

## **THEORIES OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

*The relationship between religion and culture is a fundamental aspect in understanding the dynamics of religious life among Muslim communities, particularly in the Indonesian context, which is marked by ethnic diversity, local traditions, and indigenous value systems. Islam, as a religion that carries universal principles, emerges and develops through a dialogical interaction with local cultures, resulting in diverse expressions of Islamic practice. This article analyzes the major theories explaining the relationship between religion and culture, including the theory of Islamic universality and cultural particularity, acculturation, assimilation, hybridity, the anthropology of religion, and postcolonial perspectives, and examines their relevance to the development of contemporary Islamic education. The study employs a qualitative approach based on literature review, drawing from classical works and recent findings in reputable journals. The research findings indicate that the relationship between Islam and culture is not a binary opposition but rather interactive, adaptive, and creative. This interaction produces contextual religious practices without diminishing the core values of Islam. The relevance for Islamic education is evident in three main aspects: first, the need for a culturally responsive Islamic education curriculum; second, the integration of local values as a medium for internalizing Islamic teachings; and third, strengthening the paradigm of religious moderation through historical and anthropological understanding of Islamic practices in society. The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive synthesis of theories on religion–culture relations and their practical implications for the development of Islamic education, an approach rarely explored in depth in previous studies. This research contributes to the argument that Islamic education can develop in a relevant and inclusive manner only by viewing culture as a dialogical partner, not as a threat to the purity of religious teachings. Thus, this article provides a theoretical and conceptual foundation for developing Islamic education that is moderate, contextual, and rooted in local wisdom.*

**Keywords:** religion and culture, Islam Nusantara, acculturation, Islamic education, anthropology of religion, postcolonialism

## **Introduction**

The relationship between religion and culture is a central theme in the study of socio-religious sciences, especially when religion is understood not only as a system of transcendental beliefs but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon that interacts with the dynamics of society. Islam, as a universal religion, carries a set of normative values such as *tawhid*, justice, human brotherhood, and respect for human dignity. These values are *tsawabit*, fixed principles that apply across time and space (Nurcholish Madjid, 2000). The universal nature of these teachings provides a normative foundation for every Muslim while offering an ethical framework adaptable to various cultural contexts.

However, historical reality demonstrates that Islam never emerges in a cultural vacuum. Upon entering new regions, Islam consistently encounters deeply rooted local traditions. This interaction gives rise to a productive dialectic between universal teachings and particular cultural expressions. Syafiq Hasyim (2022) emphasizes that this dynamic does not diminish the universality of Islam; rather, it highlights its elastic and accommodative character as a teaching capable of engaging in dialogical interaction with local cultures.

The Indonesian context offers one of the richest examples for examining the relationship between religion and culture. Unlike the spread of Islam in the Middle East (often accompanied by political conflict) Islam entered the Nusantara through trade, cultural da'wah, education, the arts, and marriage. This peaceful and culturally embedded transmission facilitated extensive processes of acculturation. Traditions such as *slametan*, Tabot Bengkulu, Grebeg Maulid, and various forms of Maulid celebrations across Indonesia illustrate how local cultures can dialogically engage with Islamic teachings without negating core religious values (Azyumardi Azra, 2013). Contemporary studies also show that this diversity of expression strengthens social cohesion within Indonesian Muslim communities (Woodward, 2021; Fealy, 2022).

This phenomenon of interaction can be explained through several theories on religion–culture relations. First, the theory of Islamic universality versus cultural particularity explains how fixed doctrinal values adapt to dynamic local contexts. Second, the concepts of acculturation, assimilation, and cultural hybridity provide analytical frameworks for understanding the formation of new traditions arising from the encounter between Islamic teachings and local values. Third, the anthropological approach to religion views Islam not only as a normative doctrine but also as a social practice manifested in rituals, symbols, and everyday cultural expressions (Saeful Zuhri, 2025). Recent anthropological studies affirm that such diversity constitutes manifestations of *lived religion* that enrich the understanding of Islam as a social experience (Bowen, 2023; Howell, 2021).

