identified across all three traditions.

Table 2. Conceptual Mapping of SLTLM Stages across the Three Traditions

SLTLM stage	Transformative learning (Mezirow)	Spiritual literacy	KH. Ahmad Dahlan
Reflection (*Tafakkur*)	Disorienting dilemma; critical reflection on assumptions	Reading the signs (*ayat*) in the self and the world; reflection on meaning	Repeated study (*tadabbur*) of al-Ma'un; grounding religious teaching in reason; questioning *taqlid*
Illumination (*Tazkiyah al-Fikr*)	Rational discourse; exploration of alternative perspectives	Meaning- and value-making; cultivated awareness of transcendence	Integration of revelation and reason; purification of intention
Action (*'Amal Shalih*)	Planning and taking action based on a new perspective	Compassionate, other-oriented conduct	Al-Ma'un praxis: care for orphans and the poor; faith and knowledge translated into service
Evaluation (*Muhasabah*)	Reintegration of a transformed perspective into life	Accountability and continued development of spiritual awareness	Continuous renewal (*tajdid*); learning as an ongoing responsibility

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Mezirow (1991), Zohar and Marshall (2000), Jirásek (2023), Hadjid (2018), and Al Baidlo' et al. (2026)

The mapping also reveals important differences among the three traditions. Mezirow's theory places autonomous, critically reflective judgment at the center of transformative learning, whereas Dahlan's pedagogy ultimately orients learning toward accountability before God and service to others. Spiritual literacy, as conceptualized for secular education by Jirásek (2023), is likewise open to non-theistic interpretations. SLTLM addresses these differences by retaining Mezirow's reflective and dialogical procedures, adopting the cultivable character of spiritual literacy, and situating both within a *tawhidic* orientation. The synthesis is therefore not an eclectic juxtaposition of concepts but an effort to re-ground transformative learning within an Islamic axiology.

Relation to Previous Research

Compared with previous research, SLTLM extends the discussion in three ways. First, studies of Dahlan's educational thought have primarily recontextualized his ideas in relation to 21st-century competencies (Ikmah et al., 2025), examined his progressive education as an institutional model (Al Baidlo' et al., 2026; Tentiasih et al., 2023), or interpreted it through Freire's concept of conscientization (Kamaludin & Muthohirin, 2021). The present model shifts the focus from institutions and educational ideas to the learning processes of individual students. Second, studies applying transformative learning in Islamic contexts have documented changes in students' understanding and behavior (Guefara et al., 2024; Jusubaidi et al., 2024) but have generally adopted Mezirow's framework without explicitly addressing its predominantly rationalist orientation. SLTLM addresses this limitation by positioning spiritual literacy as the bridging capacity within the learning cycle. It also differs from the closest recent proposal, which integrates Mezirow's theory with *tazkiyat al-nafs* to address students' quarter-life crisis (Abusyairi et al., 2026): that model is primarily oriented toward inner healing, whereas SLTLM extends transformation into social action through al-Ma'un praxis. Similarly, Alimah (2020) frames contemplative and transformative learning in relation to character development, whereas SLTLM specifies a spiritual process through which character formation is translated into

service. Third, active pedagogies such as problem-based learning have been shown to strengthen thinking skills and religious engagement (Anugrah et al., 2025), while spirituality-based frameworks for university students remain relatively limited (Chanifah et al., 2021). SLTLM does not seek to replace these pedagogical approaches; rather, it provides a process framework within which they can be sequenced toward spiritual and social transformation.

Novelty and Theoretical Contribution

The novelty of SLTLM lies in three features. First, it is a process model rather than a list of values or an institutional strategy: it specifies how a learner moves from disorientation through reflection and spiritual illumination to ethically oriented action and renewed reflection. Second, it positions spiritual literacy as a bridging capacity between reflection and action rather than as an outcome added at the end of learning. This directly responds to critiques that transformative learning has given insufficient attention to non-rational ways of knowing (MacKenzie, 2022). Third, it situates a global learning theory within Indonesia's Islamic intellectual heritage without reducing either tradition to the other: Mezirow's core procedures remain recognizable, while Dahlan's al-Ma'un pedagogy helps determine their ethical and social direction.

Philosophically, the model shifts the purpose of transformative learning from personal emancipation alone toward a conception of servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*) expressed through service to others. In this formulation, critical reasoning and spiritual humility become complementary dimensions of the same transformative process. The learner profile envisioned by SLTLM can be described as that of a spiritually literate reflective learner: one who understands Islam intellectually, examines assumptions critically, and translates religious understanding into ethical and socially responsible conduct. This profile gives more concrete pedagogical content to the aim of forming the integrated person, a goal that continues to inform discussions of Indonesian Islamic higher education (Iskandar et al., 2025).

