
Reimagining Islamic Education: Gus Dur's Vision For Multiculturalism and Social Harmony in Indonesian Pesantren

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Abstract: *This article explores the multicultural educational philosophy of KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), a prominent Muslim intellectual and former president of Indonesia, focusing on the strategic role of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in fostering inclusive, tolerant, and pluralistic values. Drawing from Gus Dur's concept of pribumisasi Islam (indigenization of Islam), the study highlights how pesantren serve not only as religious institutions but also as cultural hubs for social transformation, interfaith dialogue, and democratic engagement. By introducing three core strategies—politico-cultural, socio-cultural, and pedagogical—the paper emphasizes the importance of integrating multiculturalism into Islamic education to counter rising religious intolerance and exclusivism. Gus Dur's vision positions pesantren as pivotal agents of peacebuilding and civic education, where diversity is embraced as a divine gift. His ideas remain highly relevant in today's context, offering a transformative model for Islamic education that aligns with Indonesia's pluralistic identity and the universal values of justice, human dignity, and coexistence.*

Keywords: Gus Dur, Islamic education, multiculturalism, pesantren, religious moderation.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengeksplorasi filosofi pendidikan multikultural KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), seorang intelektual Muslim terkemuka dan mantan presiden Indonesia, dengan fokus pada peran strategis pesantren dalam memupuk nilai-nilai inklusif, toleran, dan pluralistik. Mengambil konsep pribumisasi Islam dari Gus Dur, penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana pesantren tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai lembaga keagamaan tetapi juga sebagai pusat budaya untuk transformasi sosial, dialog antar agama, dan keterlibatan demokratis. Dengan memperkenalkan tiga strategi inti - politik-kultural, sosio-kultural, dan pedagogis - makalah ini menekankan pentingnya mengintegrasikan multikulturalisme ke dalam pendidikan Islam untuk melawan intoleransi dan eksklusivisme agama yang meningkat. Visi Gus Dur menempatkan pesantren sebagai agen penting pembangunan perdamaian dan pendidikan kewarganegaraan, di mana keragaman diterima sebagai anugerah ilahi. Gagasan-gagasannya masih sangat relevan dalam konteks saat ini, menawarkan model transformatif untuk pendidikan Islam yang selaras dengan identitas Indonesia yang majemuk dan nilai-nilai universal seperti keadilan, martabat manusia, dan hidup berdampingan.

Kata kunci: Gus Dur, pendidikan Islam, multikulturalisme, pesantren, moderasi beragama.

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Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelagic nation characterized by an exceptionally high degree of heterogeneity ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously. With over 17,000 islands, hundreds of ethnic groups, and six officially recognized religions, Indonesia stands as a living testament to how diversity can coexist within a unified national identity. This rich tapestry of pluralism is an invaluable asset, yet

it also demands careful social and educational management to nurture and reinforce the values of nationhood. Within this context, education serves as the frontline in safeguarding social harmony amidst the complexities of pluralistic society. (Akhmad, 2020)

Islamic education, as one of the educational systems with deep historical roots in Indonesia, bears a responsibility that goes beyond merely transmitting normative religious teachings. It also carries the vital obligation of shaping a national character that is inclusive and tolerant. (Maulidiyah et al., 2021) Through institutions such as madrasahs and pesantrens, Islamic values are taught not merely as theological doctrines, but as ethical guidelines for living as citizens and contributing to the life of the nation. (Mundiri, 2015) This role becomes increasingly significant in the modern era, as society faces the growing challenges of social disintegration and rising intolerance.

