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# Challenging Moderate Muslims: Indonesia's Muslim Schools in the Midst of Religious Conservatism

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**Abstract:** Muslim schools are an important element of education in Indonesia. The school was in place long before Indonesia's independence in 1945. Schools educate Indonesian Muslim children to understand and practice religion while promoting a sense of nationalism. Thanks to Muslim schools, Indonesian Muslims are recognized as being moderate. Recently, however, the moderate nature of Indonesian Islam is challenged by the spirit of conservative Islam. The question is how Muslim schools play their roles in the discourse of moderate versus conservative Muslims. This study identified five issues that are largely discussed among Indonesian Muslims: Islam and state, Muslims–non Muslims relations, non-mainstream Islam, gender, and media. Knowing that there is a strong relationship between society and education, i.e., religious education, it is important to see the relationship between schools and society including how the current conservative trend in Indonesian Islam is being taught at schools. This study explored how the curriculum of (Islamic) religious education potentially contributes toward the development of Indonesian conservative Muslims and how religious education teachers view sensitive issues concerning conservative Islam. To answer these questions, the analysis of religious education curricula and the interviewing of teachers serve as the primary methods of data collection. Four religious education teachers from different provinces of Indonesia were interviewed to reveal their opinions on various religion-related issues. This paper discusses how Islamic education in Indonesia has been designed to present moderate Islam but, at the same time, faces a number of challenges that try to turn religious education into conservative religious doctrines.

**Keywords:** Islamic education; Pesantren; Indonesia; madrasah; moderate Islam

## 1. Introduction

Indonesian Islam has been known for its adaptability to modern society. Hefner (2000), for instance, argues that Indonesian Muslims are moving toward a democratic and pluralist Islam. Hefner's argument is based on the fact that Indonesian Muslims are working toward the creation of a democratic Muslim society. Platzdasch (2009) further observes that the development of Indonesian Muslim society toward a modern Islamic community is based on a political movement. However, the development is moving toward the Western culture by understanding issues related to Islam (Platzdasch 2009). Issues such as human rights, democracy, and gender equality are among the emerging issues Muslim scholars have been facing since the 1990s.

Thanks to the growing number of Muslim schools, Islamic education has been able to promote Islamic teachings within modern society. This research on the curriculum of Muslim schools will prove that there is a reciprocal relationship between Islamic schools and Muslim society (Zuhdi 2006). This means that Muslim society demands or facilitates the development of Islamic schools and, in return, Islamic schools provide education that strengthens the character of Indonesian Muslims.

Hefner (2000) observes that Indonesia has been able to develop a model of democracy compatible with a Muslim-majority country. He found that the existence of civil institutions and public civility are among the most important factors for the creation of a democratic state. Hefner's observation reflects the development of the Indonesian social and political situation. During the last period of the 1990s, a number of Muslim scholars such as Abdurrahman Wahid, Nurcholish Madjid, and Dawam Rahardjo played an important role in shaping the Islamic discourse in the media. Likewise, Muslim organizations such as 'Nahdlatul Ulama' and 'Muhammadiyah' were very influential in the grassroots process.

During the last few years, Hefner's theory on Indonesian Islam has been challenged by the development of conservative Muslims or Islamic populism (Azra 2017). The issues that had been agreed upon such as democracy and multi-culturalism are now being questioned and refuted. The growth of Islamic organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the Indonesian chapter of the Transnational Islamic Party, Front Pembela Islam (FPI), or the Islamic Defenders Front, for instance, indicate that conservatism plays an important role in Indonesian social development. HTI has been officially banned as an organization since 2017. Yet activists and followers of this organization maintain their ideology to promote khilafah (Islamic governance). Hence, the prohibition of HTI does not mean their activists cannot promote their ideology. The activists continue to promote their ideology to Muslim people by arguing that they are sharing religious teachings with fellow Muslims. Similarly, FPI continues to grow especially following the 2016 biggest Muslim mass rally that demanded Basuki Cahaya Purnama, the then Jakarta governor, to step down following his speech that was argued as being against Islam. Initially a social-religious group focused on helping the needy or victims of disasters, FPI is growing into a lobby group with a political agenda. Recently, FPI activists have begun promoting the changing of the government in the next election. Discussions with political party leaders were held under FPI leadership. They are claiming that they represent the voice of ummah (Muslim people). This is what Van Bruinessen (2013) calls "the conservative turn." The release of several controversial fatwas (religious opinions) of Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) or the Indonesia Ulama Council in 2005, according to Van Bruinessen (2011), is a bold indication of the conservative turn. Some of the fatwas include: fatwa on anti-liberalism, secularism, and pluralism, fatwa on condemnation of inter-religious marriage, and fatwa on the 'Ahmadiyah' sect as an apostate of Islam.

The increasing trend of conservative Islam in Indonesia, as described above, leads to several questions including the role of Islamic education. This research was conducted to explain the positions of Islamic education especially religious education teachers concerning issues related to moderate versus conservative Islam in Indonesia. The issues selected are the issues on which Muslims have different opinions. These include Islam and State, Muslim and non-Muslim relations, Islam and gender, non-mainstream Islam, and Islam and the media. While the study is about Muslim school in general, this research focuses on the curricula and teachers of Islamic education. The assumption is that both the curriculum of Islamic teaching and the teachers' understanding of Islamic teaching are very influential on students and society. Additionally, it is commonly understood that a curriculum is not only a part of education policy, but it also represents society's agreement on a certain subject. Religious education is compulsory in Indonesian schools because Indonesian people view religion as an important part of human life.

