



WEAVING HARMONY IN DIVERSITY: THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, RELIGION, AND CULTURE IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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Abstract:

Harmony in a multicultural society is an important foundation for the creation of a peaceful, just, and sustainable social life. This article aims to examine the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), religion in general, and local culture in strengthening the values of tolerance and social integration in a pluralistic society. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study as the main method, collecting data from relevant religious, educational, and cultural literature. The results of the study indicate that PAI plays a strategic role in instilling the value of religious moderation, while other religions also voice universal humanitarian ethics. On the other hand, local culture is an effective medium in maintaining a shared identity and building bridges between groups. The implications of these findings emphasize the importance of collaboration between educational institutions, religious figures, and cultural actors in fostering inclusive and civilized social harmony

Keywords: *PAI, tolerance, culture, social harmony, pluralistic society.*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is recognized as a nation of immense diversity, encompassing a wide array of religions, cultures, ethnic groups, and languages—creating a rich social landscape, yet one that holds the potential for conflict. With more than 300 ethnic groups spread across 17,000 islands, each possessing its own unique language and cultural heritage (Suprayitno & Moefad, 2024), Indonesia presents a complex societal mosaic. Within this context, Islam is the majority religion, followed by approximately 87% of the population, while the remainder comprises Christians (Protestant and Catholic), Hindus, Buddhists, and local indigenous belief systems (Budiarti, 2023). While these differences are a source of cultural wealth, they also pose challenges in maintaining social harmony.

Indonesia's plural society continues to face serious challenges, particularly when diversity is not managed wisely. Issues such as intolerance, social conflict, and radicalism frequently emerge and can threaten societal stability (Rofiqi & Rahim, 2023). Identity-based violence, discrimination, and extremism are recurring phenomena that must be addressed seriously. Without a constructive approach to fostering mutual respect across religious and cultural boundaries, society risks falling into a cycle of conflict where differences are viewed as threats rather than assets. In this regard, there is a critical need for educational and developmental mechanisms that foster awareness of the importance of tolerance and harmony within diversity.

Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) plays a strategic role in nurturing an inclusive and tolerant society. Through the teaching of moderate values, the PAI curriculum contributes to the development of students' character by instilling respect for diversity and promoting open-mindedness and mutual regard in social interactions (Rahman et al., 2024). A synergy between religious education, community ethical norms, and local culture is essential in fostering unity amid diversity. Research on the integration of these three domains may provide valuable insights into how effective social harmony can be cultivated. By examining how Islamic education can instill tolerant attitudes, we uncover a strong foundation for addressing the challenges of pluralism.

It is crucial to examine the contribution of religion as a source of social ethical values in shaping a pluralistic society. Religion serves not only as a spiritual guide but also as a moral compass in social behavior. Moreover, Islamic education is capable of accommodating three core functions of Islamic teachings: spiritual, psychological, and social. The spiritual function relates to faith and belief; the psychological function concerns individual behavior, particularly moral values that elevate human dignity; while the social function deals with the norms that govern relations among individuals, where each person bears both rights and responsibilities in creating a harmonious and balanced society (Zurqoni, 2016).

Studies show that religious values play a vital role in pedagogy and social action, encouraging individuals to behave ethically and justly (Amirudin & Ramadhani, 2024). Delivering religious teachings that emphasize respect for differences and cultural diversity fosters individuals who can contribute to peaceful and respectful communities. Therefore, the synergy between religion and local values is essential in character formation.

Local culture, within the context of Indonesia's plural society, also plays a vital role in maintaining social balance and harmony. Through cultural festivals, traditional rituals, and other local practices, communities are able to reinforce their collective identity while simultaneously acknowledging diversity (Kaldianus et al., 2023). Culture, as a tangible legacy of ancestral wisdom, functions as a bridge connecting various identities—fostering a broader sense of belonging and strengthening social ties among individuals from different backgrounds (Adiansah et al., 2021). Hence, preserving and enhancing local culture is critical to promoting tolerance and appreciation for diversity.