Amid the currents of globalization which often carry exclusive values and religious radicalism emerged influential thinkers who emphasized the importance of a multicultural and humanistic Islamic education. One of the most prominent figures in this discourse is KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur. He was not only a Muslim scholar and intellectual, but also a statesman who consistently advocated for the centrality of human values, tolerance, and diversity as fundamental to the teachings of Islam. Gus Dur's ideas were not confined to theoretical constructs; they were also realized through numerous policies and social as well as educational approaches that he initiated. (HUDA, Syamsul, 2022) For Gus Dur, Islamic education must not be trapped within the rigidity of formal curricula; rather, it should be responsive to social realities by promoting a spirit of dialogue and openness. (Miskan, 2018) He believed that the primary task of Islamic education is to shape individuals who are not only ritually observant but also socially and emotionally mature. Therefore, Islamic education must internalize the values of pluralism, equality, and justice within every aspect of its learning process. (Prasetiawati, 2017) In this regard, the pesantren serves as a strategic institution which, according to Gus Dur, plays a vital role in cultivating these values.

Pesantren, as a traditional Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, has long served as a communal living space for individuals from diverse backgrounds. Gus Dur viewed the pesantren as a place where the values of Islam as a mercy to all creation (rahmatan lil-'alamin) are genuinely practiced not merely through textual memorization, but through the everyday lives of the students (santri) and the surrounding community. (Muharis, 2023) He positioned the pesantren as a center of education that not only nurtures students to become religiously knowledgeable (alim), but also to grow into citizens with social sensitivity, a strong sense of national commitment, and deep respect for humanity and the rich diversity inherent in Indonesian society. (Nasrowi, 2020)

However, despite the extensive discourse on multiculturalism and the contribution of pesantren to inclusive education, studies that specifically examine the thoughts of KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) as a paradigm for multicultural Islamic education within the pesantren context remain relatively limited. The lack of research elaborating on pesantren as a strategic space for nurturing diversity through Gus Dur's approach indicates a significant gap that needs to be addressed—particularly in the effort to strengthen religious moderation and cultivate national character education in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method to explore and analyse KH. Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur) thoughts on Islamic education, particularly in the context of pluralism, multiculturalism, and social harmony in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools.

1. Approach and Type of Research

A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this research is on interpreting the meanings, values, and ideas of Gus Dur in the field of Islamic education. The type of research is library research, as the data used is sourced from primary and secondary literature.

2. Data Sources

The data sources in this research are divided into two categories:

a. Primary Data:

Gus Dur's writings, such as the books 'Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita' (My Islam, Your Islam, Our Islam) and 'Gus Dur: The Authorized Biography,' articles, speeches, and interviews related to his thoughts on education and diversity.

b. Secondary Data:

Books, scientific journals, theses, and articles discussing Gus Dur's thoughts, Islamic boarding schools, multicultural education, and social harmony in Indonesia.

3. Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through documentation and literature review. This technique includes:

Searching digital and print archives from national libraries, university libraries, and academic journals.

a. Study of Gus Dur's speeches, interviews, and intellectual reflections.

b. Analysis of pesantren education documents that apply the values of pluralism and tolerance.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, which involves identifying, categorising, and interpreting Gus Dur's main values and ideas related to:

a. Islamic education in the context of Islamic boarding schools

b. The concepts of multiculturalism and inclusivity in education

c. Strategies for building social harmony among religious communities

The analysis steps include:

a. Data reduction: filtering information relevant to the research focus.

b. Categorisation: grouping data based on main themes (education, multiculturalism, Islamic boarding schools, etc.).

c. Interpretation: interpreting the meaning of the values contained in Gus Dur's thoughts.

d. Drawing conclusions.

5. Data Validity

To maintain the validity and reliability of the data, source triangulation was carried out, which involved comparing various relevant and credible literature sources. In addition, the interpretation of Gus Dur's thoughts will be adjusted to the historical and social context in which these thoughts were developed.

