

Progressive Islamic Education Thought from the Perspective of Abdurrahman Wahid and Its Relevance to Religious Moderation

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the concept of progressive Islamic education in the thought of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) and its relevance to the development of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia. The study is motivated by various challenges facing contemporary Islamic education, including the rise of exclusivism, intolerance, radicalism, and the need to strengthen religious moderation within a multicultural society. Abdurrahman Wahid's thought offers a paradigm of Islamic education that is humanistic, inclusive, democratic, and oriented toward respect for diversity as part of the universal values of Islam. This study employs a qualitative approach using library research. Primary data were obtained from the works of Abdurrahman Wahid, while secondary data were derived from books, scholarly articles, and relevant research findings. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using content analysis and intellectual thought analysis through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that progressive Islamic education according to Abdurrahman Wahid is built upon five main values: humanism, pluralism, democracy, social justice, and the integration of Islamic and national values. These values position education as a process of humanization that shapes learners into religious, critical, tolerant, democratic, and socially responsible individuals. Gus Dur's educational thought is also highly relevant to strengthening religious moderation through the cultivation of tolerance, respect for diversity, national commitment, rejection of violence, and acceptance of local culture. Therefore, Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of progressive Islamic education deserves to be used as a conceptual foundation for developing Islamic Religious Education that is inclusive, moderate, and responsive to the challenges of Indonesia's plural society.

Keywords: *Progressive Islamic Education, Abdurrahman Wahid, Gus Dur, Islamic Religious Education, Religious Moderation.*

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2nd International Conference on Islamic Community Studies (ICICS) Theme: History of Malay Civilisation and Islamic Human Capacity and Halal Hub in the Globalization

Introduction

Indonesia is a nation founded upon the realities of religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and traditional diversity. This plurality constitutes valuable social capital for national development; however, it also has the potential to generate conflict if not properly managed through education that promotes tolerance, inclusivity, and respect for differences. In recent years, the rise of intolerance, religious radicalism, extremism, and social polarization has become a significant challenge to Indonesia's social cohesion. Reports from various research institutions indicate that segments of Indonesian society continue to exhibit exclusivist tendencies in understanding and practicing religion (PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2023). These conditions highlight the urgent need to strengthen religious moderation within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Religious moderation refers to perspectives, attitudes, and religious practices that embody balance, avoid extremism, and respect people from different backgrounds within social, national, and civic life (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). It does not imply weakening one's religious commitment but rather encourages a proportional understanding and practice of religion that fosters peaceful and harmonious coexistence. According to Azra (2020), religious moderation represents a defining characteristic of Indonesian Islam, which has long emphasized tolerance, balance, and appreciation of diversity. Consequently, strengthening religious moderation should be systematically implemented through educational institutions, particularly Islamic Religious Education.

Islamic Religious Education plays a strategic role in shaping students' ways of thinking, attitudes, and behaviors. Nevertheless, religious education practices often remain primarily focused on cognitive achievement and the transmission of religious knowledge, while affective development and the cultivation of moderate religious character receive less attention (Muhaimin, 2015). As a result, students may develop a textual and normative understanding of religion without acquiring sufficient awareness of broader social realities. In essence, Islamic education aims not only to produce personally pious individuals but also socially responsible individuals capable of contributing to harmonious and civilized society (Nata, 2019).

Within this context, a more progressive, humanistic, and contextual paradigm of Islamic education is required. Progressive Islamic education emphasizes not only mastery of religious sciences but also encourages learners to think critically, embrace openness, uphold democratic values, and demonstrate concern for humanitarian issues (Freire, 2005). Progressive education positions learners as active participants in the learning process and agents of social transformation. From an Islamic perspective, progressive education integrates Islamic teachings with universal human values such as justice, equality, freedom, and respect for human dignity.

One prominent Indonesian Muslim thinker recognized for his progressive educational ideas is KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur. As an Islamic scholar, intellectual, cultural figure, and Indonesia's fourth President, Gus Dur consistently advocated democracy, pluralism, humanitarian values, and social justice (Barton, 2002). His educational philosophy emerged from a synthesis of traditional pesantren scholarship, classical Islamic thought, and modern intellectual traditions acquired through interactions with diverse global intellectual communities. Consequently, his thought is widely regarded as representing an inclusive, moderate, and humanitarian interpretation of Islam (Wahid, 2006).