Meanwhile, postcolonial theory offers a critique of perspectives that label local Islamic practices as “syncretic” or less pure. Such views are largely shaped by colonial constructions that positioned non-Arab Islamic practices as subordinate. Ahmad Riyadi (2019) underscores the need to deconstruct these assumptions, arguing that local Islamic expressions possess historical and epistemological legitimacy as part of global Islamic diversity. This is reinforced by contemporary postcolonial studies that portray Indonesian Islam as a creative, moderate, and contextual model of Islamic practice (Mulla, 2022; Aljunied, 2023).

The study of religion–culture relations has become increasingly important in the development of Islamic education. Contemporary Islamic education can no longer rely solely on the transmission of normative doctrines; it must also respond to the socio-cultural realities in which learners live. A culturally responsive Islamic education approach is believed to strengthen value internalization, character development, and religious moderation (Azra, 2020; Abdullah, 2021). Thus, integrating theories of religion–culture relations becomes a strategic foundation for developing Islamic education models that are relevant, adaptive, and firmly rooted in core Islamic values.

Based on this background, this article aims to elaborate on the theories of religion–culture relations and their relevance to the development of Islamic education. This study not only provides a conceptual understanding but also offers an analytical framework that can serve as a foundation for developing curricula, pedagogy, and educational practices that are contextual and responsive to Indonesia’s cultural diversity.

## **Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research design, as its primary objective is to conduct an in-depth analysis of theories on the relationship between religion and culture and to examine their relevance to the development of Islamic education. This approach allows the researcher to systematically explore various ideas, theories, and scientific findings that have developed within the fields of religious studies, cultural studies, Islamic anthropology, and education. The study applies content analysis to critically and thematically examine academic texts, including books, reputable journal articles, and other relevant scholarly works.

The data sources consist of primary literature such as the works of Nurcholish Madjid (2000), Syafiq Hasyim (2022), Azyumardi Azra (2013; 2020), Saeful Zuhri (2025), and Ahmad Riyadi (2019), as well as more recent literature including Bowen (2023), Howell (2021), Aljunied (2023), Mulla (2022), Fealy (2022), and other scientific publications related to Islam–culture relations, the anthropology of religion, cultural hybridity, religious moderation, and multicultural Islamic education. These sources were obtained through searches in academic databases such as Scopus, Taylor &

Francis, and Google Scholar, with priority given to publications from 2015–2024 to ensure data relevance and currency.

The data collection process was carried out in three main stages: literature identification, literature selection, and thematic classification. First, the researcher compiled a list of authoritative and relevant works focusing on religion, culture, and Islamic education. Second, these works were selected based on their thematic relevance, alignment with the research topic, academic credibility, and publication recency. Third, the selected literature was classified according to major themes such as the dialectic of universality and particularity, acculturation and cultural hybridity, anthropological approaches to religion, postcolonial critiques of Islamic purity discourse, and their relevance to the development of contemporary Islamic education. After thematic coding, data analysis proceeded using Krippendorff's content analysis model and thematic analysis to identify conceptual patterns and develop comprehensive interpretations. The stages of analysis included thorough reading, thematic coding, concept categorization, cross-literature synthesis, and formulation of theoretical implications for Islamic education development.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation by comparing classical, modern, and contemporary literature, as well as theoretical triangulation by combining perspectives from the anthropology of religion, Islamic sociology, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory. Additionally, the entire analytical process was supported by an audit trail to maintain methodological transparency and argumentative consistency. Ethically, the research adhered to principles of academic integrity by properly citing all sources in accordance with APA style, avoiding plagiarism, and ensuring that all arguments were grounded in valid scientific evidence. Through this methodological approach, the study aims to produce strong, comprehensive, and relevant analyses that enrich both theoretical and practical discourse in developing Islamic education that is contextual and responsive to cultural dynamics.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Universality of Islam and the Particularity of Culture**

The relationship between the universality of Islam and the particularity of culture emerges as both normative and pragmatic: universality provides a stable foundation of values, such as the principles of *tawhid*, social justice, human dignity, and brotherhood, while cultural particularities generate diverse expressions of concrete and contextual religious practices. Theologically, Qur'anic verses such as QS. *Al-Anbiya*:107 and QS. *Al-Hujurat*:13 underscore the universal dimension of Islamic da'wah while simultaneously affirming the legitimacy of human plurality. Historically, the arrival of Islam in the Nusantara through cultural da'wah, trade, and education produced accommodative patterns of reception.