Results and Discussion

The Pesantren as a Model for Multicultural Coexistence

For KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur, the pesantren is more than just a religious educational institution; it represents a true microcosm of Indonesia. In his view, pesantren is not only a place where students (santri) pursue Islamic knowledge, but also a social space where diversity is lived and experienced daily. The varied backgrounds of the santri in terms of ethnicity, language, culture, and local traditions make the pesantren a practical arena for tolerance and harmonious cross-identity interaction. This reality aligns closely with the ideals of Indonesia as a nation founded upon the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). (Hasyim, 2018)

Gus Dur's long-standing experience living within the pesantren environment profoundly shaped his perspective on pluralism. He personally witnessed how pesantren functioned as a shared home for anyone eager to learn, regardless of their background. Students (santri) from various regions and diverse cultural origins gathered, lived in the same dormitories, attended religious study sessions together, and engaged in mutual acquaintance. It was through these daily interactions egalitarian and modest in nature

that values of tolerance and openness emerged organically, not through indoctrination, but through genuine social experience.(Wiranata et al., 2021)

In Gus Dur's view, difference is not a threat, but rather a social asset that must be preserved and nurtured. Within the pesantren, diversity is not only accepted but embraced as a vital component of life's learning process. A culture of mutual respect, cooperation, and understanding is fostered and passed down from generation to generation. Gus Dur recognized that pesantren possessed a unique cultural strength to cultivate multicultural awareness through lived practice rather than mere theory. This, in his eyes, is what makes pesantren a cultural stronghold resilient against the tides of social disintegration and exclusive ideologies..(Saputro, 2019)

Beyond that, Gus Dur referred to the pesantren as a cultural institution due to its inherent connection to traditional and communal values. A pesantren does not exist in a vacuum; it grows alongside society and absorbs local values as an integral part of its educational praxis. It serves as both a center of culture and a space for social transformation a site where the dialectic between religion, culture, and humanity takes place continuously.(Kharisma & Wahid, 2022) Therefore, Gus Dur believed that pesantren should not only provide intellectual and religious education, but also cultivate the character and social awareness of its students, enabling them to become agents of change within society.(Bahri, 2018)

With all of this, Gus Dur affirmed that pesantren holds great promise for the future of an inclusive and progressive Islamic education. In pesantren, the values of pluralism are not merely taught through textbooks, but are brought to life through everyday practices. This is why he regarded pesantren as a strategic institution in realizing Indonesia's vision of a tolerant, peaceful, and respectful society amidst diversity. Gus Dur's thought remains profoundly relevant today, particularly in facing the rising challenges of intolerance and radicalism that threaten the nation's pluralistic fabric.

Multicultural Education: Curriculum Design and Strategic Approaches

KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur, was one of the foremost thinkers and key figures in the discourse of Islamic reform in Indonesia. One of his most monumental ideas was the concept of "Islamic indigenization" (pribumisasi Islam), which he introduced as a way to harmonize Islamic teachings with local cultural contexts..(Ahmad, 2018) This concept emphasizes that Islamic teachings need not be transmitted exclusively in Arab cultural forms, but can be integrated with local Indonesian traditions, as long as they do not contradict the fundamental principles of Islam. For Gus Dur, the form of Islam embraced by Indonesian society should not be foreign or exclusive, but rather a living, grounded faith that becomes an integral part of local wisdom. His idea also serves as a critique of the rigid mindset that imposes a singular expression of Islamic practice while disregarding the cultural diversity of Muslim communities across different regions.(Nugroho, 2022)

In the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), the concept of pribumisasi Islam is manifested through an adaptive and open educational approach. Gus Dur believed that pesantren should not merely serve as bastions of traditionalism that resist the tides of change. Therefore, he advocated for a curriculum that goes beyond the mastery of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) to also include engagement with modern scientific knowledge. For Gus Dur, it was essential that students (santri) be equipped not only with a deep understanding of fiqh and tafsir, but also with knowledge of philosophy, the social sciences, human rights, and contemporary discourses on democracy and global culture.(Usman, 2019)