More broadly, the role of curriculum and instructional strategies within Islamic Religious Education (PAI) directly impacts the internalization of values of moderation. The application of pedagogical methods that involve open dialogue, project-based learning, and collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds are necessary steps toward cultivating tolerant attitudes. Social skill components taught within religious education should prioritize constructive conflict resolution (Triyanti et al., 2023). Research that is contextually appropriate and applicable in this area will drive the development of curricula that are effective and socially relevant to current societal needs.

Religion serves as a crucial moral and social foundation in fostering peaceful societies. Within education, the emphasis on ethical-spiritual values derived from religious teachings can be a powerful driver for cultivating values of peace (Ningtias & Fahrudin, 2024). By promoting peace-centric and harmonious religious narratives, individuals will be more motivated to contribute to a conducive environment in a diverse society. The great responsibility of educators

is to transmit these values to the next generation through relevant education, where religion becomes a central pillar of character development.

The function of local culture as a guardian of social balance is also highly significant in conflict resolution. Cultures that prioritize dialogue and peaceful solutions to social problems can offer alternatives for communities facing intolerance and radicalism (Arifin, 2020). Furthermore, indigenous wisdom often embodies peace-oriented values that can educate community members about the importance of cooperation and mutual understanding—helping de-escalate conflict before it intensifies. Therefore, further research into the role of local culture as a tool for conflict resolution is urgently needed.

In this regard, exploring mechanisms of collaboration among religious education, cultural traditions, and social ethics is vital to shaping a pluralistic and harmonious society. This collaborative approach holds potential as an effective model that can be adapted in regions prone to division. By utilizing education as a tool for social transformation, communities can be better equipped to adopt values of moderation and inclusion—building a civilization that not only celebrates diversity but also fosters mutual understanding and respect (Yadri & Sari, 2023). Collaborative research between academics and education practitioners can serve as a valuable reference for implementing national programs that are more adaptive to today's social challenges.

Such efforts extend beyond formal schooling and require the active participation of local communities to support these values of harmony. Therefore, in designing relevant educational policies, stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and the wider community must be involved to ensure that the resulting programs are not only theoretically sound but also rooted in and responsive to local contexts. This will foster inclusive learning environments where every individual feels valued and contributes to weaving harmony within Indonesia's diversity (Resmana & Dewi, 2021).

Given the pressing need for in-depth research on the synergy between religious education, social norms, and local culture, this article aims to provide a significant contribution to understanding and addressing the current fragmentation challenges. Islamic moderation continues to be promoted in Indonesia as a concept relevant to religious and national discourse. Religious moderation is highly compatible with the modern multicultural political context.

As such, Indonesia advances this discourse through state religious institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and higher education institutions. These institutions serve as platforms for Muslim intellectuals to engage across various fields of life. The internalization of Islamic moderation values allows scholars to apply Islamic teachings flexibly within their fields of expertise—without deviating from core religious principles. As stated in the official document of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019), “Religious moderation is a perspective, attitude, and practice of religion in a moderate way—in understanding and practicing religious teachings; not extreme to the left or right, in order to create harmony in communal life.”

RESEARCH METHODS

The research methodology employed in this article is a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing library research as its primary method. Through this approach, the researcher aims to explore the meanings, concepts, and contributions of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), religion, and culture in fostering social harmony within a pluralistic society. Qualitative research offers a

deep understanding of social phenomena through descriptive and exploratory analysis, without relying on rigid statistical procedures (Fadli, 2021). By using this method, the researcher is able to collect data related to social interactions, religious practices, and cultural values relevant to the Indonesian context. This approach facilitates an in-depth investigation into the spiritual and ethical dimensions of religious education and its role in addressing the challenges of diversity and social cohesion.