In education, Gus Dur rejected exclusive, doctrinal, and ritualistic educational paradigms. He argued that Islamic education should cultivate individuals who possess critical awareness, appreciate pluralism, and uphold universal humanitarian values (Wahid, 2001). Islamic education should not merely produce formally religious individuals but should also nurture people who respect diversity, advocate justice, and contribute positively to society. Therefore, according to Gus Dur, Islamic education should function as an instrument for liberating humanity from ignorance, discrimination, and social injustice (Asiyah, 2021).

Gus Dur's concept of progressive Islamic education is closely connected with pluralism and multiculturalism. He regarded diversity as *sunnatullah* (God's divine decree), an inevitable reality of human existence. Consequently, education should teach students to accept and respect differences as an integral part of social life (Barton, 2002). Wahid (2007) maintained that Islam upholds respect for human dignity regardless of religion, ethnicity, or social background. This perspective forms the foundation of an inclusive Islamic education oriented toward religious moderation.

The relevance of Gus Dur's educational thought to religious moderation can be observed through the principles he consistently promoted, including tolerance, inclusiveness, humanism, democracy, and respect for minority rights. These principles correspond closely with the indicators of religious moderation established by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, namely national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and accommodation of local culture (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). Therefore, Gus Dur's progressive Islamic educational philosophy offers significant contributions to strengthening religious moderation through educational processes.

Previous studies have examined Gus Dur's thought from various perspectives. Asiyah (2021) found that his educational philosophy emphasizes critical, democratic, and humanistic human development. Rohmadi and Novarini (2023) demonstrated that Gus Dur's concept of inclusive Islamic education highlights respect for diversity and intergroup dialogue. Meanwhile, Ardiyansyah et al. (2024) argued that Gus Dur's concept of religious moderation strongly supports the development of value-based Islamic Religious Education emphasizing humanity and tolerance.

Nevertheless, most previous studies have discussed either Gus Dur's educational philosophy or religious moderation separately. Research specifically examining the relationship between Gus Dur's progressive Islamic educational thought and the strengthening of religious moderation within the framework of Islamic Religious Education remains relatively limited. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this academic gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the relevance of Gus Dur's progressive Islamic educational philosophy to religious moderation. Accordingly, this study aims to comprehensively analyze Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of progressive Islamic education and examine its relevance to strengthening religious moderation. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the advancement of Islamic Religious Education scholarship and practically to strengthening religious moderation through education in Indonesia.

Literature Review

2.1 Progressive Islamic Education

Etymologically, the term *progressive* derives from the word *progress*, referring to advancement or continuous improvement. In educational philosophy, progressivism emphasizes intellectual freedom, experiential learning, creativity, and learners' capacity to adapt to social change (Dewey, 1916). Progressive education views students not as passive recipients of information but as active participants who construct knowledge through interaction with their environment.

From an Islamic perspective, progressive education refers to an educational process aimed at developing the intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of human beings in an integrated manner. Progressive Islamic education not only transmits religious values but also encourages critical consciousness and equips learners to respond constructively to contemporary challenges (Rahman, 1982).

According to Muhaimin (2015), Islamic education should integrate the normative teachings of Islam with the contextual needs of modern society. It should move beyond ritualistic and doctrinal instruction to cultivate critical, creative, and socially responsible individuals. This

perspective positions Islamic education as an agent of social transformation oriented toward public welfare (*maslahah*).

Freire (2005) likewise argues that education should function as an instrument of human liberation from oppression and injustice. This perspective aligns closely with Islamic teachings that emphasize justice, equality, and respect for human dignity, as reflected in Qur'an 49:13 (Surah Al-Hujurat).

2.2 Characteristics of Progressive Islamic Education

Progressive Islamic education possesses several defining characteristics:

- a. Humanistic, viewing every individual as possessing the potential for optimal development (Nata, 2019);
- b. Critical and reflective, encouraging rational thinking and objective analysis of social issues (Freire, 2005);
- c. Democratic, promoting active participation and freedom of expression in learning (Dewey, 1916);
- d. Contextual, connecting educational content with real-life social realities (Muhaimin, 2015);
- e. Transformative, positioning education as an instrument for creating a more just and civilized society (Rahman, 1982).

2.3 Objectives of Progressive Islamic Education

The primary objective of progressive Islamic education is to nurture individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, morally upright, intellectually critical, open-minded, and socially responsible. Islamic education should cultivate not only personal piety but also social piety expressed through commitments to justice, humanity, and the common good (Al-Attas, 1999).

