

Strengthening Religious Harmony in Indonesia through Islamic Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the largest multicultural countries in the world. While such plurality constitutes an important sociocultural asset, it simultaneously presents serious challenges related to intolerance, religious radicalism, identity politics, and social conflict. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) occupies a strategic role in promoting religious harmony through the cultivation of inclusive religious understanding, multicultural awareness, and moderate Islamic values. This study aims to analyze the implementation of IRE in strengthening religious harmony in Indonesia. This study employs a qualitative library research method by examining various academic sources, including books, scholarly journal articles, official government documents, and relevant research reports concerning IRE, religious moderation, multicultural education, and religious harmony. The analysis focuses on theological foundations, educational practices, and sociocultural challenges related to the implementation of IRE in Indonesia's plural society. The findings reveal that IRE possesses substantial potential to strengthen religious harmony through the internalization of universal Islamic values such as *tasāmuh* (tolerance), *wasathiyah* (moderation), *ta'āwun* (mutual cooperation), justice, compassion, and social inclusivity. The implementation of IRE can be strengthened through multicultural-oriented learning, the reinforcement of religious moderation, transformative social practices, the exemplary role of educators, and contextual curriculum reform. However, the study also demonstrates that IRE continues to face significant challenges, including doctrinal-textual pedagogical orientations, exclusivist religious interpretations, the spread of radicalism, and the increasing influence of digital intolerance through social media platforms. Therefore, this article argues for the reconstruction of IRE toward a more contextual, dialogical, inclusive, and transformative educational paradigm capable of fostering democratic citizenship, social cohesion, and sustainable religious harmony within Indonesia's multicultural society.

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Introduction

Indonesia is one of the countries with the highest levels of social, cultural, and religious plurality in the world. This diversity is reflected in the existence of hundreds of ethnic groups, local languages, traditions, as well as various religions and belief systems that coexist within a single national entity. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics indicate that Indonesia is home to more than 1,300 ethnic groups and over 700 local languages spread across the archipelago (BPS, 2020). In addition, Indonesian society adheres to various religions, including Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, alongside diverse indigenous belief systems that also shape the social identity of its people. From a sociological perspective, such plurality constitutes an objective reality that is inevitable and forms an inherent characteristic of Indonesia as a multicultural society (Berger, 2014).

Plurality fundamentally possesses a dual nature, functioning simultaneously as a potential source of integration and conflict. On the one hand, diversity may serve as a form of social capital that enriches social life, strengthens social solidarity, and encourages dynamic cultural interactions. Putnam (2000) argues that societies capable of building social trust and fostering values of tolerance tend to possess stronger social cohesion. In the Indonesian context, plurality can become a significant foundation for the development of a democratic, inclusive, and civilized society when managed through principles of mutual respect and appreciation for differences. On the other hand, plurality also contains latent potential for social conflict when not accompanied by collective awareness regarding the importance of tolerance and respect for diversity. Differences in religious, ethnic, and cultural identities may become sources of tension when politicized or exploited for particular group interests (Fox, 2004).

Indonesia's socio-political history demonstrates that conflicts based on religion and identity are far from marginal phenomena. The communal conflicts in Ambon and Poso during the late 1990s and early 2000s illustrate how religious identity could transform into an instrument of conflict mobilization when intertwined with political, economic, and social inequality factors (Hasan, 2011). These conflicts not only caused material losses and casualties but also generated prolonged social trauma and weakened societal cohesion. Beyond large-scale conflicts, Indonesia has also experienced various forms of intolerance in everyday life, such as the rejection of houses of worship, discrimination against minority groups, and the spread of religious hate speech through social media. Reports published by the Setara Institute (2023) indicate that intolerance and violations of religious freedom remain serious issues requiring sustained attention from multiple stakeholders.

The rise of religious intolerance and radicalism in the digital era has become a major challenge to the sustainability of religious harmony in Indonesia. The rapid development of information technology and social media has, on one hand, expanded access to religious knowledge, yet on the other hand, it has also created opportunities for the dissemination of extremist narratives, hate speech, and intolerant ideologies. Lim (2017) explains that digital media has become a new arena for the contestation of religious identities and ideologies, where radical groups strategically utilize online platforms to spread their influence among younger generations. In this context, radicalism no longer develops solely through conventional networks, but also through virtual spaces capable of reaching broader audiences quickly and effectively.

These conditions demonstrate that religious harmony cannot merely be understood as the absence of social conflict. Rather, religious harmony should be interpreted as a dynamic social process involving harmonious interaction, respect for religious rights, and a

willingness to coexist peacefully amid differences. Religious harmony requires not only formal state regulations but also the internalization of tolerance and moderation within social life. Consequently, more substantive and sustainable approaches are needed to cultivate multicultural awareness and social inclusivity.

In this regard, education occupies a highly strategic position as an instrument of social transformation and character formation. Education does not merely function as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a medium for internalizing values, shaping identity, and developing social consciousness among learners (Freire, 2000). Paulo Freire emphasizes that education should become a process of humanization that liberates individuals from naïve consciousness toward critical awareness of social realities. Accordingly, education bears the responsibility of producing individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also socially sensitive and able to live harmoniously within pluralistic societies.

