

# ISLAMIC EDUCATION FOR SEA MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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## KEYWORD

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## ABSTRACT

*Religious education in schools in many of Southeast Asian countries is compulsory. In the Malay-Muslim majority countries, Islamic education like other religions education is a must, and the governments mandate and support it fully as part of the national education system. Islamic education is, however, often described in media as a hotbed for radicalization. Although most of this description is not valid, the tendency of some Islamic schools to become less moderate and less tolerant has been evident by the growing numbers of schools which are influenced by radical ideologies of Islam such as Salafism. Based on analysis of Islamic education practices in some SEA countries and Grimmit's theory of religious education, this paper proposes a model of Islamic education which may be useful in shaping the Islamic religion classes to respond to challenges of religious and cultural diversity. This model is an initial thought of how to design a more humanist religion class, therefore, open for further debates and refinements*

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## Introduction

The region of Southeast Asia is composed of very diverse society in terms of ethnicity, religion and politics (Bouma, Ling, & Pratt, 2010). Each country has its unique characteristics of diversity. Indonesia, for instance, as the largest and most populous country, is characterized by hundreds of ethnic groups, hundreds of local languages, various religions and faiths including world and traditional faiths. In Thailand and Burma, beside ethnic diversity, significant numbers of Muslims and other religious people make the population diverse, even though Buddhists are the majority. In terms of politics, although SEA countries have agreed to adhere to a belief in building a regional identity, variety of political preferences – from monarchy to democratic – has made each country distinct from another (Jonsson, 2010).

Despite the above diversity, religious education in schools in many of SEA countries is compulsory. In the Malay-Muslim majority countries, Islamic education like other religions education is a must, and the governments mandate and support it fully as part of the national education system. Islamic education is, however, often described in media as a hotbed for radicalization. Although most of this description is not valid, the tendency of some Islamic schools to become less moderate and less tolerant has been evident by the growing numbers of schools which are influenced by radical ideologies of Islam such as Salafism. Many studies in Indonesia indicate this worrying phenomenon discovering their lack of compliance with the government's regulation

especially with regards to civic involvement as citizens of Indonesia (Hasan, 2008; Subhan, 2006; Wahid, 2014). Azyumardi Azra in one media interview has recently pointed out that 200 Salafi schools are reluctant to observe the national flag-raising ceremony (Intan, 2017). Scholars have observed that Islam in Indonesia in general has turned to more conservative with less tolerant attitudes of Muslims (Bruinessen, 2013; Fealy, 2007).

In this paper, I would like to propose a model of Islamic education which may be useful in shaping the Islamic religion classes to respond to challenges of religious and cultural diversity. I will structure this paper into several sections. First, I will present relevant findings of how Islamic education has been so far implemented in some of SEA countries. Second, I will review three relevant models of religious education developed by Grimmitt (1987). Third, I will propose a model for Islamic education, which I think is appropriate to the context of multicultural society in Southeast Asia.

### **A Brief Description of Islamic Education in SEA**

Islam has spread in the region of Southeast Asia short after its early inception (MacAmis, 2002). It has now established a very large number of followers. In some countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, Islam is followed by the majority of populations, while there are significant numbers of Muslims living in Singapore, Thailand, Philippine and Burma. It can be said that most Malay inhabitants follow Islam spreading throughout SEA countries.

Following the dissemination of Islam, Islamic education found its feet in the region starting from its simplest form of education, i.e. teaching processes in mosques, small prayer houses, and even houses of religious preachers. This developed into the inception of surau, pondok, pesantren or Islamic boarding schools which have been typical throughout Malay community in SEA (Azra, 1999; Madmarn, 1999). In Indonesia, many pesantren have developed progressively to become modern educational institutions by changing curriculum, management and facilities, while some preserve their traditionalism being focused on only Islamic teachings through the readings of classical Arabic Islamic texts (Dhofier, 1985; Mastuhu, 1994). Similarly, in Thailand, many pondok have transformed into modern Islamic schools adapting to the government curriculum while preserving strong Islamic teachings at the same time (Liow, 2009). However, it is important to note that while there has been a force for Islamic education to modernize itself, its response is quite various from one context to another.