2.4 Abdurrahman Wahid's Educational Thought

Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur, was born in Jombang on 7 September 1940 and passed away on 30 December 2009. He was the grandson of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama. His educational experiences in Indonesia, the Middle East, and Europe shaped his inclusive intellectual outlook (Barton, 2002).

Gus Dur is recognized internationally as a Muslim intellectual committed to democracy, pluralism, human rights, and social justice. His ideas combined the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah tradition with modern intellectual thought, resulting in an inclusive and progressive interpretation of Islam (Fealy, 2011).

According to Gus Dur, Islamic education should function as a means of developing the complete human being (*insan kamil*). Education should extend beyond ritual observance to cultivate humanitarian awareness and social responsibility (Wahid, 2001).

He criticized indoctrinative educational models for fostering exclusivism and intolerance. Instead, he advocated dialogical, humanistic education that respects intellectual freedom (Wahid, 2006).

According to Asiyah (2021), Gus Dur's educational philosophy emphasizes: Humanization of education; Democratization of education; Strengthening pluralism and multiculturalism; Integration of religious and general knowledge; Development of critical thinking.

2.5 Values of Progressive Islamic Education

Humanism. Gus Dur's humanism is founded upon the belief that every individual possesses inherent dignity deserving respect regardless of religion, ethnicity, race, or social status (Barton, 2002). Education should therefore serve to humanize individuals and facilitate the full development of their human potential.

Pluralism. Gus Dur regarded diversity as God's will. Consequently, education should cultivate respect for differences and encourage dialogue among diverse communities (Wahid, 2007).

Democracy. Islamic education should foster democratic values by promoting freedom of expression, deliberation (*musyawarah*), and active student participation in learning (Fealy, 2011).

Social Justice. Gus Dur viewed social justice as a primary objective of religious life. Education should nurture learners who are sensitive to poverty, discrimination, and social inequality (Wahid, 2006).

2.6 Religious Moderation

Religious moderation refers to balanced, moderate religious attitudes and practices. In Islamic terminology, this concept is known as *wasatiyyah*, representing the middle path that avoids extremism in understanding and practicing religion (Kamali, 2015).

According to the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019), religious moderation is a perspective and practice that balances religious commitment with respect for social diversity.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi (2010) similarly describes moderation as a defining characteristic of Islam, referring to the concept of *ummatan wasatan* mentioned in Qur'an 2:143.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019) identifies four primary indicators of religious moderation: National commitment; Tolerance; Non-violence; Accommodation of local culture.

Additionally, religious moderation encompasses the principles of balance (*tawazun*), justice (*i'tidal*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), and consultation (*shura*) (Azra, 2020).

Religious moderation aims to create harmonious social life, prevent religious conflict, strengthen national unity, and promote peaceful and tolerant religious practices (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019).

2.7 Relevance of Gus Dur's Progressive Islamic Education to Religious Moderation

Gus Dur's progressive Islamic educational philosophy exhibits strong relevance to religious moderation. First, his emphasis on humanism aligns with the principle of respecting human dignity, which forms the ethical foundation of religious moderation (Barton, 2002).

Second, his advocacy of pluralism supports the cultivation of tolerance, one of the central indicators of religious moderation. Education that appreciates diversity prepares students to coexist peacefully with people of different backgrounds (Wahid, 2007).

Third, Gus Dur's democratization of education promotes dialogue and deliberation, thereby reducing exclusivism and religious intolerance (Fealy, 2011).

Fourth, his emphasis on social justice develops learners' awareness of others' rights while rejecting discrimination and violence committed in the name of religion.

Overall, Gus Dur's progressive Islamic educational philosophy provides a strong conceptual foundation for strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia. The values of humanism, pluralism, democracy, and social justice closely correspond to the principles of religious moderation and therefore remain highly relevant for the development of Islamic Religious Education within Indonesia's multicultural society.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design. Library research is a method that utilizes various written sources as the primary data to examine and analyze particular phenomena or intellectual perspectives (Zed, 2018). The focus of this study was to analyze Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of progressive Islamic education and its relevance to religious moderation.

The research data consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained from Abdurrahman Wahid's major works discussing Islamic education, pluralism, humanism, democracy, and religious life, including *Menggerakkan Tradisi* (2001), *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita* (2006), and *Pribumisasi Islam dalam Pergulatan Budaya* (2007). Secondary data were collected from books, scholarly journal articles, previous research, and official documents relevant to progressive Islamic education and religious moderation.