Within the Indonesian national education system, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a particularly significant role in shaping religious consciousness. As a compulsory subject taught at various educational levels, IRE is expected not only to enhance students' understanding of Islamic teachings but also to cultivate moderate, inclusive, and tolerant religious character. Ideally, Islamic Religious Education should not be limited to ritualistic and normative dimensions; rather, it should also internalize universal Islamic values such as justice (*'adl*), tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), cooperation (*ta'āwun*), and compassion (*rahmah*) within social life (Shihab, 1999).

Normatively, Islam itself possesses a strong theological foundation for promoting harmony and peace. The Qur'an emphasizes that diversity constitutes *sunnatullah*—a divine decree that should be accepted as part of God's will—as reflected in Q.S. Al-Hujurat verse 13 and Q.S. Al-Ma'idah verse 48. Furthermore, the principle of “no compulsion in religion” (Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 256) explains Islam's respect for freedom of belief and its rejection of coercion in matters of faith. Therefore, Islamic Religious Education has substantial potential to serve as a strategic instrument in fostering religious harmony in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, numerous studies indicate that the practice of IRE in Indonesia continues to face several fundamental challenges. Azra (2012) explains that IRE instruction in many educational institutions still tends to adopt normative-doctrinal approaches and provides limited space for critical thinking and intercultural dialogue. IRE materials in some contexts continue to reflect tendencies toward religious exclusivism that are insufficiently responsive to Indonesia's pluralistic social realities. Textual and memorization-oriented pedagogical approaches potentially generate rigid and exclusive religious understandings that are less adaptive to contemporary social dynamics.

Moreover, globalization and the rapid advancement of information technology demand a reconstruction of the paradigm of IRE. Today's younger generation lives within a digital era characterized by information openness and intense intercultural interaction. Under such circumstances, IRE is required to present contextual, dialogical, and relevant learning models capable of addressing contemporary challenges. IRE should not merely teach theological and ritual aspects but must also develop social awareness, digital ethics, and students' abilities to respond wisely and maturely to diversity.

Based on this background, this article seeks to analyze comprehensively how IRE is implemented in fostering religious harmony in Indonesia. Furthermore, this study aims to identify the challenges faced by IRE within a multicultural society and formulate relevant strengthening strategies amid contemporary social dynamics. Thus, this article is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of a more inclusive, moderate, and transformative IRE framework to strengthen religious harmony in Indonesia.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using the library research method to examine the implementation of IRE in fostering religious harmony in Indonesia. Library research was selected because the study focused on conceptual, theoretical, and contextual analyses derived from various scholarly sources related to IRE, multiculturalism, religious moderation, tolerance, and religious harmony within Indonesian society. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research is appropriate for exploring social and educational phenomena through interpretative and analytical approaches that emphasize meaning, context, and understanding.

The data used in this study were collected from both primary and secondary academic sources. Primary sources included scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government regulations, official reports, and policy documents related to IRE and religious harmony in Indonesia. Secondary sources consisted of supporting academic literature discussing multicultural education, religious moderation, social cohesion, and contemporary challenges such as intolerance and religious radicalism. The study particularly utilized credible and relevant publications from academic journals, institutional reports, and recognized scholars in the fields of Islamic education, sociology of religion, and multicultural studies.

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation and literature review techniques. Relevant literature was identified, classified, and analyzed based on its relationship to the focus of the study. The collected data were then interpreted using descriptive-analytical methods to understand the role of IRE in promoting religious harmony and to identify the challenges faced in its implementation within Indonesia's multicultural context.

The analysis process employed sociological, theological, and educational perspectives. The sociological approach was used to examine religious harmony as a social phenomenon within a pluralistic society. The theological approach was applied to analyze Islamic teachings related to tolerance, moderation, and coexistence, while the educational approach was utilized to evaluate the role of IRE in internalizing inclusive religious values and shaping students' social attitudes.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, this study applied source triangulation by comparing information from various academic references and institutional publications. Through this approach, the study aimed to produce a comprehensive and academically reliable analysis regarding the implementation of IRE in strengthening religious harmony in Indonesia amid contemporary social challenges.

Results and Discussion

The Concept, Policy, and Regulation of Religious Harmony

According to the online edition of the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), the term *kerukunan* (harmony) refers to: (1) the condition of living harmoniously, and (2) a sense of harmony or mutual agreement (KBBI Daring, n.d.). Harmony may therefore be defined as the creation of an atmosphere of togetherness and fraternity among different groups of people despite differences in religion, ethnicity, race, culture, or social affiliation. Harmony can also be understood as a process of becoming reconciled following conflict, accompanied by a collective willingness to coexist peacefully and respectfully within society (Samsudin, 2018).

The concepts of *rukun* (harmonious) and *kerukunan* (harmony) are closely associated with the notions of peace and peaceful coexistence. The term *kerukunan* itself is primarily

used within the context of social relations and interaction. Religious harmony serves as a social mechanism or medium for regulating relationships among individuals and communities adhering to different religions or belief systems (Rusydi & Zolehah, 2018). Religious harmony reflects a pattern of social life characterized by mutual respect, recognition, and appreciation of the beliefs and religious practices of others. It may also be defined as a harmonious relationship established among communities professing different religions and beliefs (Samsudin, 2018).

Historically, the term “religious harmony” was first formally introduced by K.H. M. Dachlan, the Minister of Religious Affairs during Indonesia’s New Order era, in his opening speech at the Interreligious Consultation Forum on November 30, 1967. In his speech, Dachlan stated:

“Harmony among religious groups is an absolute prerequisite for the realization of political and economic stability, which constitutes the primary agenda of the AMPERA Cabinet. Therefore, we sincerely expect cooperation between the government and religious communities in creating a climate of religious harmony, so that the aspirations of the people and our collective ideals of building a just and prosperous society under the protection of Almighty God may truly be realized” (Rusydi & Zolehah, 2018).