Furthermore, Gus Dur believed that the success of an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) should not be measured solely by the number of students who master classical Islamic sciences, but also by the extent of their contribution to broader society. For this reason, pesantren must serve as institutions that cultivate Muslim intellectuals who are socially conscious and capable of engaging in meaningful dialogue across differences. Gus Dur actively encouraged pesantren to be open to interfaith discussions and to build social collaborations with groups from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. In his

view, interreligious dialogue is not a threat but a necessary effort to preserve social harmony in a multicultural nation like Indonesia.(Ramdhan, 2018)

The pesantren envisioned by Gus Dur is an inclusive educational institution one that does not isolate itself from the outside world, but instead serves as a pioneer in building a just and tolerant society. He firmly rejected educational models that detach students (santri) from the dynamics of society and contemporary developments. As such, Gus Dur frequently emphasized the importance of pesantren engagement in pressing social issues, including justice, poverty, gender equality, and the rights of minorities. He aspired for pesantren to produce not only religious scholars, but also future leaders imbued with a strong sense of humanitarian concern.(Hanafi, 2017)

Gus Dur's thought demonstrates that Islam does not have to be a conservative and exclusive force, but can instead serve as a transformative power adaptive, progressive, and deeply humanistic..(RAMADHAN, 2016) Through the concept of Islamic indigenization (pribumisasi Islam), Gus Dur instilled the belief that Islam can coexist with local cultures and even strengthen the social harmony deeply rooted in Indonesian traditions. In this regard, the pesantren plays a crucial role as a space for cultivating inclusive, open, and human-centered Islamic values. Building on this foundation, Gus Dur proposed three key approaches to multicultural Islamic education:

1. Political and Cultural Strategy: Promoting Inclusive Ideology and the Protection of Minority Rights

Gus Dur emphasized the importance of political and cultural strategies in developing a multicultural Islamic education. Through this approach, he advocated for the introduction of an inclusive ideology that not only accommodates differences but also actively champions the rights of minority groups. In his view, education cannot be separated from the structures of power and state policy. Therefore, Islamic education must play a political role in fostering a just and civilized society. Through its curriculum and educational discourse, values such as democracy, religious freedom, and the protection of marginalized groups must be instilled early on in students. Gus Dur believed that in this way, Islamic education could serve as both a moral and social force to support the democratization process and counteract religious exclusivism. (Mulyadi, 2019)

2. Socio-Cultural Strategy: Positioning Pesantren as a Center for Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Collaboration

In the socio-cultural strategy, Gus Dur envisioned pesantren as a hub for cross-cultural interaction and cooperation. He regarded pesantren not merely as religious institutions, but as cultural nodes within society that possess significant potential in shaping peaceful and respectful social relations. According to him, pesantren must create ample space for dialogue with communities of different faiths and cultures through social, cultural, and intellectual engagements. This could include interfaith discussions, community service programs, and cultural forums. Such an approach aims to build equal and harmonious relationships among diverse social groups, enabling pesantren to produce not only religious scholars but also social leaders who are attuned to diversity and committed to social justice.(Ranggo & Oleh, 2018)

3. Pedagogical Strategy: Instilling Values of Equality, Reducing Prejudice, and Fostering Appreciation for Diversity in Teaching Methods

The pedagogical strategy centers on instructional methods and content that systematically embed multicultural values into the educational experience. Gus Dur underscored the importance of Islamic education that actively teaches principles of equality, reduces prejudice, and fosters genuine appreciation for differences throughout the teaching and learning process. This includes utilizing unbiased teaching materials, employing inclusive discussion methods, and adopting experiential learning approaches rooted in students' diverse social and cultural backgrounds. He believed that teachers play a strategic role in guiding students to become not only proficient in religious knowledge but also broad-minded, open, and capable of embracing diversity as an inherent aspect of life. This strategy ultimately aims to

cultivate a generation of Muslims who are tolerant, critical, and able to coexist peacefully within a pluralistic society.(HUDA, Syamsul, 2022)