It is important to note in this section that the notion of "conservative" refers to Van Bruinessen's observation regarding Indonesian Islam. Conservative means a position that rejects the modern, contextual interpretation of Islamic teachings (Van Bruinessen 2011, p. 6) especially when regarding the issues that are discussed within this study. The author places conservative versus moderate to highlight that, in social issues such as democracy, inter-religion relations, and gender, conservative views on Islamic teachings could be a hindrance to Muslim communities for the establishment of mutual relationships with the wider society.

## 2. Islamic Education in Indonesia

Religious education, more specifically Islamic education, in Indonesian schools generally has two meanings. The first is religious education or Islamic education as subjects and parts of the schools' curricula. Religious education is a compulsory subject in every Indonesian school. The schools must provide religious education to students of any religion. This is to ensure that the right of every student to receive religious education is fulfilled. Added to formal curriculum, a number of non-religious-oriented schools also provide other religion-oriented activities at school such as collective prayers and religious teaching in extra-curricular activities. Additionally, Islamic education means an Islamic educational institution that offers more religious teachings and practices at school compared to non-religious oriented schools. There are three types of Islamic education institutions in Indonesia: Sekolah Islam (Muslim School), Madrasah (Islamic School), and Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School).

Islamic educational institution has a long history in Indonesia. It has existed prior to the advent of secular education. Initially, there were just two kinds of Islamic educational institutions (Muslim schools) known as Pesantren and Madrasah. Pesantren is a boarding school that provides religious education for Muslim students. It is the oldest education institution in Indonesia. [Lukens-Bull \(1997\)](#) observes that there was no formal education in Indonesia before the 20th century except 'Pesantren.' Initially, Pesantren only offered religious education. However, due to higher demands for Pesantren to also teach non-religious subjects, most Pesantrens now teach non-religious subjects such as math, sciences, and languages. Meanwhile, Madrasah are day-schools that provide more Islamic teaching in their curricula when compared to secular schools. The first Madrasah in Indonesia was built in 1909 in West Sumatra, which is known as Madrasah Adabiyah ([Yunus 1996](#)). However, it took a long time before Madrasah was recognized as a formal education institution even after Indonesian independence in 1945. It began with the 1975 Three-Minister Decree on the Improvement of the Quality of Islamic Education ([Zuhdi 2005](#)) and was then followed by the 1989 National Education System Act before Madrasah was recognized officially as formal education. It is important to note that, differing from Madrasah in other parts of the world like Pakistan, Indonesian Madrasah provide students with both religious education and a secular curriculum such as sciences, language, and citizenship education. Following the 1975 Three-Minister Decree, the composition of secular subjects constituted the majority of topics in the Madrasah curricula ([Zuhdi 2005](#)). While the majority of Madrasah belong to private institutions, the curricula of Madrasah are regulated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as opposed to the Ministry of Education.

Aside from Pesantren and Madrasah, there is another form of an Islamic education institution in Indonesia known as Sekolah Islam (Islamic School). The term refers to day schools that adopt the Ministry of Education curricula, which is enriched with each school's own religious education. Since Sekolah Islam creates its own religious education curricula, the Ministry of Religious Affairs does not supervise their religious education.

## 3. Challenges for Indonesia's Moderate Islam

Despite various definitions of moderate Islam, the author tends to agree with Azra's notion regarding Indonesia's moderate Islam—compatibility with modernity, democracy, and plurality ([Azra 2006](#)). One of the main features of Indonesia's Islam is the creation of Pancasila.<sup>1</sup> Pancasila represents the country's vision of democracy and pluralism. Scholars such as [Azra \(2006\)](#) and [Hefner \(2000\)](#) argue that democracy as practiced in Indonesia is compatible with Islamic teachings. This is because Indonesian democracy is slightly different from other countries. Indonesian democracy is not a secular one. It allows some space for religions to take important parts and grow.

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<sup>1</sup> Pancasila or The Five Principles consist of Believe in one God, Humanity, The Unity of Indonesia, Democracy, and Social Justice. These principles were first formalized on 1 June 1945, which was a few months before the proclamation of Indonesia's independence.

Recently, Indonesian moderate Islam is facing a serious challenge from various groups of Muslims. The challenges are not only coming from those who disagree with the idea of moderate Islam but also from those who claim themselves as moderates. The notable event of 2 December 2016 in Jakarta shows the challenge to democracy in Indonesia from religious groups. There was a huge mass rally of Muslims in Jakarta, which was claimed to be the largest Muslim demonstration in Islamic history, demanding to send the then Governor of the capital city of Jakarta to jail for his [accused] anti-Islamic statements. Moreover, some Muslim groups have also demanded the government to accommodate their “Islamic agenda” including sharia-based laws, Muslim leadership in Muslim majority areas, and the banning of anti-mainstream Islamic groups such as ‘Shi’a’ and ‘Ahmadiyah’. Thanks to the growing use of social media, these agendas are promoted easily to their Muslim colleagues all over the country. The schools are potential places for the dissemination of various religious and political thoughts especially in a country where religious education has a special place. This is to say, while there are accepted religious doctrines among the believers, there are also a number of doctrines that are interpreted differently among them. The question is who controls the authority to decide what interpretations are acceptable.