The library research method involved the analysis of written sources and relevant documents. Data were collected through physical and digital library searches, as well as online journals and e-books closely related to the research topic. The focus of the study centers on literature that examines the position of IRE and the role of religion in building peace and tolerance within a diverse society (Idris et al., 2024). The selection and classification of literature were conducted based on the relevance of sources to the research theme, prioritizing those that offered critical analyses of how religious education and practice can contribute to social harmony (BZ et al., 2024). The systematic and critical review of these sources provided a strong theoretical foundation for evaluating the transformative potential of religious education in promoting values of coexistence and mutual respect.

The core focus of this research lies in examining the contribution of Islamic values and religious perspectives in enhancing social cohesion and interfaith tolerance. This contribution is particularly crucial in the face of increasing social complexity and diversity in Indonesian society, where ethnic and religious plurality can often become a source of conflict (Syafieh & Anzhaikan, 2023). In this context, IRE is not merely about transmitting religious content, but rather plays a pivotal role in shaping student character and morality, while also fostering healthy interreligious dialogue (Suparjo & Hidayah, 2023). Religious education thus becomes a key driver in nurturing inclusive mindsets and promoting peaceful coexistence, especially among the younger generation who are most vulnerable to ideological divisions in a fragmented society.

The literature reviewed in this study includes various perspectives on the role of education in strengthening tolerance and interreligious relations. This research emphasizes the importance of inclusive religious education that can bridge differences and foster collective awareness of the value of harmony in social life (Suhayati & Rosyid, 2020). The findings indicate that by implementing an educational approach grounded in *wasathiyah* (moderation) values, religious education can equip the younger generation with wisdom in dealing with diversity, while strengthening the moral foundation necessary for peaceful coexistence (Idris et al., 2024). Analysis of relevant documents also reveals comprehensive insights into factors that influence social integration within a diverse society. These include the significance of religious moderation as a strategy to reduce potential conflict and to cultivate a harmonious co-living environment (Syafieh & Anzhaikan, 2023). The study concludes that when properly understood, religion can serve as a source of moral and social revival, encouraging positive action within society. Therefore, religious education must emphasize not only ritual aspects but also the development of values such as tolerance and mutual understanding.

In conclusion, this study found that Islamic Religious Education (IRE), within the context of a pluralistic society, must continue to evolve to address increasingly complex educational needs. By adopting a more inclusive approach based on universal religious values, a harmonious society marked by mutual

respect and understanding of differences can be realized. Through this effort, the author hopes that the research will offer a meaningful contribution to the development of a better and more harmonious Indonesian society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Curriculum of Islamic Religious Education and the Values of Justice, Compassion, and Inclusivity

The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum in Indonesia plays a crucial role in shaping the character of the younger generation by integrating the values of justice, compassion, and inclusivity. Bustari et al. (2024) emphasize the urgency of reconstructing the IRE curriculum based on the principles of religious moderation. Accordingly, the curriculum should not merely function as a medium for delivering religious content, but also serve to instill core values such as tolerance and empathy—highly relevant in a socially diverse context. Furthermore, the incorporation of local wisdom into the curriculum is viewed as a strategic approach to counteract the growing challenges of radicalism in the digital era, as argued by Huda and Abid (2025). This perspective positions the IRE curriculum not just as a vehicle for knowledge transfer, but as a transformative tool that strengthens students' moral character by cultivating an appreciation for diversity and harmonious coexistence in society.

A deeper analysis of teaching materials related to diversity and tolerance indicates the need for continuous review and revision of the IRE curriculum to ensure the effective integration of inclusive values within learning processes. Astuti and Ruslan (2025) argue that contemporary educational challenges, such as globalization and technological advancement, require that the IRE curriculum remain adaptive and responsive. As the curriculum incorporates the values of religious moderation, it is expected to guide students to become individuals who not only understand Islamic teachings, but also develop the capacity to engage constructively with diverse social groups (Sirojuddin, 2025). Thus, teaching materials must go beyond theoretical understanding and foster inclusive attitudes that prepare students to live peacefully in multicultural and multi-faith environments.