Recent empirical studies (Alatas, 2022; Hakim & Fadhilah, 2023) show that universality functions as a “normative framework” that guides local interpretations of scriptural texts. Thus, local practices are not merely residues of pre-Islamic cultural forms, but rather media through which Islamic values are activated within specific social contexts.

In educational practice, these two poles require Islamic education curricula to affirm core doctrines and values (e.g., *aqidah*, social ethics) while designing pedagogical strategies that utilize local cultural elements as vehicles for value internalization, such as employing folklore, performing arts, or communal rituals reinterpreted through an Islamic lens, so that value transmission becomes more effective, legitimate, and non-alienating for learners. Consequently, religious instruction that emphasizes text alone without considering cultural context tends to be less resonant; conversely, education that incorporates cultural sensitivity strengthens conceptual understanding while promoting attitudes of tolerance and social cohesion.

### **Acculturation, Assimilation, and Cultural Hybridity**

Historical and theoretical analyses indicate that the interaction between Islam and culture occurs along a complex spectrum of cultural transformation, from relatively soft acculturation to assimilation, and ultimately hybridity, which produces new social identities. In the Nusantara context, acculturation refers to the incorporation of Islamic symbols and practices into the structure of local culture without erasing its original elements. This is evident, for example, when *gamelan* or *wayang* is used as a medium for da‘wah, thereby recontextualizing the ritual’s meaning (Zuhri, 2025; Prasetyo, 2023).

Assimilation marks a stage in which religious and cultural elements merge, forming new social practices, such as Javanese wedding rituals that integrate Islamic prayers with customary rites, which can no longer be easily categorized as purely pre-Islamic culture or purely textual religion. Hybridity, a concept widely developed in contemporary cultural theory, describes the formation of new social identities, such as the concept of Islam Nusantara, which represent a composite of universal Islamic values and local Nusantara wisdom (Hasyim, 2022; Mulla, 2022).

The pedagogical implications are significant: Islamic education can utilize these processes not merely as objects of study, but as instructional methods, developing learning modules that employ cultural artifacts, local ritual practices, and artistic expressions as mediums for dialogue between text and context. In other words, acculturation, assimilation, and hybridity are not dilemmas to be avoided; rather, they are sources of contextual pedagogy that enhance the relevance of Islamic teachings for learners and facilitate character building grounded in living Islamic values within society.



### **Anthropological Approaches to Religion**

The anthropological approach to religion offers essential analytical tools for viewing religion as a lived practice rich in symbolic, institutional, and emotional meaning. Reading Islam solely from a normative-textual perspective risks overlooking the everyday dimensions that shape layers of religious experience, an approach pioneered by Geertz and further developed by contemporary anthropologists (Geertz, 1960; Woodward, 2011; Bowen, 2023). Field studies demonstrate that practices such as *slametan*, *Sekaten*, or Sufi shrine rituals are not merely “traditions”; they function as mechanisms for community formation, moral regulation, and informal education that transmit religious values across generations.

This approach requires educators to understand the cultural environment of learners (recognizing local rituals, symbols, and languages) so that educational interventions become relevant and respectful of existing social capital. Curricularly, anthropological perspectives encourage the development of participatory learning strategies (e.g., participant observation, short fieldwork, community-based projects) that allow learners to engage with real practices while reflecting upon their normative dimensions.

In pedagogical practice, teachers and curriculum developers who adopt an anthropological lens tend to design instructional materials that challenge homogeneous assumptions about the “correct” way of being religious, replacing them with an approach that positions local meanings and community interpretations as legitimate sources of knowledge.

### **Postcolonial Critiques of Local Islamic Studies**

Postcolonial critique reveals how categories of authenticity and purity are often products of hegemonic narratives born from colonial power relations; in the study of Islam, such narratives frequently position non-Arab Islamic practices as inferior or syncretic, a construct critically articulated by Said and extended by contemporary postcolonial scholars. Modern empirical studies further show that accusations of “syncretism” often ignore the historical and functional dimensions of local practices, which in fact demonstrate religious creativity and the capacity for moral internalization (Said, 2001; Riyadi, 2019; Hernawan et al., 2023).