Multiculturalism and Religious Moderation

KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur, held a visionary outlook that Islamic education should not be confined merely to textual dimensions. He criticized religious approaches that overly emphasized rote memorization and literal interpretations of classical Islamic texts without fostering adequate social awareness. For Gus Dur, the ultimate goal of Islamic education was to nurture individuals who are intellectually grounded, spiritually mature, and socially engaged. In his view, students santri must not only grasp religious laws rigidly but also be challenged to translate Islamic values into the pluralistic and dynamic realities of everyday life.(Wahid, 2006)

In this regard, Gus Dur firmly rejected the notion that multiculturalism is at odds with Islam. On the contrary, he asserted that the spirit of multiculturalism is an integral part of Islamic teachings, which are inherently meant to be a mercy for all creation rahmatan lil-‘alamin. According to him, Islam exists to nurture life, uphold justice, and honor diversity. Therefore, values such as tolerance, equality, and social justice are not foreign concepts but rather lie at the very core of Islamic ethics. With this understanding, Gus Dur sought to dismantle narrow and exclusionary religious attitudes, replacing them with a more humanistic and inclusive approach.(Rosidi, 2017)

Within Gus Dur’s framework of thought, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) must serve as pioneers in grounding these values in daily life. He positioned pesantren as strongholds against the tides of extremism, radicalism, and intolerance that threaten the social cohesion of the nation. Through an education rooted in the principles of nationalism and humanity, pesantren are believed to have the capacity to cultivate students who are not only intellectually grounded in religious knowledge but also actively contribute to peacebuilding within a diverse society. Gus Dur recognized the profound cultural and moral strength of pesantren in shaping the younger generation to become agents of reconciliation and dialogue, rather than forces of provocation and violence.(Suwardiyamsyah, 2017)

This perspective demonstrates that long before the term “religious moderation” became a formal national agenda, the pesantren initiated and nurtured by Gus Dur had already been embodying these principles in their daily life. Religious moderation was not merely taught as a theoretical concept; it was lived through the social interactions between students and the surrounding community, reflected in open-minded thinking, and manifested in the acceptance of difference as a divine blessing. Gus Dur proved that moderation is not merely a slogan, but a daily practice born from a grounded and contextual understanding of Islam.(Masyhud, 2016)

Thus, Gus Dur’s intellectual legacy on multicultural Islamic education is not only relevant but also urgently needed in today’s context. As the educational world faces growing challenges of intolerance, discrimination, and violence in the name of religion, the inclusive approach advocated by Gus Dur offers a transformative model for Islamic education—one that is more compassionate, open, and deeply rooted in humanistic values. Through pesantren as centers of change, the ideal of Islam as a mercy for all humanity (rahmatan lil-‘alamin) can be genuinely realized in the life of the nation and the state..

Conclusion

KH. Abdurrahman Wahid’s (Gus Dur) thought on multicultural Islamic education stands as a significant contribution to the development of a humanistic, inclusive, and nationally relevant educational paradigm. By positioning pesantren as the central institution for internalizing values of tolerance, dialogue, and diversity, Gus Dur proved that Islamic education can serve as a vital pillar in sustaining social harmony within a pluralistic society. The political-cultural, socio-cultural, and

pedagogical strategies he introduced offer a new direction for Islamic education one that not only nurtures religious individuals but also cultivates pluralist and justice-oriented citizens.

Amidst the rising tide of intolerance and religious exclusivism, Gus Dur's approach becomes increasingly relevant and urgent to revive, especially within Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren. His intellectual legacy provides both a moral compass and a strategic foundation for building transformative education one that embraces diversity and reaffirms Islam as a mercy for all creation (rahmatan lil-'alamin). Therefore, integrating multicultural values into the curriculum and practice of Islamic education is not merely an academic necessity but a strategic effort to uphold Indonesia's pluralism and strengthen national social cohesion.

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Titles for acknowledgments and references are not numbered. This part presents the acknowledgment when it is required. It should not be numbered.

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