Van Bruinessen (2011) identified three possible causes of the growing trend of religious conservatism in Indonesia: the majority of Indonesian Muslims are actually conservative. The proponents of moderate Islam changed their agenda into politics and, hence, weakened the promotion of moderate Islam. The growing influence of the middle eastern countries that promote conservative Islam ideology. Nevertheless, there is concern over the development of conservative ideology in Indonesia and one of the means of transmitting the ideology is through school (Hasan 2009). As a place for the transmission of knowledge, skills, and values from generation to generation, school is also a potential place to transfer various ideologies.

There are two important measures for understanding the context and the contents of religious education: curriculum and teachers. Despite the fact that education is part of the district autonomous policy, the curriculum in Indonesian education is heavily centralized. The government including both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs develop curricula for all levels of schooling. Successful curriculum implementation, however, relies heavily on teachers. There are two different institutions that supervise Indonesian teachers. Teachers of religious education mostly belong to the Ministry of Religious Affairs (centralized) while teachers of other subjects belong to the district or provincial governments.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

There are two main sources of data for this study. The first is the curriculum documents of Islamic education in Madrasah. The curriculum is obtained from the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ publication on the curriculum of religious education. The second is teachers of religious (i.e., Islam) education. Some structured interviews were conducted with four religious education teachers from different institutions: one teacher of state Madrasah in Manokwari-West Papua, one religious education teacher of State Vocational School (SMKN) in Cianjur–West Jawa, one religious education teacher in Pondok Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) in Bekasi–West Jawa, and one religious education teacher from a private Islamic school in Jakarta.

The teachers were requested to respond to twenty-four questions, clustered into five categories: The issue of state, Muslims, and non-Muslim relations, Non-mainstream Islam, Islam and media, and gender issues. To maintain objectivity, the teachers were told that the questions were only for research purposes and identities would remain anonymous. The questions were open ended, so the teachers were free to respond, according to their own views. Since there were plenty of questions, the author did not explore every answer that the teachers gave. The author limited the study to only analyzing available initial responses from the teachers. This was important to gain genuine answers from the teachers.

## 5. Islamic Education: Moderate vs. Conservative Islam

### 5.1. Islamic Education Curricula

There are two forms of curriculum for Islamic education: Madrasah curriculum and the general school curriculum. Following the 1975 Three-Minister Decree on Islamic Education, the government and experts on Islamic education simplified the Islamic education curriculum in Madrasah. Thus, the contents of Islamic education curriculum in Madrasah are divided into five subjects: Quran–Hadith (the Quran and the Prophet traditions), Akidah and Akhlak (theology and morality), Fiqh (Islamic law), Islamic history, and the Arabic language. This division began in 1976 when the government introduced the first official Madrasah curriculum. These subjects are compulsory for students beginning in elementary Madrasah (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah) to high school-level Madrasah (Madrasah Aliyah). The latest regulation on Madrasah curricula was the Minister of Religious Affairs' Decree No. 165 from 2014 regarding the 2013 Curriculum of Islamic Education Subjects in Madrasah.

Found in regular schools, Islamic education is compressed into one subject called Pendidikan Agama Islam (Islamic religious education). Hence, even though there is only one subject in the secular schools as opposed to five subjects in Madrasah, there are four sub-divisions of the subject, which is similar to the contents of Madrasah curriculum: Quran–Hadith (the Quran and the Prophet's traditions), Akidah and Akhlak (theology and morality), Fiqh (Islamic law), and Sejarah Peradaban Islam (The history of Islamic civilization). The Minister of Education Decree No. 21 Year 2016 standardized the contents of curricula for all subjects and for all levels of schooling including religious education. This standard explicitly mentions four sub-divisions for the content of religious education in general schools ([The Ministry of Education and Culture 2016](#)). Another difference between religious education in Madrasah and secular schools is the allocated time. The allocated time for religious education in Madrasah is two hours for each subject or approximately 10 hours per week ([The Ministry of Religious Affairs 2014](#)). Meanwhile, religious education in general schools allocates only three hours per week. This is certainly not surprising because Madrasah is a religious-oriented school and, hence, it is normal to have a more religious education curriculum.

There are two important features that the author would like to highlight concerning the religious education curriculum in Indonesia: the objective and the content.

#### 5.1.1. The Objective

The main objective of religious education in Indonesia is to instill religious beliefs and strengthen religious values and practices among the believers of every religion. This objective is clearly mandated by the National Education Act No. 20 Year 2003, which states that "... national education ... aims to develop children's potential into human beings that are faithful and obedient to God with good moral conducts, healthy, knowledgeable, smart, creative, independent, and responsible as well as democratic citizens" ([Presiden Republik Indonesia 2003](#)). Since submission to God is a part of the national education objectives, religious education is designed to instill faith into children. It should be noted, however, despite the fact that Muslims are a majority, Indonesia acknowledges different religions and religious education should be provided in accordance with students' beliefs.

Indonesia recognizes six different religious beliefs and traditions: Islam, Christian, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhism, and Confucianism. While Muslims constitute the majority of the population, Islam is not the only official religion. The constitution grants equal rights for every citizen regardless of their religious beliefs. Despite the fact that Indonesia is a multi-religion country, religious education is not directed toward understanding other religious traditions. Religious education in Indonesia is designed toward understanding students' religious beliefs and practices without understanding other religious traditions. This is what [Stoeckl \(2015\)](#) categorizes as a confessional religious education approach.