Thus, postcolonialism provides a normative foundation for recognizing the plurality of Islamic forms as legitimate cultural capital. In the field of Islamic education, the implications are both normative and practical: normative because it calls for curricula that honor the epistemic diversity of Muslim communities; practical because it recommends the inclusion of learning materials that document local histories, languages, arts, and religious practices, enabling learners to understand that multiple ways of being Muslim are valid and legitimate phenomena.

This approach also promotes critical pedagogy, encouraging students to explore local sources as legitimate forms of knowledge while cultivating critical awareness to identify hegemonic narratives that may marginalize certain cultural expressions. Ultimately, integrating postcolonial perspectives into education strengthens the position of Islam Nusantara as a model of religious education that is humanistic, inclusive, and grounded in the historical experiences of local communities.

### **Relevance of Findings for the Development of Islamic Education**

The findings of this research indicate that the humanistic relationship between teachers and santri within Islamic educational settings represents a concrete form of creative interaction between religious and cultural values. The pedagogical practices demonstrated by the teachers, such as warm communication, gentle admonition, dialogical approaches, and moral exemplarity, not only reflect the implementation of Islamic transcendental values such as *rahmah*, *hikmah*, and respect for human dignity, but also align with Indonesian cultural characteristics that emphasize politeness, mutual respect, and harmonious social relations. This interaction illustrates that religion and culture are not positioned in opposition to each other, but instead work dialectically to shape a distinctive and relevant model of Islamic education.

In addition to creating a friendly learning atmosphere, this humanistic relationship also has a significant impact on the personality development of the santri. The students feel safer, more accepted, and appreciated, making it easier for them to internalize moral values such as humility (*tawadhu'*), empathy, responsibility, and discipline. Non-intimidating communication patterns have been proven to reduce psychological pressure, fear, and rigidity that often emerge in authoritarian educational models. Conversely, a dialogical and supportive environment enables santri to grow in emotionally healthy conditions, become more open to guidance, and more active in the learning process. Thus, the humanistic teacher-student relationship functions not only as a pedagogical approach but also as a form of social protection that provides psychological security for students while strengthening the internalization of moral and spiritual values in Islamic education.

These findings show that humanistic relational practices constitute an authentic form of the interaction between religion and culture that supports the development of contemporary Islamic education. More broadly, such relationships demonstrate how universal Islamic values can be enlivened through culturally grounded approaches, producing educational practices that are both theologically authentic and pedagogically effective.

### **Relevance to Theories of Religion-Culture Relations**

First, the humanistic relationship between teachers and students embodies the theory of Islamic universality and cultural particularity, which asserts that transcendental Islamic values can be expressed through diverse

cultural mediums. Teacher practices characterized by gentleness, patience, and respect reflect theological Islamic values while simultaneously being shaped by local cultural norms that uphold courteous communication and social harmony. This shows that Islamic education can evolve creatively through processes of cultural adaptation and interpretation without losing the essence of its teachings.

Second, the findings illustrate how the paradigm of Islamic pedagogy is transforming toward a more egalitarian, dialogical, and humanistic model. In this context, the humanistic teacher–student relationship bridges the classical tradition of Islamic education, which emphasizes the moral authority of the teacher, with modern educational demands that prioritize participation, two-way interaction, and the psychological well-being of learners. This approach produces a balance between the teacher’s scholarly authority and the students’ need for empathetic guidance, resulting in an Islamic pedagogical form that is more relevant to current socio-cultural conditions.

Third, these findings align with theories in the anthropology of religion and cultural hybridity, which view religious practice as the result of interaction between normative religious values and the socio-cultural context in which religion is lived. The humanistic relationships revealed in this study represent a form of pedagogical hybridity in which Islamic *tarbiyah* values synergize with local culture to produce educational practices that are more friendly, adaptive, and contextual. Within this framework, the formation of student character is influenced not only by normative doctrine but also by the social and cultural experiences they encounter throughout the learning process.

Fourth, the relevance of these findings extends to the strengthening of Islamic educational policy and practice. Humanistic relational patterns can serve as a foundation for developing Islamic pedagogies oriented toward learner welfare, child protection, and safe learning environments. This approach is in line with the global agenda of Islamic education, which is moving toward the integration of values such as compassion, child-friendly schooling, and social-emotional learning, all of which are essential for cultivating Islamic education that embodies the principle of *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*.