Data were collected through documentation techniques, involving the identification, collection, reading, and critical examination of relevant literature related to the research focus (Moleong, 2021). The collected data were subsequently classified into thematic categories, including the concepts of progressive Islamic education, humanism, pluralism, democracy, and religious moderation.

Data analysis employed content analysis, aiming to systematically identify, interpret, and understand the meanings embedded in the collected data (Krippendorff, 2019). The analytical process followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To strengthen the interpretation, this study also applied an intellectual thought analysis approach by critically examining Abdurrahman Wahid's educational ideas and relating them to the concept of religious moderation within the context of contemporary Islamic education.

The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through source triangulation, by comparing various primary and secondary sources to obtain a more comprehensive and objective understanding of the research topic (Patton, 2015).

Results

4.1 The Paradigm of Progressive Islamic Education in Abdurrahman Wahid's Thought

The analysis of Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur's) writings reveals that progressive Islamic education represents an educational paradigm aimed at developing individuals who are religious, humanistic, democratic, and capable of living harmoniously within a pluralistic society. For Gus Dur, Islamic education should not merely function as a transfer of religious knowledge, but rather as a transformation of values that cultivates critical consciousness, social responsibility, and respect for human dignity (Wahid, 2001).

Content analysis of *Menggerakkan Tradisi* (2001), *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita* (2006), and *Pribumisasi Islam dalam Pergulatan Budaya* (2007) demonstrates that Islamic education must integrate Islamic teachings with evolving social realities. According to Gus Dur, educational practices characterized by textualism, exclusivism, and indoctrination tend to produce narrow religious fanaticism, contradicting Islam's mission as rahmatan lil 'alamin (a mercy to all creation). Consequently, education should foster critical thinking, dialogue, openness, and appreciation for religious and cultural diversity (Wahid, 2006).

Furthermore, Gus Dur regarded Islamic education as an emancipatory process that liberates individuals from ignorance, injustice, discrimination, and various forms of social oppression. Education should empower learners to develop their intellectual and moral capacities while contributing positively to society. This perspective closely aligns with Paulo Freire's concept of progressive education, which views education as a process of humanization and liberation (Freire, 2005).

The findings indicate that Gus Dur's progressive Islamic educational paradigm is founded upon three interconnected pillars: Islamic values, universal humanism, and Indonesia's national identity. Consequently, Islamic education is positioned not as an instrument of religious exclusivism but as a means of nurturing a peaceful, democratic, and civilized society.

4.2 Core Values of Progressive Islamic Education in Abdurrahman Wahid's Thought

The analysis identified **five fundamental values** underpinning Gus Dur's concept of progressive Islamic education.

a.2.1 Humanism

Humanism constitutes the central principle of Gus Dur's educational philosophy. He argued that every human being possesses equal dignity as God's creation and therefore deserves equal treatment regardless of religion, ethnicity, race, or social status. Education should humanize human beings rather than merely produce individuals with academic competence.

Within Gus Dur's framework, humanism also encompasses respect for human rights, freedom of thought, and protection of minority groups. Humanistic education cultivates empathy, social responsibility, and commitment to universal humanitarian values (Barton, 2002).

b.2.2 Pluralism and Inclusivism

Pluralism represents another defining characteristic of Gus Dur's thought. He regarded diversity as *sunnatullah* (God's divine decree) that should be accepted and respected. Islamic education should prepare learners to coexist peacefully with people of different beliefs while maintaining their own religious identity.

For Gus Dur, pluralism does not imply theological relativism or the homogenization of religions. Rather, it recognizes every individual's right to practice their faith while encouraging constructive dialogue and cooperation in social life. Therefore, Islamic education should nurture mutual respect, tolerance, and interreligious collaboration (Wahid, 2007).

c.2.3 Democracy

Democratic values occupy a significant place in progressive Islamic education. Gus Dur rejected authoritarian educational practices because they suppress learners' intellectual development. Instead, he emphasized dialogical learning, allowing students to think critically, express their opinions freely, and respect differing perspectives.

Democratic education promotes deliberation (*musyawarah*), responsibility, and peaceful conflict resolution through dialogue. This perspective resonates with John Dewey's conception of schools as laboratories of democracy (Dewey, 1916; Fealy, 2011).

d.2.4 Social Justice

Social justice constitutes another essential objective of progressive Islamic education. Gus Dur maintained that education should serve as an instrument for empowering marginalized communities rather than reproducing social inequalities.