The diversity of Islamic educational practices in this region is undoubtedly high and shaped by ideologies, social and cultural contexts, political determinants and even global forces. In the context of Indonesia, Islamic (boarding) schools as an institutional manifestation are various in curriculum orientations, types of management, and level of facilities. However, from the existing literature (Hasan, 2008; Liow, 2009; Parker, 2008; Parker & Raihani, 2011; Raihani, 2010; Raihani, Karim, Asy'ari, & Mahnun, 2016; Zuhdi, 2005) several common characteristics of Islamic education across the region can be drawn as follows:

*First*, Like teaching other religions, teaching Islamic religion in the SEA countries is confessional in nature. This means that the teaching is aimed at instilling faith and commitment to the religion so that pupils become pious Muslims. The teaching implementation does not always mean to be conducted by private agencies or non-government organizations like what 'confessional' mostly means in the western secular context. In the SEA region, it refers to the process of teaching to nurture religious commitment in pupils conducted by either state or private schools. Some theoretical insights about approaches to religious will be discussed in the following section.

*Second*, In the light of the confessional approach, teaching Islamic religion heavily uses an indoctrination model by which teachers impose certain belief and understandings to students in almost non-critical ways. Beside ignoring the critical nature of Islamic teachings which expect the use of reasoning in understanding Islamic concepts and wisdoms, this indoctrination approach neglects students' autonomy of thinking critically about religious teachings. As a result, many teachers still use heavily memorization of Islamic texts.

*Third*, The founders' ideology has in a great deal influenced how Islamic schools are oriented in terms of the Islamic studies curriculum. This is why one Islamic school may differ greatly from another. Often Islamic studies in these institutions teach only one particular Islamic sect (madzhab) and stifle students from the chance to understand other sects (madzahib). The currently mushrooming salafi schools even impose only its own sect in teaching Islamic studies and promote the anti-bid'ah slogan which often means closing from understanding and respecting differences.

*Fourth*, In many Islamic schools in SEA, there is an insertion of religious studies in one or two units of Islamic religion classes. The principles and main concepts of other religions are taught usually by Muslim teachers who may not fully understand the topics. In my research on this issue, the teaching of other religions is not comparative in its approach, but more about depicting other religions one by one and often in a biased way. This means that, as clearly stated in one of the Islamic textbooks in Thailand, teaching other religions to students is aimed to explore its weaknesses and faults so that students develop their faith in Islam more strongly.

From the exploration above, Islamic education has not yet demonstrated ability in responding to diverse reality of society in SEA. Competing and often confronting groups of Muslims among them has been increasingly intense. Inter- and intra-religious differences are seemingly problematized, and politics often make the condition worse. Islamic education, therefore, needs to be revisited in order to produce Muslims who survive the diverse religious and cultural realities. The following section will explore briefly about religious education model before I propose an approach or model of Islamic education that corresponds to multicultural society in SEA.

### **Approaches to Religious Education**

Grimmitt (1987) develops three approaches to religious education, each with different teaching orientations. First, teaching *into* religion requires teachers to instill in students faith and commitment to the religion being taught. The objective is to create religious and pious personality. This approach is supportive to any of the religious missions to educate pupils to become committed individuals. Second, teaching *about* religions means more or less religious studies in which students are taught different religions with no intention to make them religious. Religions are put no more than an object of study. In this approach, teachers may use a comparative approach to promote a more comprehensive understanding of relevant religious concepts. Whether or not students want to be committed to any religion or any particular teaching of a religion afterwards is not this approach's concern. Third, teaching *from* religions means that teachers facilitate students to learn concepts, beliefs or practices from a particular religion(s) and reflect upon their own ones. As a result, they developed understanding of such teachings and learn new things from such a learning process to take benefits for their life. This is a kind of reflexive approach to learning religions in which the truth may exist in teachings of different religions.

From the religion's interest, perhaps, teaching *into* religion is preferable to other two approaches. As said before, it corresponds to the mission of religion to develop commitment in individuals. Consequently, this approach emphasized more on the truth claim, and provided nothing but small opportunity to accept and respect other religions equally. To some extent, this is

quite reasonable like one of my respondents – a religious teacher – argues. He said that if someone does not believe that his or her religion brings the truth, there is no reason for him or her to be committed to it. Meanwhile, the other two approaches – teaching *about* and *from* religions – tend to dismiss such a self-claim of every religion which is the core of any religious teachings. The approaches emphasize more on the presentation of religions as an object of study which may inspire pupils to learn and take share from the religions for their life. This sounds of course like to put every religion as equally true. These two approaches may therefore be appropriate to the context of liberal and secular nations. But, for countries like in SEA where both religion and being religious are an important part of people’s life, these approaches may attract objections from religious leaders and community.