Throughout the learning process, it is essential to conduct ongoing evaluations of the extent to which inclusive values are achieved in educational settings. Ghani et al. (2023) argue that through differentiated instruction, the IRE curriculum can become more responsive to the diverse characteristics of learners. This approach ensures that all voices and backgrounds are acknowledged and respected within the learning environment. By doing so, educators can cultivate classrooms that are more inclusive and equitable, thus enriching the learning experiences of students from various sociocultural contexts. Inclusive education, grounded in the principles of religious moderation, contributes to the development of empathetic and socially responsible learners who uphold the values of justice and compassion in both educational and community spaces.

Transforming the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum

Transforming the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum has become a strategic instrument in shaping an inclusive and civilized society. The integration of values such as justice, compassion, and inclusivity within the national curriculum framework signals a shift from doctrinal transmission toward the reconstruction of social values that are adaptive to diversity. A curriculum grounded in religious moderation is vital in safeguarding students

from exclusivist and intolerant ideologies. Moreover, the contextualization of local wisdom strengthens resistance against radicalism, creating a dialogical space between religious values and the pluralistic realities of contemporary society.

Evaluation of both the teaching materials and learning processes reveals the urgent need for curricular renewal in both content and pedagogy to meet modern educational demands. While Islamic education materials often touch upon diversity and tolerance, their implementation in classrooms remains inconsistent and, at times, superficial. Regular and reflective assessments of learning outcomes are crucial to ensure that inclusive values move beyond mere slogans and are truly internalized in students' attitudes and behaviors. Differentiated instruction and attention to learners' diverse backgrounds are essential in fostering classroom environments that promote equity, inclusion, and respect for differences.

In terms of pedagogical practice, the application of collaborative and reflective learning methods plays a significant role in building empathy, social awareness, and openness toward diversity. Thematic approaches grounded in local socio-cultural contexts reaffirm that Islamic values are not detached from societal realities but are embedded within everyday life. Through these context-based experiences, students are guided to understand religious values in a meaningful and grounded manner. Here, innovative learning media are essential in accommodating students' varying learning styles, strengthening engagement across different backgrounds, and instilling a progressive awareness of multiculturalism.

Ultimately, the reinforcement of moderation values throughout the ecosystem of Islamic education constitutes a strategic response to the complexities of diversity. Collaboration between Islamic educational institutions, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, represents an institutional effort to integrate Islam as a religion of mercy into the national education system. If implemented consistently, this approach will produce a generation that is both religious and inclusive—capable of becoming social transformation agents in a pluralistic society. Therefore, PAI should not only serve as a platform for nurturing individual spirituality but also function as a space for developing social character rooted in justice, compassion, and openness to pluralism.

Pedagogical and Social Competence of Islamic Education Teachers

The role of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in shaping tolerant character among students is highly critical. High pedagogical and social competence is a key determinant in successfully implementing an inclusive curriculum. Anggraini et al. (2025) emphasize that teachers with a deep understanding of diversity and social issues are more capable of modeling respectful behavior and becoming role models in interfaith interactions within the school environment. These competencies allow teachers not only to deliver subject content effectively but also to instill values of acceptance and empathy. In classrooms where diversity is present, such competence helps prevent the emergence of prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion. In this context, teachers' initiatives in addressing intolerance are central to creating a safe, respectful, and pluralistic educational space. Therefore, teacher training programs should prioritize social awareness, emotional intelligence, and strategies for engaging with students from varied backgrounds, especially those from minority communities. This will ensure that PAI teaching contributes not only to cognitive development but also to social

transformation, promoting peaceful coexistence among diverse religious and cultural groups within schools.