Following Dachlan’s speech, the concept of religious harmony gradually became widely recognized and institutionalized as an official term in various state documents and government regulations (Rusydi & Zolehah, 2018). One important legal definition of religious harmony can be found in the Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs No. 9 and No. 8 of 2006, Article 1, Paragraph 1, which defines religious harmony as:

“A condition of relations among religious communities based on tolerance, mutual understanding, mutual respect, recognition of equality in the practice of religious teachings, and cooperation in social, national, and state life within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution.”

This definition demonstrates that religious harmony is not merely understood as the absence of conflict, but rather as an active and constructive social relationship rooted in tolerance, equality, cooperation, and mutual respect. In this context, harmony involves peaceful coexistence and the willingness of individuals and groups to accept differences in religious beliefs and practices. It also includes allowing others to practice their religious traditions according to their own convictions and acknowledging diversity as a fundamental aspect of social life. Harmony therefore signifies “agreement within difference,” where diversity becomes the foundation for creating meaningful social interaction characterized by understanding, sincerity, and inclusivity (Rusydi & Zolehah, 2018).

Religious harmony also reflects reciprocal social relations marked by mutual acceptance and appreciation within collective life. In practical terms, religious harmony implies a condition in which religious communities respect one another’s beliefs, cooperate socially, and work together toward common societal goals. Consequently, religious harmony plays a crucial role in maintaining national integration and social stability within Indonesia’s pluralistic society (Rusydi & Zolehah, 2018).

Given its strategic importance, the Indonesian government has long formulated various policies and legal regulations aimed at maintaining and strengthening religious harmony. Several important regulations include: (1) Presidential Regulation in Lieu of Law

(Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang) No. 1/PNPS of 1965 concerning the Prevention of Religious Abuse and/or Blasphemy; (2) the Joint Decree of the Minister of Home Affairs and the Minister of Religious Affairs of 1969 concerning the Duties of Government Apparatus in Ensuring Order and the Proper Implementation of Religious Activities; (3) the Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. 70 of 1978 concerning Guidelines for Religious Propagation; (4) the Joint Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs No. 1 of 1979 concerning Procedures for Religious Propagation and Foreign Assistance to Religious Institutions in Indonesia; (5) the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Community Guidance No. 101 of 1978 concerning Guidelines for the Use of Loudspeakers in Mosques, Prayer Rooms, and Mushalla; (6) the Circular Letter of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. MA/432/1981 concerning the Organization of Religious Holidays; and (7) the Joint Regulation of the Minister of Home Affairs and the Minister of Religious Affairs No. 9 and No. 8 of 2006 concerning Guidelines for Regional Heads and Deputy Regional Heads in Maintaining Religious Harmony, Empowering the Forum for Religious Harmony, and Regulating the Construction of Houses of Worship.

In general, these regulations were designed to regulate interreligious relations to promote harmonious, peaceful, and orderly coexistence among religious communities. Nevertheless, in practice, some of these regulations have occasionally become sources of controversy and conflict, particularly concerning the establishment of houses of worship and minority religious rights. This indicates that legal regulation alone is insufficient to fully guarantee social harmony without broader cultural and educational efforts that foster mutual understanding and tolerance.

In addition to regulatory measures, the Indonesian government has also implemented various policy initiatives to strengthen religious harmony. During the New Order period, for example, the Ministry of Religious Affairs introduced the concept of the “Trilogy of Religious Harmony,” which consisted of: (1) harmony within religious communities, (2) harmony among different religious communities, and (3) harmony between religious communities and the government (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1983). This trilogy was intensively promoted by the government as a strategic framework for minimizing and resolving interreligious conflicts. The government’s efforts to maintain religious harmony were therefore not limited to legal regulation, but also included religious guidance programs, interfaith dialogue initiatives, and community-based religious development aimed at cultivating peaceful coexistence within Indonesia’s multicultural society (Armita, 2016).

Religious Harmony in Islam

Islam was revealed not merely to establish itself as a religion, but also to acknowledge the existence of other religions and to grant them the right to coexist peacefully while respecting the followers of different faiths (Shihab, 1999). Religious harmony can only be effectively realized when individuals are willing to appreciate religious diversity and respect differences in belief systems. In Islamic theology, diversity and difference—including religious diversity—are understood as part of *sunnatullah* (divine law), willed by Allah SWT as an inherent aspect of human existence. This principle is clearly articulated in the Qur’an, particularly in Q.S. Al-Ma’idah [5]: 48: “Had Allah willed, He could have made you one community; but He intended to test you in what He has given you. Therefore, compete with one another in doing good deeds.” (Qur’an 5: 48)

Interpreting this verse, M. Quraish Shihab (1999) argues that Allah intentionally

created diversity and plurality among humankind. Human beings are granted freedom to choose the religion they believe to be true and righteous, and freedom of religion is therefore considered a divine right bestowed upon every individual. Similar explanations regarding the inevitability of human diversity can also be found in Q.S. Hud [11]: 118: "Had your Lord willed, He could have made mankind one community, but they will continue to differ." (Qur'an 11:118). Likewise, Q.S. Al-Nahl [16]: 93 emphasizes: "Had Allah willed, He could have made you one nation, but He leaves astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills, and you will surely be questioned concerning what you used to do." (Qur'an 16: 93).