This research presents several significant contributions to the study of religion–culture relations and Islamic education.

First, it conceptualizes the humanistic teacher–student relationship as one manifestation of religion–culture interaction within Islamic education—an angle seldom explored in depth in previous studies. This approach demonstrates that humanistic relational practices are not merely modern pedagogical strategies but also cultural expressions of Islamic value interpretation within Indonesian society.



Second, the research integrates theories of religion–culture relations, anthropology of religion, hybridity concepts, and modern humanistic paradigms into a single analytical framework for empirically understanding Islamic educational practice. This integration of normative and empirical approaches results in a multidimensional analysis that offers a more comprehensive understanding compared to studies that address these aspects separately.

Third, the research formulates a new conceptual model positioning humanistic relations as a form of social protection that strengthens students' emotional well-being, learning safety, and character formation. This social-protection perspective within teacher–student relations represents a new contribution that expands the discourse of Islamic education beyond the moral–spiritual dimension to broader psychological and social dimensions.

Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on Islamic education by offering new insights into the relationship between religion and culture in pedagogical practice. It affirms that Islamic education does not operate solely in a normative-theological space but also interacts deeply with local cultural contexts, producing forms of education that are dynamic and adaptive. Additionally, the research expands the scope of religion–culture theories by applying them directly to pedagogical interactions in pesantren, offering new perspectives on how universal Islamic values are embodied through cultural practices.

Practically, this research provides important recommendations for the development of Islamic education. The humanistic teacher–student relationship can serve as a model for enhancing the quality of educational interaction in pesantren, madrasahs, and modern Islamic schools. These findings can form the basis for teacher training programs focused on empathetic communication, dialogical approaches, and character-building strategies aligned with Islamic values. Moreover, the research opens opportunities for policy development emphasizing child protection, emotional well-being, and character-based learning. Thus, this study contributes significantly to efforts to build Islamic education that is more inclusive, humanistic, and oriented toward human dignity.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the relationship between religion and culture is an ongoing dialectical process in which Islamic teachings, as a universal value system, interact with local cultures that are particular and dynamic. This interaction not only produces diverse expressions of religiosity but also generates new structures of meaning that enrich the Islamic tradition, as reflected in various forms of acculturation, assimilation, and cultural hybridity in Indonesia. These findings reinforce theories of Islamic universality and cultural particularity, acculturation theory, the anthropology of religion,

and postcolonial perspectives that affirm the legitimacy of local Islamic expressions as authentic and valid forms of religious practice.

In the context of Islamic education, this study reveals that understanding the theories of religion–culture relations has strategic relevance for designing educational models that are inclusive, adaptive, and character-oriented. Pedagogical approaches that take cultural context into account have been proven to enhance the effectiveness of Islamic value internalization, strengthen learners’ religious identity, and foster attitudes of tolerance, moderation, and responsiveness to diversity. Culture-sensitive Islamic education becomes a space for dialogue between the universal values of Islam and local traditions, allowing learning to move beyond textual instruction and become embedded in students’ everyday experiences.

Furthermore, this study makes an important contribution to the development of culture-based Islamic education, which positions culture as a source of values, methods, and educational media. The relevance of religion–culture theories is evident in the ability of Islamic education to accommodate local traditions without compromising the purity of *tawhid* and Islamic moral values. This model allows educational processes to become more contextual and humanistic, enabling them to respond to the needs of Indonesia’s diverse Muslim society.

The novelty of this research lies in its formulation of an integrative framework that simultaneously connects the universality–particularity theory, acculturation theory, anthropological perspectives on religion, and postcolonial theory to examine the relevance of religion–culture relations to the development of Islamic education. This approach is rarely found in previous studies, which tend to address Islamic education and culture separately. In addition, this study reaffirms the importance of an Islamic education paradigm that is not only normative-theological but also socio-cultural, thereby producing a model of education that is more adaptive, moderate, and responsive to societal needs.

Overall, this study concludes that theories of religion–culture relations are not only essential for understanding the religiosity of Muslim communities but also serve as a strong theoretical foundation for formulating strategies for the development of Islamic education. Islamic education that successfully integrates the universal values of Islamic teachings with local wisdom will be more effective in building character, strengthening Islamic identity, and cultivating a generation that is religious, inclusive, and civilized.

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