As far as the curriculum of religious education is concerned, there are four levels of core competence of religious education: early primary (grades 1–3), upper primary (grades 4–6), secondary

(grades 7–9), and high school (grades 10–12) (The Ministry of Religious Affairs 2014). The differences among the grades are shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Core competence (spiritual competence) of Islamic education in Madrasah.

Grades 1–3	Grades 4–6	Grades 7–9	Grades 10–12
Accepting and exercising the religious teachings which he/she embraces.	Accepting, exercising, and appreciating the religious teachings which he/she embraces.	Appreciating and living the religious teachings, which he/she embraces.	Living and practicing the religious teachings, which he/she embraces.

Similar to Madrasah, core (spiritual) competencies of the curriculum in general (secular) schools are also directed toward accepting and practicing the students' religious beliefs (The Ministry of Education and Culture 2016). Stated in a slightly different manner, the core competencies of primary and secondary education of general school can be found in the Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Core competence (spiritual competence) of education in general schools.

Grades 1–6	Grades 7–9	Grades 10–12
Accepting, exercising, and appreciating the religious teachings, which he/she embraces.	Appreciating and living the religious teachings, which he/she embraces.	Living and practicing the religious teachings, which he/she embraces.

### 5.1.2. The Content

Both the Madrasah's and General School's curricula provide comprehensive guidelines on the scope and contents of religious education in Madrasah and general schools. Generally, there are two main differences between the two. The first is that religious education in Madrasah is categorized into five different subjects while secular schools only recognize one religious education subject. The second is that the time allocated for religious education in Madrasah is four to five times as much as it is in general schools.

While there are differences in volume and time-load, the contents of Islamic education in Madrasah and general schools are closely related. The main difference in terms of content is the Arabic language, which is not taught in general schools. Generally, the content of Islamic education in Madrasah are described below.

1. Al-Qur'an–Hadith is a subject that introduces students to basic sources of Islamic teachings and values. The Quran and the Hadith lay the foundation on akidah (principles of Islamic belief), akhlak (principles and practices of Islamic moral conduct), and syariah or fiqh (Islamic law).
2. Akidah–Akhlak is a combined subject of basic Islamic beliefs and moral conducts. Akidah is the principle of Islamic beliefs. Muslim behaviors that are regulated in syariah or fiqh and akhlak are based on akidah, which means that it is the belief that leads Muslims to act in accordance with syariah and akhlak.
3. Fiqh is a system or a set of regulations that control the relationship between human beings to Allah, to other human-beings, and to other creatures.
4. Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam (SKI) or Islamic history and culture is a note on the development of the lives of Muslims over time. It shows the way Muslims pray, interact, practice their moral conduct, develop social systems, and spread their religious beliefs and practices throughout the world.
5. Bahasa Arab or Arabic language is an important medium for understanding Islamic teachings from its original sources. Using the language, people can learn Islam directly from the Quran, the hadith, and other reference books that further explore the explanation of Islamic teachings such as Tafsir (Quranic exegesis) and Syarah Hadith (explanation of Hadith) (The Ministry of Religious Affairs 2014).

These five subjects represent the complexity of Islamic teachings. These subjects introduce principles, elaborations, and practices of Islamic teachings from basic to advanced, according to the levels of schooling. The religious education curriculum goes on to explain the detail of core and basic competencies of religious education and guides teachers to prepare their lesson plans. The curriculum also provides teachers with detailed explanations of each competency. Thus, teachers can perform their duties in transmitting knowledge, values, and skills as well as in transforming students' behaviors to reflect Islamic teachings.

A number of studies found that there is some potential for spreading radical messages through the content of the religious education curriculum. [Zainiyati \(2016\)](#), for instance, explored the curriculum of Islamic education through a radicalization perspective. She found that a number of topics in the existing curriculum potentially lead students to have radical views. Topics such as khilafah (Muslim ummah under a single leadership) and jihad (the spirit of fighting) are among topics that Zainiyati observed to be possibly misunderstood. When understood incorrectly, the topics will lead students to misconstrue the noble meaning of jihad and the maximizing of efforts in finding good ways to serve Allah through good deeds. Jihad could be understood as fighting against those who do not believe in Islam and those who are deemed as anti-Islam.

Similarly, [Hasniati \(2017\)](#) investigated the use of Islamic education textbooks in high school. She found that all the observed textbooks contained ambiguous texts that could be interpreted as either moderate or conservative. The books contained both tolerant as well as intolerant messages. Furthermore, she found that some radical messages were explicitly stated in the textbooks. There was a hadith that says: "... those of you who see munkar (misconduct) should be able to change it with their hands. If hands are not possible, then they should use their mouth. If the mouth also cannot work, then at least use your heart and that is the weakest form of belief" ([Hasniati 2017](#), p. 93). It is important to note that if teachers understand and explain the textual meaning of the hadith without further explanation on the context, then students will learn that they have to use their physical strength (hands) to change people's bad behaviors since it is better than using words or silent condemnation ([Hasniati 2017](#)). This will further create a chaotic society since people will become the police of good conduct for other people while the standards between groups of people might be different.