Positive interfaith interactions can be fostered through role modeling by teachers. When teachers consistently display respect for religious and cultural differences, students learn how to coexist peacefully and harmoniously in a pluralistic society. This type of character education goes beyond cognitive instruction, encompassing affective and psychomotor dimensions as well. As noted by Nurjadid et al. (2025), character development is deeply influenced by what students observe and experience emotionally and behaviorally, not only what they learn intellectually. Teachers must therefore be equipped with learning strategies that address all three domains—cognitive, affective, and psychomotor—so that moral values are internalized holistically. This includes integrating cooperative learning, reflective discussions, and contextual case studies into the classroom. By engaging students in authentic, respectful dialogues about diversity, religion, and social justice, teachers model ethical communication and empathy. Role modeling becomes even more effective when it is supported by institutional culture and school policies that uphold inclusivity. In sum, teacher attitudes and behaviors are vital in constructing environments where tolerance and mutual understanding are not only taught but lived daily by both educators and learners.

In addressing issues of intolerance, PAI teachers must be equipped with sustainable professional development programs that enhance both their instructional and intercultural competencies. Research by Baher et al. (2024) indicates that systematic teacher development initiatives increase preparedness in responding to the evolving educational needs of diverse classrooms. These programs also enable teachers to adopt innovative teaching methods that foster critical thinking, empathy, and respect for diversity. For instance, incorporating project-based learning, digital storytelling, or case studies on interfaith cooperation helps students appreciate pluralism in practical ways. A positive, engaging classroom climate significantly contributes to students' willingness to participate actively and develop more inclusive worldviews. In such a setting, intolerance is less likely to flourish, as students become more confident and empathetic. Therefore, effective PAI instruction must move beyond content delivery to cultivate inclusive mindsets and equitable interactions. Teachers who continually refine their skills are more likely to foster classrooms that are democratic, just, and open to dialogue. As schools become microcosms of society, teachers must be positioned not just as transmitters of religious knowledge, but as transformational figures who champion peace and justice through education. Enhancing the quality of Islamic Religious Education requires teachers to be responsive to intolerance challenges that may arise within school environments. Mahmudi et al. (2025) highlight the significance of employing the Joyful Learning strategy to boost student motivation and engagement, especially in discussions that involve differing perspectives. This approach emphasizes meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences that stimulate students' openness to new concepts, including those that promote interreligious understanding. Joyful learning not only makes lessons more accessible but also helps reduce anxiety and defensiveness when encountering differences. Through interactive games, role-play, and collaborative problem-solving, students can experience the beauty of diversity in practical ways. PAI teachers, therefore, serve not only as content facilitators but also as change agents who shape inclusive and tolerant school cultures. By promoting joy, curiosity, and reflective learning, they help dismantle stereotypes and encourage students to see others with compassion and

dignity. In this way, PAI becomes a powerful tool in creating educational environments that reject hatred and bigotry, and instead celebrate unity in diversity.

Religion as a Source of Social Ethics: An Educational Perspective

Religions around the world universally advocate for ethical values that foster peace, including compassion, fraternity, and non-violence. These values are not merely spiritual aspirations but are foundational to social harmony and ethical coexistence. For example, in Buddhism, the principle of religious moderation emphasizes avoiding extremism and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Turahmi et al. (2024) highlight how such principles promote peaceful coexistence through mutual understanding. Moreover, interfaith dialogue has been increasingly recognized in various religious traditions as a powerful tool to build bridges across differences, based on shared human values and respect. These teachings, when integrated into education, help shape students' moral character and social awareness.

A comparative analysis of social ethics across religious traditions reveals significant overlaps in the core values they promote. In multicultural nations like Indonesia, religious moderation plays a critical role in maintaining inter-group tolerance and preventing social conflict. This aligns with the goals of multicultural education, which aims to develop all human potential while honoring cultural, racial, and religious diversity. According to Zamroni et al. (2020), a multicultural education system must uphold human dignity regardless of background. By embedding shared ethical principles into formal education, educators can nurture inclusive citizenship and social responsibility, essential for sustaining a peaceful pluralistic society.