These verses collectively affirm that diversity and difference constitute an unavoidable reality within human life. The Qur'an further emphasizes this principle in Q.S. Al-Hujurat [49]: 13: "O humankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you." (Qur'an 49: 13).

According to Alwi Shihab (1999), religious pluralism contains several important dimensions. First, religious pluralism does not merely refer to the factual existence of diverse religions but also requires active engagement among religious communities in understanding both similarities and differences for the purpose of building harmony. Second, religious pluralism should not be equated with cosmopolitanism that lacks meaningful social interaction among community members. Third, pluralism differs fundamentally from relativism. Relativism assumes that truth and morality are entirely relative depending on individual or societal perspectives, whereas religious pluralism acknowledges diversity without negating the existence of religious convictions.

From the Islamic perspective, coercion or interference in matters of faith is strictly prohibited. Compelling others to embrace a particular religion contradicts both human dignity and the teachings of the Qur'an. This principle is explicitly stated in Q.S. Al-Baqarah [2]: 256: "There shall be no compulsion in religion. The right path has become distinct from the wrong path." (Qur'an 2:256). Freedom of belief is also reaffirmed in Q.S. Yunus [10]: 99: "Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed together entirely. Would you then compel people in order that they become believers?" (Qur'an 10: 99). Similarly, Q.S. Al-Kafirun [109]: 6 states: "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion." (Qur'an 109: 6)

According to M. Quraish Shihab (2002), this verse contains recognition of the existence and rights of each religious community to adhere to the religion they consider true, without imposing it upon others. These Qur'anic principles collectively demonstrate that Islam upholds freedom of religion and peaceful coexistence within a pluralistic society. As social beings, humans cannot fulfill their needs without interaction, cooperation, and mutual assistance from others. Islamic teachings encourage Muslims to cooperate and assist one another (*ta'awun*) in goodness regardless of differences in religion, ethnicity, race, or nationality (Suryana, 2011). Human beings are fundamentally brothers and sisters who are encouraged to establish bonds of fraternity (*ukhuwah*). In Islamic terminology, *ukhuwah* refers to any form of similarity, harmony, and closeness with others. Linguistically, the Arabic word *akh* (brother), from which *ukhuwah* derives, may also signify a close friend or companion. Brotherhood therefore constitutes one of the central ethical doctrines in Islam, and the Qur'an mentions concepts related to fraternity dozens of times (Shihab, 1999).

Islamic thought generally recognizes three forms of *ukhuwah*: *ukhuwah Islamiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood among Muslims), *ukhuwah basyariyyah* or *insaniyyah* (universal human brotherhood), and *ukhuwah wathaniyyah* (national brotherhood). *Ukhuwah Islamiyyah* is explicitly mentioned in Q.S. Al-Hujurat [49]: 10: "Indeed, the believers are but brothers, so make peace between your brothers and fear Allah so that you may receive mercy." (Qur'an

49:10). The Prophet Muhammad SAW also emphasized Muslim solidarity in a hadith narrated by Muslim: “The example of the believers in their mutual love, mercy, and compassion is like one body; when one part suffers, the whole body responds with sleeplessness and fever.” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). In another hadith narrated by Muslim, the Prophet stated: “A believer to another believer is like a building whose different parts strengthen one another.” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim).

Meanwhile, *ukhuwah basyariyyah* or *insaniyyah* refers to universal human brotherhood based on the understanding that all human beings originate from the same ancestors, namely Adam and Eve (Shihab, 1999). This form of brotherhood transcends primordial boundaries such as religion, ethnicity, race, gender, and nationality. The theological basis for universal brotherhood is reflected in the Prophet’s saying narrated by Bukhari and Muslim: “Be servants of Allah who are brothers to one another.” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). Another prophetic tradition similarly states that “all servants of Allah are brothers.” These teachings affirm that Islam promotes universal human solidarity and social compassion beyond religious distinctions.

The third form, *ukhuwah wathaniyyah* (national brotherhood), refers to fraternity among citizens who share the same homeland and national identity. Similar to universal human brotherhood, this concept transcends religious, ethnic, racial, and gender divisions (Imanulhaq, 2014). The practical manifestation of *ukhuwah wathaniyyah* can be clearly observed in the Charter of Medina initiated by the Prophet Muhammad SAW. The Charter functioned as a constitutional agreement binding the diverse inhabitants of Medina—despite their differing religious and tribal backgrounds—into a unified political community. One of the principal objectives of the Charter of Medina was the establishment of social harmony and peaceful coexistence within a pluralistic society.

From an Islamic perspective, love for one’s homeland and nation (*nationalism*) is strongly encouraged if it does not evolve into chauvinism or hostility toward other nations. The theological basis for nationalism may be found in Q.S. Al-Hujurat [49]: 13 and Q.S. Al-Ma’idah [5]: 48, both of which emphasize diversity among nations and communities as part of divine will. In this context, the Qur’anic term *ummah* may also be interpreted as “nation” or “community.” Therefore, these verses indicate that national diversity and coexistence among different peoples are part of Allah’s intended order for humanity. These three dimensions of *ukhuwah* should serve as ethical and theological foundations for Muslims in establishing social interaction, both with fellow Muslims and with non-Muslims. By internalizing the principles of Islamic brotherhood, universal human solidarity, and national unity, religious harmony can be fostered more effectively within multicultural societies such as Indonesia.