## 5.2. Teachers' Perceptions

There are five issues the author argues that represent the discourse of conservative versus moderate Muslims. Different responses to these issues reflect various positions of Muslims. The differences, however, are not clear-cut. The positions are somehow spread across continuums rather than as two completely different sides. The issues selected here were state form, religious differences, position of non-mainstream Islam, media, and gender. These are issues that are continuously debated among Muslims across time and place. The study shows that religious education teachers shared different responses for the selected issues. However, the author certainly cannot make a simplification to categorize the teachers into conservative, moderate, or even liberal Muslims. What can be seen is how religious education teachers have different opinions about certain issues. Teachers' positions on issues related to their expertise will certainly influence their students' understanding. Therefore, it is important to know teachers' opinions on certain issues related to religion and social lives. [Woodward \(2015\)](#) emphasized that education or school is influential to everyone. What people learn at school will later influence their worldview and decision making. It is important to note that a school's influence on students is dependent on teachers. It is the teachers that implement the curriculum and it is the teachers that have a direct influence on students. The following are the responses from four religious education teachers concerning the previously mentioned issues.

### 5.2.1. The Issue of State

The Issue of State has existed since the beginning of the country's history. When the founding fathers of the country discussed the creation of a new independent country, one of the issues discussed

emotionally was the form of the new country and whether it would be an Islamic state or a secular one. The solution was the creation of a secular system accommodating the needs of different religious groups. The unifying factor of the debate was the creation of Pancasila that serves as the nation's ideology. Pancasila constitutes five principles that reflect the beliefs, culture, and imagination of the country. Using those principles, the country's elite from different ideological backgrounds such as nationalism, religious (Islam), and socialism agreed to create a country that catered to different ideological interests.

When asked about Pancasila, all the teachers agreed that Pancasila is the best solution for the country. One, however, regretted that there was a missing clause that might serve better for Muslims. The clause known as a part of the Jakarta Charter, says "... with the obligation for Muslims to practice religion in accordance with Islamic shari'a". (Al-Hamdi 2015, p. 44). Teacher 2, who wanted to maintain the missing clause in Pancasila asserted, "... indeed, sad when knowing the history of the deletion of seven words in Pancasila, which refer to the Islamic shari'a. If I lived in those days, I must defend the Islamic shari'a in Pancasila."

The issue of the implementation of Islamic shari'a as a formal law in Indonesia still exists regardless that all parties agreed to Pancasila. During the so-called conservative turn, the issue of the implementation of shari'a law began to rise again. It is not surprising that two out of four teachers agreed with limited implementation of shari'a law in Indonesia. Teacher 1 argues that "I agree to some extent especially for those who commit drunkenness, adultery, and corruption. It is necessary to give them deterrent effects ... " and teacher 2 said, "It is legitimate if people want to apply Islamic shari'a in Indonesia. It might not be feasible for all over the country, but it is workable in certain districts ... ". On the contrary, teacher 2 proposed a different opinion, "... it is better to increase tolerance instead of implementing shari'a law. We already have Pancasila in Indonesia ... " and teacher 4 similarly argued that "... ideally, Indonesia is a non-religion-affiliated country, but is inspired by religious values like what we are having now."

There is another aspiration from some Muslim groups that goes beyond the implementation of Islamic shari'a law—the changing of the country's system from democracy to khilafah. Khilafah, according to some Muslim leaders, is an ideal form of government that is claimed to be based on Islamic teaching. Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) is known as a transnational organization promoting the khilafah system. While the organization has been banned in Indonesia, a number of HTI activists remain free to spread their ideas for having an Islamic country under the khilafah format. When the teachers were asked about the khilafah system, three of them disagreed with the ideology.

Confirming their disagreement to the khilafah system, Teacher 1 asserted, "I do not agree because there is no single khilafah system that all Muslims agree upon ... Besides, khilafah system does not guarantee that Indonesia will be better with it compared to the democratic system that we have now." Teacher 3 also confirmed that, "(khilafah) is not compatible with Indonesia since Indonesia is based on Pancasila and a democratic system." Teacher 4 strongly argued that, "khilafah is not an Islamic system because politics in Islam is a matter of religious opinion (ijtihad) from a Muslim scholar that is subject to debate."

In a slightly different tone, Teacher 3 proposed that "it was one's right to exercise his/her views, including to implement the khilafah system, so long as it was used in a lawful way." This sounds like an agreement to exercise the khilafah system in a country as long as the exercise does not go against the law.

### 5.2.2. Muslim and Non-Muslim Relationship

The issue of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is always dynamic. While there is no question that Muslims and believers of other religions can live side-by-side harmoniously in Indonesia, conflicts among different religious believers continue to exist. There are various reasons causing the conflicts such as economy, family, or culture, but religious sentiment can always take its part especially when the conflict involves people from different religious backgrounds.

Arakaki (2004) observed that, despite the fact that Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, it has no experience in using Islam as a political and social hegemony. This means that the efforts to make Islam a dominant religion will continue to exist even though not all Muslims agree. The teachers' responses reflected the different positions. Two teachers agreed that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Indonesia has been positive. Teacher 1 said, "... the relationship between Muslims and other religious adherents in Indonesia is very positive compared to other countries. This is because we have Pancasila ... The fact is that we did not have a major religious conflict for a long period of time. Even when we have such a problem, it could be immediately responded to." The other two participants, on the contrary, found problems in inter-religious relationships. Teacher 3 said, "... not good enough. The fact is that there are some cases where different religious believers disrespect each other through social media."