Social and Practical Implications

SLTLM has implications beyond theory for several stakeholders. For students, it reframes religious learning from the memorization of doctrine toward the cultivation of reflective habits and a disposition to serve, addressing broader concerns about student well-being and resilience in Indonesian higher education (Alam et al., 2025; Zuhdi & Syarief, 2023). For lecturers teaching compulsory PAI and Al-Islam Kemuhammadiyahan courses, the four stages can be translated into a semester-long design: reflective journals and case analysis for *tafakkur*; guided ethical dialogue with Qur'anic texts for *tazkiyah al-fikr*; community-based service projects for *'amal shalih*; and portfolio-based self-assessment for *muhasabah*. Lecturers can thereby act as *murabbi*, mentors who model the integration of knowledge and conduct rather than merely transmit content. Table 3 illustrates how the cycle can be organized within a single course.

Table 3. Illustrative Learning Design for a PAI Course Based on the SLTLM

SLTLM stage	Learning activities	Lecturer's role	Evidence of learning
Reflection (*Tafakkur*)	Case analysis of a local social problem; reflective journal examining gaps between belief and conduct	Facilitator who poses disorienting questions and guides critical reflection	Journal entries that identify and question taken-for-granted assumptions
Illumination (*Tazkiyah al-Fikr*)	Guided reading of Qur'anic texts, such as Surah al-Ma'un; small-group ethical dialogue	*Murabbi* who models the integration of reason and revelation	Reasoned position paper linking Qur'anic guidance to the case under discussion
Action (*'Amal Shalih*)	Service-learning project with a community partner (e.g., an orphanage, low-income households, or a disaster-relief initiative)	Mentor and liaison with community partners	Project report and testimony or feedback from the community partner
Evaluation (*Muhasabah*)	Portfolio-based self-assessment and peer feedback; formulation of new questions for continued learning	Facilitator of reflective self-assessment and *muhasabah*	Portfolio reflection and a plan for the next learning cycle

Source: Authors' design

For universities and relevant ministries, the model offers a reference for revising PAI learning outcomes so that assessment encompasses moral reasoning and social engagement rather than cognitive mastery alone (Muttaqin et al., 2025). For Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, whose educational network has long combined schooling with social service (Hefner, 2022; Jatmiko et al., 2025), the model provides a pedagogical language for sustaining the spirit of *al-Ma'un* in classroom practice. Historical evidence that Islamic schooling is sustained by social solidarity (*'asabiyah*) and community networks (Fauzi et al., 2025) suggests that such learning is most sustainable when embedded in local social relationships. Finally, for the wider community, the action stage channels students' learning into service for orphans, low-income families, and other vulnerable groups, extending the benefits of religious education beyond the campus.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is conceptual and has not yet empirically tested the SLTLM in classroom settings. The four stages may also overlap in practice more than the analytical distinction presented in the model suggests. In addition, the literature base is weighted toward Indonesian sources, particularly those associated with Muhammadiyah. Future research should operationalize the model through design-based or mixed-method studies, develop instruments for assessing spiritual literacy and *muhasabah*, and compare its implementation across Islamic and general universities, as well as across Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts, including Central Asia.

CLOSING

This study concludes that Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, spiritual literacy, and KH. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought can be integrated into a coherent model for renewing Islamic Religious Education in higher education. The Spiritually Literate Transformative Learning Model organizes learning into four cyclical stages, including Reflection (*tafakkur*), Illumination (*tazkiyah al-fikr*), Action (*'amal shalih*), and Evaluation (*muhasabah*), with spiritual literacy serving as a bridging capacity that connects critical reflection with moral action. The model addresses the gap identified at the outset by proposing a process through which intellectual

understanding of Islam can develop into spiritual depth and socially responsible practice.

Theoretically, the study re-grounds transformative learning within a *tawhidic* paradigm. It retains Mezirow's emphasis on critical reflection and discourse while reorienting the purpose of transformation toward accountability before God and service to others. Practically, the model provides lecturers with a sequence for designing PAI courses, offers universities and policymakers a basis for considering moral and social outcomes in assessment, and provides communities with a channel through which students' learning can generate tangible social benefits. Its significance lies in showing that the pedagogy of an Indonesian Islamic reformer can contribute to a global theory of learning rather than merely being interpreted through it. Future research should empirically examine the model through classroom-based and mixed-method studies, develop instruments for assessing spiritual literacy and *muhasabah*, and investigate its applicability across diverse institutional and cultural contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank the editorial team and anonymous reviewers of *Al-Qalam* for their constructive feedback, as well as Andi Djemma University, Akba University of Technology, and the A.K. Kussayinov Eurasian Humanities Institute for their academic support.

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