The Implementation of Islamic Religious Education in Promoting Religious Harmony

IRE occupies a highly strategic and transformative position in promoting religious harmony within Indonesia’s pluralistic society. As one of the largest multicultural nations in the world, Indonesia is characterized by extensive diversity in religion, ethnicity, language, culture, and social identity. Such diversity represents both a sociocultural asset and a potential source of tension. On the one hand, plurality may strengthen social cohesion and enrich national civilization when managed constructively through inclusive values and democratic engagement. On the other hand, unresolved religious prejudice, identity politics, intolerance, and radicalism may transform diversity into a source of social

fragmentation and communal conflict. In this context, education – and particularly Islamic Religious Education – plays a central role in cultivating inclusive religious consciousness and fostering harmonious coexistence among different religious communities.

IRE should not merely be understood as a subject designed to teach doctrinal knowledge, ritual obligations, and theological principles. Rather, it constitutes a broader educational process aimed at shaping students' moral character, social awareness, civic responsibility, and humanitarian values. In contemporary educational discourse, religious education is increasingly expected to contribute not only to personal piety but also to social ethics and democratic citizenship. Consequently, the implementation of IRE in Indonesia must move beyond formalistic and textual approaches toward transformative pedagogical models capable of responding to the realities of multiculturalism, globalization, technological disruption, and socioreligious polarization.

According to Azyumardi Azra (2012), Islamic education in Indonesia faces a crucial challenge in balancing religious commitment with openness toward pluralism and modernity. Historically, Islamic education has often emphasized normative and doctrinal dimensions while paying insufficient attention to contextual social realities. Such orientations risk producing exclusive religious attitudes that perceive differences as threats rather than opportunities for dialogue and cooperation. Therefore, the reconstruction of IRE becomes essential to develop educational practices capable of nurturing moderation, inclusivity, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence.

Similarly, Paulo Freire (2000) argues that education fundamentally serves as a process of humanization through which individuals develop critical consciousness regarding social realities. Education should not function as an instrument of indoctrination that reproduces rigid and uncritical ways of thinking. Instead, it should empower learners to critically engage with social problems and contribute constructively to society. Within the framework of IRE, this means that religious learning should encourage students to interpret Islamic teachings in ways that promote justice, compassion, social solidarity, and respect for human dignity. Religion must therefore be presented not as a source of exclusivism and division, but as a moral and ethical foundation for peacebuilding and interreligious coexistence.

The implementation of IRE in promoting religious harmony encompasses several interconnected dimensions, including the internalization of multicultural values, the strengthening of religious moderation, the transformation of values into social practice, the exemplary role of educators, and curriculum reform. These dimensions collectively represent a comprehensive framework for developing a more contextual, dialogical, and socially responsive model of Islamic education.

1. Internalization of Multicultural Values

One of the most fundamental dimensions in implementing IRE for the promotion of religious harmony is the internalization of multicultural values. Multiculturalism refers not merely to the recognition of diversity as a social fact, but also to an ethical commitment to respecting and appreciating differences within society. In educational contexts, multicultural education seeks to cultivate students' awareness, attitudes, and competencies for living harmoniously in culturally and religiously diverse societies (Banks, 2015).

The urgency of multicultural education in Indonesia cannot be separated from the country's sociological reality as a plural nation-state. Indonesia consists of hundreds of ethnic groups, local languages, cultural traditions, and religious communities. Such diversity requires educational approaches capable of fostering mutual understanding and preventing the emergence of prejudice, discrimination, and intolerance. Within this

context, IRE has a crucial responsibility to instill awareness that diversity constitutes *sunnatullah*—a divinely ordained reality intended by Allah SWT. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes that human beings were created in diversity so that they may know, understand, and cooperate with one another. Q.S. Al-Hujurat [49]: 13, for example, clearly states that humanity was created into nations and tribes "so that you may know one another" (*li ta'ārafū*).

According to M. Quraish Shihab (1999), the Qur'anic acknowledgment of diversity demonstrates that Islam does not reject plurality. On the contrary, Islam recognizes human diversity as part of divine wisdom. Consequently, Islamic education should not produce exclusivist attitudes that stigmatize or delegitimize other religious communities. Instead, IRE must cultivate inclusive religious understanding that respects the dignity and rights of all human beings regardless of their religious affiliation.

The internalization of multicultural values within IRE should occur not only at the level of discourse but also through pedagogical practice and institutional culture. First, learning materials should explicitly incorporate themes related to tolerance, coexistence, human rights, social justice, democracy, and interreligious dialogue. Students need to understand that Islamic teachings contain universal humanitarian principles compatible with multicultural values. Second, teaching methods should prioritize dialogical and participatory approaches rather than authoritarian and indoctrinative models. Dialogical learning enables students to critically engage with differences and develop empathy toward others. Third, educational institutions should create inclusive environments where students from diverse backgrounds can interact positively and collaboratively.

James A. Banks (2015) emphasizes that multicultural education must be integrated into the entire educational system, including curriculum content, teaching methods, institutional policies, and school culture. In other words, multiculturalism should become an educational ethos rather than merely an additional topic within the curriculum. Therefore, the implementation of multicultural values in IRE requires systemic transformation involving teachers, educational institutions, policymakers, and the broader community.