While a majority of Muslims might agree with the idea that Muslims should respect believers of other religions, as stated in Islamic teaching, they have different opinions on the rights of others such as the right to leadership. Some Muslim groups rejected the idea of having a non-Muslim serve as a leader in a Muslim-majority area. The obvious example is the case of the general election for the governor of Jakarta in 2017. One of the candidates was a non-Muslim and had been serving as the vice-governor and acting-governor during the previous period. A number of Muslim conservative groups such as FPI did not agree with his candidacy and tried their best to defeat him by supporting his opponents. Various religious issues were exploited to campaign against him including accusing him of religious blasphemy (Setijadi 2017). Furthermore, a Muslim governor was elected and the non-Muslim candidate was imprisoned for the religious blasphemy. Setijadi (2017) also noted that 33% of voters for the non-Muslim candidate were Muslims, which indicates that some groups of Muslims believed that a non-Muslim can also be a leader in a Muslim-majority area.

Another sensitive issue is greetings for religious holidays. While it is acceptable for all Muslims to receive greetings from other believers for observing religious holidays, not all Muslims agree with greeting others for their religious holidays especially Christmas. Offering a greeting for Christmas means, to the objectors, agreeing with what Christians believe, which is against what they believe is the core of Islamic teaching, tawhid (the oneness of God). Considering the era of social media, the prohibition of offering Merry Christmas is easily spread across media and is confusing to ordinary Muslims. Additionally, the same groups also prohibit Muslim workers from wearing symbols of holidays of other religions such as a Santa's hat.

The above cases confirm that there remain a number of crucial issues concerning the relationship between Muslims and believers of other religions in Indonesia. While a majority of Muslims agree that they should respect believers of different religions, they disagree on the rights of believers of other religions in public including leadership rights. This does not mean that inter-religious conflict is a major problem. Different religious believers have lived harmoniously in Indonesia for decades. Masjids (mosques), churches, and temples stand side-by-side in many places and all different believers can practice their religions freely and securely. However, inter-religious social relationships have tended to weaken in the last few years due to conservative interpretations of religious scriptures.

### 5.2.3. Non-Mainstream Islam

The issue of non-mainstream Islam remains controversial. The existence of some non-mainstream groups especially those who actively promote their teachings triggered anger in some Muslim groups and, hence, social conflicts cannot be avoided. Some Muslim groups believe that the non-mainstream Islamic groups such as Shi'a and Ahmadiyah should be banned from Indonesia since they violated the principles of Islam and their existence would be dangerous for other Muslims. An example of this case is the Sunni-Shi'i conflict in East Java in 2007 when a group of anti-shi'a followers attacked a house of a Shi'i cleric in the Island of Madura, East Java (Ida 2016).

The uneasiness of mainstream Muslims to accept non-mainstream groups is also reflected by the responses of the teacher respondents. Three out of four teachers expressed their disagreement for

accepting non-mainstream Muslims as part of all Muslims. Teacher 1 responded, “... they have the same rights as a citizen within the social context. However, we have to follow the fatwa (religious opinion) of MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) on their status in Islam. It means that when MUI says that they are defiant from Islam, we have to correct them...”. Teacher 4 spoke more strongly, “Shi’a and Ahmadiyah are not Islam in the theological perspective.” Only one teacher offered a milder response to the question. Teacher 3 said, “Shi’a and Ahmadiyah groups have the same rights as other Muslims in Indonesia, so long as their teachings are relevant with Islamic shari’a in Indonesia.” He clearly mentioned that Shi’is and Ahmadi have the same rights as other Muslims, which means that they are part of Islam.

A number of studies reported that non-mainstream Islamic groups such as Shi’a and Ahmadiyah continue to exist despite reluctance from the mainstream Muslim group to accommodate their presence. [Zulkifli \(2009\)](#), for instance, investigated the struggle of Shi’i group to integrate with the wider society and obtain recognition as well as access to public positions. Shi’i in Indonesia, according to [Zulkifli \(2009\)](#), is a stigmatized group that continues to maintain and extend their existence through education, publication, and organization. Unlike Shi’a, Ahmadiyah is facing an even more difficult situation in Indonesia. Despite its long existence in Indonesia (since the 1920s), the doctrines of Ahmadiyah remain unacceptable to the majority of Muslims. A great number of Muslims feel disturbed with their presence since most of their basic beliefs are not acceptable to mainstream Muslims. The beliefs include the existence of another revelation after the Quran, the existence of another prophet after Muhammad, and the condemnation of non-Ahmadi Muslims as deviant ([Rofiqoh 2015](#)). Therefore, a number of Muslim leaders call upon Ahmadiyah to claim a new religion rather than claiming to be a part of Islam ([Avonius 2008](#)).

These studies confirm that the presence of non-mainstream Muslim groups that have existed for years in Indonesia remain unacceptable in many places. Their struggle to have equal rights to their fellow Muslims seems to be very difficult. It is easier for many Muslims to deal with believers of other religions because the line is clear and they can respect each other. Dealing with non-mainstream is tricky because they claim to believe in the same religion while some major doctrines are different. What makes things worse is often the spirit of the missionary that every group has. Some non-mainstream groups often promote their doctrines and try to persuade the mainstream group.