### Humanist Confessional Approach to Islamic Education

Considering the problematic application of the above three approaches in Islamic education, I would like to propose a more realistic and compromised approach to Islamic education, which is not to neglect the interest of Islamic religion nor the basic characteristics of human being as an autonomous individual who lives in a context of an intense cultural and religious diversity. I call this approach ‘humanist confessional approach to Islamic education’, and define as ‘an approach to nurturing students’ faith and commitment to Islamic religion by respecting and developing their humanity and its universal values so that they, through such an educational process, are becoming pious Muslims and good citizens’ (Raihani, 2016). There are three core dimensions coherently attached to this approach, i.e. the reoriented concept of Islamic education, confessional nature of teaching religion, and humanism.

The concept of Islamic education is an important point to start to explain about the proposed approach. There have been so far three Arabic terms used to refer to the process of Islamic education, i.e. *tarbiya*, *ta’lim*, and *ta-dib*. *Tarbiya* is a concept to describe a generic process of development of human beings. This term encompasses all activities within the process and does not exclusively belong to Islam or attributed to Islamic process of education. *Ta’lim* refers mainly to teaching activities in which teachers instill knowledge and understanding to students. Students are supposed to become knowledgeable through this process of knowledge transfer. *Ta-dib* is defined as a process of developing consciousness of God and reflecting it in human attitudes and behaviors or *akhlaq*. I am inclined to agree with al-Attas (1979) that the comprehensiveness of Islamic education can only be accommodated in *ta-dib*. Al-Attas explains that *insan adabi* is the ultimate goal of Islamic education, the characteristics of which are: “the one who is sincerely conscious of his responsibilities towards the true God; (2) who understands and fulfils his obligations to himself and others in his society with justice; and (3) who constantly strives to improve every aspect of himself towards perfection as a man of *adab* [*insan adabi*].” So, Islamic education is not merely about teaching Islamic studies so that pupils become knowledgeable, but more about a process of development towards a human perfection with strong divine, social, and ethical characters.

To achieve the above ideal objective, Islamic education cannot be divorced from the teaching approach that enables teachers to nurture such a faith, piety and noble characters in pupils. This means that, like teaching of other religions, Islamic education is in nature confessional. As a religion, Islam has missions to invite people to become its followers and to nurture and strengthen their faith in it. Therefore, Islamic principles, concepts and teachings cannot be approached from the religious study perspective which places religion as an object of study, and pretends that there is distance between Muslims and Islam. In general, it is the interest of religion, religious leaders and even parents to teach pupils into the religion they adhere to.

However, the above confessional approach has to be conceptualized and designed to cater human nature and universal values which are also inseparable teachings of Islam in order to avoid a monolithic approach that may stifle critical capacity of students and lead to a narrow interpretation of Islam. Every student has as part of human nature an autonomy to think and act based on information possessed and received. Indoctrination to the extent of ignoring this autonomy suppresses his or her potentials from developing to the maximum. He or she will follow the doctrines blindly and develop a close attitude towards differences. There are also universal values of humanity, which as well belong to Islam, such as justice, equality, basic human rights, and so forth. These values must be made as a basis for teaching Islamic religion in order to produce Muslims with strong humanity characters.

Correspondingly, Islam is no doubt a religion of peace as its name suggests. It has the spirit of creating and spreading peace in the inner side of individuals and society at large. Also, Islam means submission. It asks its adherents to fully submit himself to the will of Allah Almighty who is the Most Merciful and Peaceful. Since God is the Most Merciful and Peaceful, and commands His servants to spread peace, this total submission brings a consequence of fully surrendering to follow His commands to create and spread peace on earth. So, a Muslim is therefore required to become an agent of peace for himself, neighbors, and community. He or she continuously strives to realize in him/herself a peaceful being, and inculcate and create peace among all mankind and environment.

In short, the proposed humanist confessional approach to Islamic religion can be useful in educating Muslim children to become Islamic pious individuals whose characteristics are described as those who maintain both the Divine and humane relations.