Moreover, multicultural-oriented IRE is essential for preventing the spread of intolerance and identity-based hostility among younger generations. Several studies indicate that intolerance among students often emerges from limited social interaction with people of different religious backgrounds and from narrow interpretations of religious teachings (PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2021). Consequently, IRE must actively foster intercultural competence, empathy, and openness so that students develop the capacity to navigate constructive diversity in contemporary society.

2. Strengthening Religious Moderation

Another essential dimension in implementing IRE is the strengthening of religious moderation. In contemporary Indonesia, religious moderation has become one of the most significant themes within educational and religious policy discourse due to the increasing spread of extremism, radicalism, hate speech, and identity politics. These phenomena threaten social cohesion and undermine democratic coexistence in multicultural societies.

Religious moderation refers to a balanced and non-extreme understanding and practice of religion grounded in justice, tolerance, and respect for humanity (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). In Islamic terminology, this concept

corresponds to *wasathiyyah*, which signifies moderation, balance, and the middle path. The Qur'an describes Muslims as *ummatah wasathan* (a middle community) in Q.S. Al-Baqarah [2]: 143, indicating that Islam ideally promotes equilibrium and rejects excessive or extremist tendencies.

The strengthening of religious moderation through IRE is particularly important because educational institutions frequently become areas for ideological contestation. In recent decades, Indonesia has witnessed the dissemination of radical religious narratives through educational spaces, digital media, and transnational ideological networks. Radicalism often emerges through literalistic and exclusive interpretations of religion that reject diversity and delegitimize alternative perspectives. In this regard, IRE must function as a counterbalance capable of developing critical, contextual, and inclusive religious understanding.

Abdurrahman Wahid consistently emphasized that Islam should be understood as a religion of compassion, humanity, and cultural openness rather than as an ideological instrument for exclusion and violence (Barton, 2002). According to Wahid, Islamic teachings should contribute to strengthening democracy, pluralism, and peaceful coexistence within society. His ideas remain highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges related to religious intolerance and extremism.

In practical terms, strengthening religious moderation within IRE may involve several strategies. First, learning materials should emphasize Islamic ethical principles such as *tasāmuh* (tolerance), *tawāzun* (balance), *i'tidāl* (justice), *musāwah* (equality), and *ta'āwun* (mutual cooperation). Second, students should be encouraged to critically examine extremist narratives and understand the sociopolitical contexts in which religious conflicts emerge. Third, IRE should develop students' digital literacy so that they are capable of critically evaluating religious information disseminated through social media and online platforms.

The importance of digital literacy in religious education has become increasingly urgent in the digital era. Merlyna Lim (2017) demonstrates that social media algorithms often create ideological echo chambers that reinforce intolerance and polarization. Many radical groups exploit digital platforms to spread simplistic and emotionally charged religious narratives targeting young people. Therefore, IRE must equip students with critical media literacy skills to prevent manipulation and ideological radicalization in cyberspace.

3. Transforming Values into Social Practice

One of the most persistent challenges in religious education is the gap between normative understanding and social behavior. Many students can memorize religious doctrines concerning tolerance, compassion, and brotherhood, yet these values often remain disconnected from everyday social practice. Consequently, the implementation of IRE must prioritize the transformation of religious values into concrete social action.

Islamic teachings emphasize that faith (*īmān*) should be reflected in ethical conduct and social responsibility. Values such as *tasāmuh* (tolerance), *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *ta'āwun* (mutual assistance), and *rahmah* (compassion) should not remain abstract theological concepts but must manifest in interpersonal relationships and public life. In this regard, Thomas Lickona (1991) explains that effective character education involves three interconnected dimensions: *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action*. Students must therefore not only understand moral values cognitively but also internalize them emotionally and practice them behaviorally.

Transformative IRE requires contextual and experiential learning approaches capable of connecting religious teachings with real social realities. Interfaith dialogue

programs, collaborative community service, humanitarian activities, and social engagement projects represent important educational strategies for cultivating practical tolerance and empathy. Through direct interaction with individuals from different religious and cultural backgrounds, students develop greater understanding and appreciation of diversity.

Furthermore, social transformation through IRE also requires critical engagement with social injustice, discrimination, and violence. Religious education should encourage students to become active agents of peace who contribute to conflict resolution, social solidarity, and democratic citizenship. In this sense, IRE should not merely produce personally pious individuals, but also socially responsible citizens committed to justice and peaceful coexistence.

4. The Exemplary Role of IRE Educators

The role of educators is central to the successful implementation of IRE in promoting religious harmony. Teachers and lecturers are not merely transmitters of religious knowledge; they also function as moral exemplars whose attitudes and behavior significantly influence students' character formation. According to Albert Bandura (1977), individuals learn through observation and imitation of social models within their environment. Consequently, educators' conduct plays a decisive role in shaping students' perspectives and behavior.

IRE educators must therefore demonstrate inclusive, tolerant, and democratic attitudes in both classroom interaction and everyday social practice. Students are more likely to internalize values such as tolerance and moderation when they observe these principles embodied by their teachers. Conversely, discriminatory or intolerant attitudes displayed by educators may legitimize exclusivism and prejudice among students.

In addition to pedagogical competence, IRE educators require multicultural competence, intercultural communication skills, and contextual understanding of contemporary socioreligious issues. Teachers should be capable of facilitating open discussions regarding diversity, conflict, and religious differences without reinforcing stereotypes or hostility. Consequently, educators function not only as instructors but also as mediators, facilitators, and agents of peace within pluralistic societies.