#### 5.2.4. Islam and Media

The representation of Muslims in national and international media is among the most commonly discussed issues. Media are an important means for spreading ideas, news, and for building images. Promoting the nature of a peaceful Islam, for many, is part of their duty as Muslims. Thanks to social media that allows everyone to spread publicly their ideas and opinions, devoted Muslims can share easily their religious opinions and activities as ways to promote their religion. However, mainstream media undoubtedly remains important. It serves as reference points from which many people obtain information.

The issues of radicalism and terrorism, for instance, are most often reported by media as related to a certain Muslim group. [Rane and Abdalla \(2008\)](#) observed that, in Western societies like Australia where Muslims are a minority, media tend to present Islam in negative ways such as focusing on violence, terrorism, and backwardness. Similarly, [Alatas \(2005\)](#) noted that what Western media represent “... orientalist’s stereotypes and misconception of Islam.” In short, media have a very important role in shaping the way Islam is viewed in any society.

Unlike the Western World, Indonesian Islam has a dynamic relationship with the media. While the issues of terrorism and radicalism remain interesting for mainstream media, the media do not easily relate any case of terrorism or radicalism to mainstream Islam. Moreover, considering the vast majority of the audience is Muslim, the messages of Islamic teaching are part of the important contents of the media. [Barkin \(2014\)](#), for instance, observed that Indonesian private television producers were successful in taking advantage of Muslim viewers to commercialize Islam. Despite a number of

criticisms that they are facing (Barkin 2014), the media continues to present Islamic messages through television to attract viewers.

Most of the respondents agreed that Indonesian media presents Islam in various positive ways. Teacher 2, confirming Barkin's finding, stated that "...it is good so that da'wa (Islamic propagation) does not only occur in masjids (mosques) ... when Islam exists in media, da'wah meets wider audiences." Teacher 3, furthermore, asserted that "I so far rely on the national media to confirm whether or not a piece of information is a hoax. Likewise, [I rely on national media about] news about Islam." However, when asked about the representation of Islam in national and international media, two teachers gave negative responses. Teacher 1 said that "... in my opinion, Islam has not been significantly represented in national and international media. The media focus more on social, economy, politics, and security issues. The segment about Islam is insignificant." Less vehemently, Teacher 3 asserted, "... not (well represented) yet. However, it will not be a problem if the national and international media carry out their mission honestly."

### 5.2.5. Gender Issue

The issue of gender is a sensitive case in the Muslim world including Indonesia despite the fact that Indonesian society has a long history of having women participate in public domains such as market and governance. Subsequent to the fall of Suharto's regime in 1997, the following election (1999) gave a big opportunity to Megawati Soekarnoputri to run for president since her party ranked first in parliamentary representation. However, Ms. Soekarnoputri failed to claim the presidential seat at that time due to the reluctance of a large group of Muslim parliamentary members. Those who opposed her candidacy for the presidential position argued that female leadership is a controversial issue in Islam. Hence, for Muslim parliamentary members, it was better to have a male president compared to a female one that might spark controversy and further rejection from Muslim groups (Sadikin 2008). Megawati Soekarnoputri eventually became Indonesia's first female President in 2001 until 2004 after the failure of Abdurrahman Wahid to maintain his presidential tenure following severe criticism from Parliament. Ida (2001) reflected on the phenomena of the role of Indonesian women in the public sphere. She found that the social construct of women in Indonesia represents the culture of Javanese patriarchal society as well as the majority interpretation of Islamic teaching. The female role has been focused more on the family both as mother and housewife. However, Ida further found that, recently, the situation is shifting since more women are involved actively in public spheres.

The involvement of women in public spheres received positive replies from the respondents. All agreed that Muslim women have the right to be involved in public spheres. However, they differed in the degree to which the involvement was acceptable. Teacher 2 suggested a very minimum involvement, "... welcome if the women are capable (to be involved in the public sphere), but the portion may be less (compared to male) ... ". Other teachers responded that it is important for women to be involved in public roles. Teacher 3, for instance, said, "... to become human beings that benefit others, their involvement in public activities makes women useful."

While all teachers agreed that women should have their rights in serving public goods, they have different opinions about female leadership. Teachers 1 and 4 agreed that women had the right to become leaders in the public sphere as long as they had the capacity. Teachers 2 and 3, on the contrary, believed that women cannot serve as leaders in public except if there is not a more capable man to take the position.

## 6. Discussion

Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country in the world. As a result of interaction between Islamic teachings and the rich Indonesian culture, Indonesian Islam is somehow different from other Muslim-majority countries especially compared to the Middle East. Van Bruinessen (1999) observed that Indonesian Islam had its own forms of culture that were different from other Muslim places, but it only spread around the archipelago. Azra (2006) identified Indonesian Islam as moderate and

not identical to Arab culture. Celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, for instance, is a form of culture in Indonesian Islam. This is an example of how local tradition adopts Islam without changing its main mission. The other major characteristic of Indonesian Islam is its adaptability to the pluralistic nature of the country. Indonesian Muslims live harmoniously with believers of other religions. When visiting major cities in Indonesia, it is not unusual to find a masjid (mosque) near a church or a temple. This reflects a symbol of pluralism and tolerance. It is not an exaggeration when [Hasyim \(2013\)](#) proposed Indonesian Islam could become a model of democracy for other Muslim countries. All of the above examples reflect the worldview of Indonesian people, which is summarized in the country's five principles, Pancasila.