Accordingly, Islamic education should cultivate awareness of poverty, injustice, discrimination, and human rights violations while preparing learners to become agents of positive social transformation committed to public welfare (*maslahah*) (Wahid, 2006).

e.2.5 Integration of Islamic and National Values

The findings further demonstrate that Gus Dur viewed Islam and Indonesian nationalism as mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. Islamic education should simultaneously foster devotion to religion and commitment to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI).

National values are reflected through respect for Pancasila, democracy, constitutional principles, and Indonesia's rich cultural diversity. Thus, Islamic education should help students harmoniously integrate their Islamic identity with their national identity (Barton, 2002).

2.3 The Relevance of Gus Dur's Progressive Islamic Education to Strengthening Religious Moderation

The findings indicate that the values embedded in Gus Dur's progressive Islamic education are highly relevant to Indonesia's contemporary policy of religious moderation.

First, humanism reinforces respect for human dignity, thereby preventing hate speech, discrimination, and religiously motivated violence. Humanistic education develops empathy and compassion toward others regardless of religious or cultural differences.

Second, pluralism directly strengthens tolerance, one of the principal indicators of religious moderation. Through education that values diversity, students learn to accept differences as social realities that should be managed through dialogue and cooperation.

Third, democracy promotes deliberation, openness, and respect for differing opinions, all of which are essential for fostering peaceful religious coexistence within multicultural societies.

Fourth, social justice supports the principles of nonviolence and equal rights for all citizens. Islamic education should nurture the understanding that religion functions as a moral force for justice and collective welfare.

Finally, the integration of Islamic and national values reinforces national commitment, another key indicator of religious moderation. Islamic education should cultivate not only personal piety but also social responsibility expressed through patriotism, respect for the constitution, and dedication to preserving Indonesia's unity (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Gus Dur's educational philosophy strongly corresponds to the four principal indicators of religious moderation: national commitment, tolerance, nonviolence, and accommodation of local culture.

2.4. Implications of Abdurrahman Wahid's Thought for the Transformation of Islamic Religious Education

The analysis suggests that Abdurrahman Wahid's progressive educational thought offers broad implications for the transformation of contemporary Islamic Religious Education (PAI).

From a philosophical perspective, PAI should move beyond memorization-oriented instruction toward an educational paradigm that develops critical awareness, moral character, and social responsibility. Religious education should therefore be understood as a process of nurturing individuals who are both religiously committed and deeply humanistic.

From a curriculum perspective, the values of humanism, pluralism, democracy, social justice, and nationalism should be systematically integrated into Islamic Religious Education through contextual learning approaches that connect Islamic teachings with Indonesia's multicultural social realities.

From a pedagogical perspective, Islamic Religious Education teachers should adopt dialogical, reflective, collaborative, and problem-based learning strategies. Such approaches encourage students to think critically, appreciate diversity, and engage constructively in intercultural and interreligious communication.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of progressive Islamic education offers a highly relevant educational paradigm for addressing contemporary challenges facing Islamic Religious Education. The values of humanism, pluralism, democracy, social justice, and the integration of Islamic and national identities collectively establish a framework for Islamic education that is moderate, inclusive, and oriented toward public welfare. Accordingly, Gus Dur's educational philosophy deserves recognition as a significant conceptual foundation for strengthening religious moderation through Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Abdurrahman Wahid conceptualized Islamic education as a transformative process aimed at developing individuals who are religious, humanistic, democratic, inclusive, and socially responsible. According to Gus Dur, Islamic education should function not merely as a medium for transmitting religious knowledge but also as an instrument for character formation, the promotion of human rights, the strengthening of tolerance, and the construction of a just and civilized society. This paradigm demonstrates that Islamic education should integrate Islamic teachings with universal humanitarian values while responding to Indonesia's multicultural national context.

The findings identify five fundamental values underpinning Gus Dur's concept of progressive Islamic education: humanism, pluralism, democracy, social justice, and the integration of Islamic and national values. These principles exhibit strong relevance to the development of contemporary Islamic Religious Education, particularly in promoting religious moderation, nurturing a culture of dialogue, appreciating diversity, and strengthening students'

national commitment. Their implementation through curriculum development, pedagogical strategies, and school culture is expected to produce learners who possess not only sound religious competence but also the capacity to live peacefully and constructively within a pluralistic society.

Therefore, Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of progressive Islamic education remains highly relevant as a guiding paradigm for the advancement of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia, particularly in addressing global challenges, strengthening character education, and fostering an inclusive, democratic, and civilized society.

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