5. Curriculum Reform

The implementation of IRE in promoting religious harmony also necessitates comprehensive curriculum reform. Traditional IRE curricula have often emphasized memorization, doctrinal conformity, and ritual obligations while paying insufficient attention to social realities and contemporary challenges. As a result, students may possess strong textual knowledge yet lack the social competencies necessary for living harmoniously within diverse societies.

According to Azyumardi Azra (2012), Islamic education reform should aim to develop inclusive, democratic, and civil society-oriented educational paradigms. Therefore, IRE curricula must become more contextual and responsive to issues such as multiculturalism, human rights, democracy, environmental ethics, conflict resolution, and digital citizenship.

Curriculum reform should also involve methodological transformation. Learning processes should move away from teacher-centered approaches toward student-centered and inquiry-based models that encourage critical thinking and

dialogue. Students should be given opportunities to analyze social problems, discuss religious diversity, and explore ethical dimensions of contemporary issues. Such approaches are essential for developing reflective and moderate religious understanding.

In addition, assessment systems within IRE must be broadened beyond cognitive evaluation. Educational success should not be measured solely through students' ability to memorize religious texts or concepts, but also through their attitudes, behavior, and social engagement. Evaluations should therefore include affective and behavioral dimensions reflecting students' commitment to tolerance, empathy, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence.

Ultimately, the implementation of transformative, multicultural, and moderation-oriented IRE represents a crucial strategy for strengthening religious harmony in Indonesia. Through the internalization of inclusive values, the promotion of religious moderation, the transformation of ethical principles into social action, the exemplary role of educators, and comprehensive curriculum reform, IRE can contribute significantly to the development of democratic citizenship, social cohesion, and sustainable peace within Indonesia's multicultural society.

Challenges in the Implementation of Islamic Religious Education in Fostering Religious Harmony

The implementation of IRE in fostering religious harmony in Indonesia faces increasingly complex and multidimensional challenges. These challenges emerge not only from theological and pedagogical issues, but also from broader sociopolitical, cultural, and technological transformations occurring within contemporary society. In the context of globalization and digitalization, religious education is confronted with new realities characterized by rapid information flows, ideological contestation, identity politics, and the expansion of transnational religious movements. Consequently, the role of IRE in fostering tolerance and peaceful coexistence cannot be separated from broader structural and cultural dynamics influencing religious life in Indonesia.

One of the most significant challenges in the implementation of IRE is the rise of religious radicalism and extremism. Radicalism refers to religious understandings and movements characterized by exclusivism, intolerance, rejection of diversity, and, in some cases, the justification of violence in the name of religion. In the Indonesian context, religious radicalism has developed through various channels, including informal religious networks, ideological movements, social organizations, digital platforms, and educational spaces. Radical religious ideologies frequently spread through informal educational institutions and religious study circles that are not adequately monitored by the state or mainstream educational authorities. Such networks often promote literalistic and rigid interpretations of Islamic teachings while rejecting pluralism, democracy, and multicultural coexistence.

The development of radicalism among young people represents a particularly serious concern because educational institutions are often targeted as strategic spaces for ideological recruitment and dissemination. Several studies conducted in Indonesia indicate that students and university communities remain vulnerable to exposure to radical narratives, especially when religious learning emphasizes textual rigidity without contextual and critical interpretation (PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2021). In some cases, religious education has unintentionally contributed to exclusivist attitudes by presenting religious truth claims in dichotomous ways that divide society into "believers" and "others." Such pedagogical approaches may weaken students' ability to appreciate diversity and engage constructively with people from different religious backgrounds.

Moreover, the challenge of radicalism cannot be separated from broader sociopolitical conditions. Economic inequality, social marginalization, political polarization, and feelings of injustice often create fertile conditions for the growth of extremist ideologies. According to Olivier Roy (2004), contemporary radicalism frequently emerges not solely from theological motivations but also from crises of identity and social alienation among young people. In this regard, IRE should not merely focus on doctrinal teaching but must also address broader humanitarian and social issues affecting students' lives. Religious education should therefore function as a medium for cultivating critical consciousness, empathy, and peaceful conflict resolution rather than reinforcing rigid ideological boundaries.

Another major challenge in the implementation of IRE is the rapid expansion of digital technology and social media. Digitalization has fundamentally transformed patterns of communication, knowledge production, and religious learning. While digital technology offers opportunities for broader access to religious knowledge and intercultural dialogue, it simultaneously creates new challenges related to the spread of intolerance, hate speech, misinformation, and online radicalization. In recent years, social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) have increasingly become areas for ideological contestation and religious polarization.

Merlyna Lim (2017) explains that social media algorithms often create "algorithmic enclaves" or digital echo chambers in which users are continuously exposed to information reinforcing their existing beliefs and prejudices. As a result, individuals may become increasingly isolated from alternative perspectives and more susceptible to extremist narratives. Radical groups frequently exploit emotionally charged religious content, provocative rhetoric, and identity-based grievances to attract young audiences in digital spaces. The viral nature of social media further accelerates the dissemination of intolerant and polarizing messages.