### **Some Implications of the Approach**

The humanist confessional approach to Islamic education has several implications at least in four areas of education, i.e. curriculum orientation, teaching strategies, religious studies, and teacher education for Islamic religion classes.

Since the concept of Islamic education is now more focused on the creation of *Insan Adabi* as previously argued, the curriculum orientation needs to be changed accordingly. It may reduce the heavy traditional contents of Islamic education subjects which have included *Aqida*, *Fiqh*, *Sirah*, and the *Quran* and *Hadith*, but to be sure, the orientations of teaching these subjects should be balanced to develop more strongly spiritual dimensions of students. Right now, Islamic religion classes are directed mostly to memorization of the religious concepts, texts and literal observations of religious acts or worships, but poorly incorporate the spiritual dimensions of all of those. Because of this, Islamic school students are found to observe very well the Islamic religiosities, but fail to demonstrate spiritual maturity that is supposed to lead to the observance of Islamic morality. With the increasingly penetrating *Salafism* in the Muslim society, the literal interpretation and observation of Islamic teachings have been thickening, and in many cases have created social friction and conflicts. Therefore, the incorporation of the spiritual dimension in Islamic teachings is mandated in this proposed approach.

Islamic spirituality is not something new in Islamic traditions. It is the core of Islamic teachings. Every worship and act by Muslim has to be directed to gain Allah's pleasure, which is the essential objective of Muslim's life. Along with the symbolic worshiping practices, there is always a spiritual component of sincerity towards God, humbleness, and innate merciful attributes developed throughout. The ultimate objective of this integration between symbolic and spiritual dimensions is the continuous consciousness of God's presence in Muslim's life. This is the essence of piety in

Islam, and therefore as pointed previously is one of the Islamic education objectives.

The change of the curriculum orientation has ramification in teaching strategies in Islamic religion classes. The indoctrination as highlighted previously should no longer be practiced in classroom. Instead, reflexive strategies which invite students to ponder upon the religious practices and put them into both spiritual and social contexts/experiences are required in order to develop a deeper understanding in students of the comprehensive Islamic teachings. Reasoning of religious doctrines is also important to explore students' potential of thinking capacity in receiving every piece of information be it religious or not. Perhaps, not all religious doctrines are subject to reasoning, but there is always a way to use the intellect to ponder upon every religious doctrine so that Muslims understand fully the aims and wisdoms of Islamic teachings. In my studies, it is not uncommon that I found religious teachers use unverified information circulated in the Internet or social media.

Related to the changes of teaching strategies, the presentation of other religions in Islamic religion classes should be fair and non-bias. As indicated earlier, in my observations of Islamic religion classes in Indonesia and Southern Thailand, most of Islamic curriculum include teaching of other religions to students. Interestingly, in the Indonesian case, there is a fair presentation of other religions in the textbooks, but during the classroom instruction, religious teachers often emphasize the weaknesses of other religions to impress more that Islam is the true religion. In some of Southern Thai Islamic schools' curriculum, the presentation of other religions in both textbook and classroom teaching is deliberately designed to demonstrate weaknesses of some of the teaching and emphasize Islam is the only choice (Raihani et al., 2016). All of these practices in the proposed humanist confessional approach should be changed into fairer religious studies which present other religious concepts and teaching in an objective fashion according to their main sources and the followers. When necessary, there should be a teacher exchange program between or among religion classes under the mutual agreement to teach students proper understanding of other religions. This will develop sympathy, empathy, respect and recognition in students about other religions and religious others. This does not mean at all to promote that all religions are equally true, but the emphasis is on objective understanding of, nurturing respect to, and tolerance towards other religions.

Part of the implications of the proposed approach is changes in teacher education of Islamic religion classes. Teachers are a pivotal component of education who play a role in shaping students' belief, values and behaviors. Teachers mostly teach in a way they are educated to. Teacher preparation should therefore correspond to the objective of Islamic education as outlined above. One important note regarding teacher education especially in Indonesia is a heavy emphasis on mechanical teaching skills. Based on my observation as an Islamic education faculty at an Islamic university, student teachers tend to "memorize" various teaching strategies and methods, and poorly understand the philosophy behind every method. More apprehensively, they seem to fail to develop capacity to comprehend the relationship between classroom practices and social realities as if the former exists in no context. This is because teacher education is, for the sake of observable pedagogical skills, designed to ignore social and cultural theories which can serve as important foundations of critical thinking and analysis. As a result, teachers produced from this program teach literally according to teaching methods specified in the textbooks with poor contextualization.