Lately, the existence of Indonesian Islam has met some challenges from outside especially from the Middle Eastern model of Islam. Several sensitive and critical issues that were resolved by the founding fathers of Indonesia such as Islam and state are currently being challenged by the so-called neo-conservative Muslims. While the debate between the moderates and the conservatives in Indonesian Islam is not a new phenomenon, the presence of the current debate is crucial since it relates to the global issues on radicalism and terrorism. A number of terrorism suspects in Indonesia have some connections to global terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS ([Gunaratna 2018](#)). It obviously is difficult to find terrorism suspects before they commit a terrorist act. However, the spread of their ideology has allowed them to expand their messages to their Muslim fellows.

School is a crucial place where the ideology of racism and radicalism could be internalized. Therefore, it is important to know the content of religious (Islamic) education as well as the teachers who deliver the contents. The term radicalism itself is potentially biased since it mostly refers to the Western understanding of radicalism. The author argues, however, that radicalism as an idea means the way of thinking that neglects democracy, human rights, and plurality. Therefore, issues such as Islam and state, different groups of people, and gender are important topics for discussion, which is mentioned by the teachers.

As this study found, there are a number of issues that need to be further discussed and followed with careful attention. The first is the issue of the content of Islamic education. It is always problematic when presenting Islamic teachings to a wider Muslim audience. While the sources of Islamic teachings are basically the same, The Quran and Hadith (the Prophet tradition), there are various interpretations of both when it comes to implementation. Thus, many Muslims disagree with various issues. Take the issue of khilafah as an example. Some Muslims argue that khilafah (Islamic governance) is a non-negotiable concept mandated by the Prophet and, hence, every Muslim should aim to support khilafah. Other Muslims argue that governance is a matter of human worldly business. Allah has given human beings the ability to think what is right and what is wrong as well as what is good and what is bad, so that they will be able to design a concept for their own personal and collective rights. History shows that the practice of khilafah in the Muslim world did not work very well. Thus, it is up to the best thoughts of the people of a country to create its own governance and, in the Indonesian case, the Republic of Indonesia is based on Pancasila.

The second is the issue of the teachers' understanding of Islamic teaching. This study found that teachers have different opinions regarding sensitive issues regarding Islam in its social context. Some teachers tend to be closer to conservative ideas. Others tended to be more moderate in their understanding of Islam. There is actually no clear demarcation between conservatives and moderates. However, one can generalize that the conservatives tended to be more closed to differences while the moderates tended to be more accepting of differences. The attitudes toward the rights of non-believers of Islam and non-mainstream Muslims are a good example to distinguish between the conservatives and the moderates. The challenges are from conservative teachers who tend to protect their students from different beliefs. They assume that, to secure their students' faith, they have to minimize contact with those who have different beliefs. Therefore, potential conflicts between different religious believers are higher. Likewise, potential conflicts among different theological schools will also increase.

It is important, therefore, to review the content of the curriculum of Islamic religious education and find ways to minimize the conservative thoughts without losing respect for different schools of Islamic teaching. Similarly, it is important to have open and sustainable dialogues between teachers of religious education to share their views and understanding of religious education within the context of a pluralistic society. It is also necessary for religious education teachers to have experience living as a minority in order to have a good relationship with the majority.

## 7. Conclusions

Religion plays an important role in Indonesian society, which is true in many other places around the world. The changing social circumstances, for various reasons, create new challenges to religious values that have been in place for a very long time. Some religious thinkers propose new approaches to understand and contextualize religious teaching while others maintain the perennial doctrines of religion. Thus, different responses from various religious groups concerning issues related to religion and social life are found.

The presence of religious education in secular schools and the existence of religious schools in Indonesia indicate that religion is very important in Indonesian society. The way religion is presented in school further influences how Indonesian people view and practice religion. Therefore, both curriculum and teachers of religious education play very significant roles in shaping the religious perspective of Indonesian society.

Van Bruinessen's observation on the "conservative turn" in Indonesia (Van Bruinessen 2013) seems to find its roots in education. The curriculum is certainly a place where different ideological positions struggle to be recognized or even adopted as "the official" understanding of religious doctrines. Subjects such as Islamic education in secular schools, theology (akidah), and Islamic law (fiqh) in Madrasah have the potential to present both moderate and conservative understandings of Islam. While the government tries to minimize the influence of conservative interpretations through the official religious education curriculum, a number of schools (especially private Muslim schools) might employ a curriculum of their own.

As the interpreters and the implementers of curriculum, teachers play very significant roles in shaping students' understanding. Even if a religious education curriculum is designed to be more moderate and accommodating to social changes, the message could be different in the classroom when a teacher presents it differently. This suggests that the battleground for moderate and conservative ideologies does not only appear during the creation of a religious education curriculum but also in defining who will teach the curriculum. This author believes one of the weaknesses in teacher education especially their religious education, which is the lack of social context for understanding the religion. Religion is often presented in a more normative way without trying to contextualize the teachings. It is very difficult to implement norms that have existed for centuries into societies that have different ways of life. It is, therefore, very important that religious education teachers situate religion into the very complex structure of today's society. Teachers of religious education need additional tools for understanding religion in addition to religious knowledge alone. Understanding politics, sociology, history, and information technology is very important for religious education teachers. The teachers should be able to present religious teachings as a dynamic set of values that people in today's world need to have.

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