Within this context, the implementation of IRE faces the urgent challenge of developing students' digital religious literacy. Traditional pedagogical approaches that rely solely on classroom instruction are no longer sufficient in an era where students obtain substantial religious information from online platforms. Many young people today learn religion not primarily from teachers or formal educational institutions, but from social media influencers, YouTube preachers, online communities, and algorithm-driven digital content. Unfortunately, not all online religious content promotes moderation and tolerance; some instead encourage exclusivism, sectarianism, and hostility toward religious differences.

Therefore, IRE must adapt to technological transformation by integrating critical digital literacy into its pedagogical framework. Students should be equipped with the ability to critically evaluate online religious information, identify misinformation and hate speech, and distinguish between credible religious scholarship and extremist propaganda. According to Henry Jenkins (2009), digital literacy in contemporary society involves not only technical competence but also ethical, critical, and participatory capacities. In the context of religious education, this means that students must learn how to responsibly engage with religious discourse in digital environments while maintaining ethical and inclusive perspectives.

In addition to radicalism and digitalization, another challenge in implementing IRE concerns the persistence of normative-textual and teacher-centered pedagogical models. In many educational institutions, religious learning remains dominated by rote memorization, doctrinal transmission, and one-way communication patterns. Such approaches frequently

limit students' opportunities to engage critically with religious diversity and contemporary social issues. According to Paulo Freire (2000), authoritarian educational models tend to reproduce passive learners who accept information uncritically rather than developing reflective and emancipatory consciousness. In the context of IRE, rigid pedagogical practices may hinder students' capacity to understand religion contextually and dialogically.

Another important challenge involves the limited multicultural competence among some IRE educators. Teachers play a central role in shaping students' attitudes toward diversity, yet not all educators possess sufficient understanding of multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, and religious moderation. In some cases, educators may unconsciously reproduce intolerant attitudes through discriminatory language, exclusive interpretations, or negative stereotypes regarding other religious groups. This issue demonstrates that improving teacher competence constitutes a crucial aspect of strengthening IRE for religious harmony.

Furthermore, the sociopolitical climate in Indonesia also influences the implementation of IRE. The increasing politicization of religion in electoral politics and public discourse has contributed to social polarization and identity-based tensions. Religious symbols and narratives are frequently mobilized for political interests, thereby intensifying sectarian sentiments within society. According to Robert W. Hefner (2000), the relationship between Islam, democracy, and civil society in Indonesia remains dynamic and contested, particularly in periods of political transition and social change. In such contexts, IRE faces the challenge of maintaining its educational and ethical mission amid broader ideological contestation within society.

The challenges confronting the implementation of IRE ultimately demonstrate that religious education cannot operate in isolation from broader societal transformations. Addressing radicalism, intolerance, and digital polarization requires comprehensive and multidimensional strategies involving educational institutions, families, religious organizations, civil society, media platforms, and government agencies. IRE must therefore evolve into a transformative educational project capable of promoting critical religious understanding, democratic values, multicultural awareness, digital literacy, and social responsibility. Through such transformation, IRE may contribute significantly to strengthening religious harmony, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence within Indonesia's multicultural society.

Conclusion

IRE plays a crucial and strategic role in fostering religious harmony within Indonesia's pluralistic and multicultural society. As a nation characterized by extensive religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, Indonesia requires educational approaches capable of nurturing inclusive religious understanding, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence among different communities. In this context, IRE should not merely function as a medium for transmitting doctrinal and ritual knowledge but must also serve as a transformative educational instrument aimed at cultivating ethical awareness, democratic citizenship, and humanitarian values grounded in tolerance, moderation, justice, and mutual respect.

This study demonstrates that Islamic teachings fundamentally support the principles of religious harmony, coexistence, and respect for diversity. Qur'anic values such as *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *ta'āwun* (mutual cooperation), *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *rahmah* (compassion), and *wasathiyah* (moderation) provide strong theological foundations for developing inclusive and peaceful social relations within multicultural societies. Therefore, the implementation of IRE should emphasize the internalization of these universal Islamic

values through contextual, dialogical, and multicultural-oriented educational approaches.

Furthermore, the study highlights several important dimensions in strengthening the role of IRE in promoting religious harmony, including the internalization of multicultural values, the reinforcement of religious moderation, the transformation of religious values into social practice, the exemplary role of educators, and curriculum reform responsive to contemporary social realities. Through these dimensions, IRE may contribute significantly to developing students' critical consciousness, intercultural competence, and social responsibility in navigating religious diversity within democratic society.

Nevertheless, the implementation of IRE continues to face substantial challenges. The spread of religious radicalism, the increasing influence of digital intolerance and hate speech, the persistence of doctrinal-textual pedagogical orientations, and the politicization of religion represent serious obstacles to the development of inclusive religious education. The rapid expansion of digital media has further intensified ideological polarization and facilitated the dissemination of extremist narratives among young people. Consequently, IRE must adapt to these transformations by integrating critical digital literacy, contextual religious understanding, and peace-oriented pedagogy into its educational framework.

Ultimately, this article argues that the future of religious harmony in Indonesia depends significantly on the capacity of IRE to transform itself into a more inclusive, democratic, contextual, and socially responsive educational paradigm. IRE must move beyond exclusive and formalistic orientations toward approaches that encourage dialogue, empathy, critical reflection, and constructive engagement with diversity. By doing so, IRE can function not only as a means of religious instruction, but also as a strategic instrument for strengthening democratic values, social integration, national unity, and sustainable peace within Indonesia's multicultural society.

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