To respond to this problem and within the proposed humanist confessional approach, the teacher education program of Islamic religion classes needs to introduce critical pedagogy in its program. The concept of critical pedagogy was first attributed to Paulo Friere, particularly in his work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (Freire, 1970). He criticized teaching approach that maintains the status quo and fail to empower pupils to have critical thinking and awareness of social issues and injustices. Teachers only do the routines, and education is like a banking process, depositing

knowledge into passive students. Critical pedagogy, therefore, wants to challenge and change structural and cultural inequalities in school, respects differences and promotes equalities, incorporates a moral vision to unoppress the oppressed, and to question one-self and one's society. It is not only a method of teaching, but an approach to design schooling to become a place for justice education. With the critical pedagogy approach, student teachers of Islamic religion classes learn social and cultural realities outside classroom routines. They would be able to evaluate the impacts of classroom teachings on social justice.

## Conclusion

This paper proposes a humanist confessional approach to Islamic education in the context of multicultural Southeast Asia. It is an approach not only to nurture in students faith and commitment to Islamic religion but also to develop the characters of humanity so that they become pious and humanist individuals who contribute to the creation of peaceful and harmonious society. This approach should bring about changes in relevant areas of education including more spiritually oriented curriculum, reflexive and contextual teaching strategies involving critical thinking and analysis, objective religious study approach, and more critical teacher education of Islamic religion classes. However, some challenges to the implementation of this approach would potentially hinder it from success.

*First*, the capacity of traditional Islamic religion teachers has been one of the main concerns in order to present Islamic studies subjects in an interesting way. These subjects as they are taught make students feel bored because of the monotonous teaching methods and the heavy use of memorization. Our findings in many Indonesian and Thai Islamic schools indicate that teachers need to be trained about appropriate methodology of teaching as discussed above (Raihani at al. 2016). *Second*, the teacher's lack of teaching capacity is in parallel with the overload of Islamic subjects even in non-religious schools. In the Indonesian context, this has made teachers focused more on finishing the materials they are required to deliver without sufficient concerns about teaching effectiveness. Students' learning burden is also too heavy impeding them from having fun learning process (Parker & Raihani, 2011).

*Third*, truth claim of any religion is another challenge to the application of the proposed approach. Truth claim is an inherent attribute of any religion, and in the Islamic belief, is not negotiable. The proposed humanist confessional approach does not nullify such a claim, but explores how it does not hinder religious followers from tolerating, respecting and acknowledging other religions and religious others. The Quran itself states clearly that diversity in any form in this life is God's will and decree. Had He willed, he could make only one single homogenous community (QS, Al-Maidah: 48). So, truth claim is to be understood as a nature of every religion, but not to be essentialized in establishing relationship with Other.

*Fourth*, as discussed here and there throughout this paper, the penetration of transnational ideologies such as Hizbut Tahrir and Salafism has significantly influenced the way some Muslims in becoming religious and viewing their relations with others and even with the state. Indonesia has recently witnessed how these ideologies has colored – in many cases in a negative way – the social and political relations of Muslims with religious others and even with fellow Muslims. Moreover, their influence is not limited to Islamic society in general, but to the education sector through the establishment of Islamic schools and the spread of teachers who share or follow the ideology. *Last*, the escalating tension of global politics especially the relation between the West and Islamic world has also contributed to the way Muslim see 'outside' in which the West is often described as an everlasting enemy. If not explicitly mentioned in the textbook, this narrative is told by teachers of

Islamic religion classes often quoting the verse of the Quran that Jews and Christians will never be pleased with Muslims until Muslims follow their religion or way of life. The polarization has even been expanded to not limited to Islam and the West, but now in the context of Southeast Asia also to include between Islam and Buddhism particularly in the case of the persecution and expulsion of Muslim Rohingya by the extremist Buddhists.

In conclusion, the application of the proposed humanist confessional approach to Islamic education does not go without challenges. But, this does not mean it is not applicable at all. Efforts to change and improve Islamic education have to be done in order to produce pious Muslims who internalize and demonstrate universal values of humanity so that SEA countries will witness Islam as the unifying force for the creation of peaceful and harmonious society.

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