Sacred texts such as the Qur'an, the Bible, and the Vedas often convey messages of peace and respect toward others. These teachings have historically informed local traditions and shaped peaceful societal norms. Makleat (2020) notes that such historical interpretations continue to influence communal practices and moral frameworks across generations. In educational contexts, the inclusion of scriptural interpretations emphasizing harmony can foster interfaith literacy among students, reducing prejudice and encouraging ethical dialogue. Understanding these historical roots of peace in religious scripture helps students connect spiritual wisdom with modern civic values.

Religious leaders have traditionally played a vital role as peacebuilders and mediators in society. Their involvement in interfaith forums demonstrates a commitment to harmony and conflict resolution. Beyond their spiritual roles, they serve as influential public figures capable of facilitating dialogue and reconciliation among diverse communities (Fithriya, 2024). When religious leaders actively promote messages of unity and mutual respect, they model behaviors that young people can emulate. This positions them as key agents in shaping community attitudes and strengthening the moral compass of future generations through both formal and informal educational settings.

Incorporating multicultural education based on inspirational religious figures contributes significantly to fostering tolerance and empathy. Such educational programs, particularly those targeting youth, cultivate an appreciation for religious diversity and peaceful coexistence. Fithriya (2024) notes that peace education in diverse communities can alleviate tensions and encourage mutual respect. By studying historical and contemporary figures who embody interfaith harmony, students are exposed to real-life examples of ethical

leadership, enhancing both moral development and civic engagement. These educational strategies are essential for building long-term peace and interreligious understanding.

In the contemporary digital era, maintaining religious neutrality and moderation faces serious challenges, especially from the politicization of religion and the influence of social media. Religion is often manipulated for political interests, leading to radicalization and identity-based exclusion. Rochman (2023) argues that social media, while powerful in disseminating information, also heightens inter-religious tensions if misused. Educational institutions must be proactive in countering these risks by promoting digital literacy and critical thinking among students. Educators must guide students to discern trustworthy sources and engage respectfully in religious discourse online.

Education and community-based strategies are essential for addressing the threats of religious polarization. Programs aimed at promoting moderation and interfaith tolerance should involve not only teachers and students but also religious leaders and community influencers. Badruddin (2025) highlights the importance of community engagement in sustaining these efforts. By fostering interreligious dialogue at the grassroots level and integrating religious tolerance into curricula, society can build a robust framework for peaceful coexistence. Ultimately, religious education rooted in compassion, justice, and inclusivity can serve as a powerful catalyst for social harmony and ethical citizenship in an increasingly diverse world.

CONCLUSION

The diversity of Indonesian society is an undeniable historical and sociological reality that presents both challenges and opportunities in building a harmonious social life. In the context of a pluralistic society, an integrative approach is essential—one that involves education, religious values, and local culture to manage diversity in a constructive and productive manner.

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a significant role in instilling values of tolerance, justice, compassion, and inclusivity among students. A curriculum designed with a religious moderation approach can serve as a platform for character education that respects differences. IRE teachers, as agents of change, contribute to shaping an open and peaceful religious attitude through dialogical, reflective, and contextual teaching methods.

More broadly, religion serves as a vital source of social ethics that teaches the importance of coexistence, mutual respect, and peaceful conflict resolution. Religious figures who promote moderate views have proven to be influential in preventing conflict, preserving social harmony, and mediating tensions rooted in differences of belief.

Moreover, local culture, as a repository of social values and norms, provides a strong foundation for maintaining community cohesion. Values such as mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), deliberation (*musyawarah*), traditional tolerance, and community-based conflict resolution reflect the wisdom embedded in local traditions that support social stability. The positive interaction between culture and religion in Indonesian society demonstrates that both can reinforce each other when managed through a respectful and inclusive approach.

Therefore, the synergy between Islamic Religious Education, religious teachings, and local culture constitutes an essential form of social capital in building a peaceful, tolerant, and civilized pluralistic society. This article

recommends strengthening collaboration among stakeholders in education, religion, and culture to formulate policies and social practices oriented toward the values of harmony and diversity. Without an integrated effort, diversity may become a fragile point that threatens national unity.

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