



Strengthening Religious Literacy in the Higher Education Curriculum in Ajatappareng

Syawal¹, Andi Ahmad Chabir Galib², Ismaya³, Elihami⁴

^{1,2,3}Library and Information Science, Science and technology Department, Muhammadiyah
University of Enrekang, 91712 Enrekang, Indonesia

⁴Non-Formal Education, Teacher Training and Education Department, Muhammadiyah
University of Enrekang, 91712 Enrekang, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author. E-mail: sitondasyawal@gmail.com

Receive: 01/05/2024	Accepted: 02/06/2024	Published: 01/10/2024
----------------------------	-----------------------------	------------------------------

Abstract

Religious literacy is the ability to understand, internalize, and practice religious teachings contextually while respecting diversity. Amid the flow of digital information and the rise of intolerance, strengthening religious literacy in higher education has become increasingly important. This study aims to explore how religious literacy is reinforced in the higher education curriculum in the Ajatappareng region and its impact on shaping students' moderate character. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach using case study methods at several public and private universities in the Ajatappareng area. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, document studies (syllabi, lesson plans, academic guidelines), and analyzed thematically. The results show that religious literacy is reinforced through the integration of moderate religious values into teaching materials, contextual learning approaches, and student involvement in religious activities that foster tolerant attitudes. Challenges include the lack of learning innovation, the dominance of cognitive approaches, and limited training for lecturers on multicultural-based religious literacy. The implication is that the religious education curriculum needs to be reformulated not only theologically, but also equipping students with critical, empathetic, and dialogical thinking skills to help build an inclusive and peaceful society.

Keywords: *Religious Literacy; Curriculum; Higher Education; Religious Moderation*

Abstrak

Literasi agama adalah kemampuan memahami, menghayati, dan mengamalkan ajaran agama secara kontekstual serta menghargai keberagaman. Di tengah arus informasi digital dan meningkatnya paham intoleransi, penguatan literasi agama di pendidikan tinggi menjadi sangat penting. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi bagaimana literasi agama diperkuat dalam kurikulum pendidikan tinggi di daerah Ajatappareng dan dampaknya terhadap pembentukan karakter moderat mahasiswa. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode studi kasus pada beberapa perguruan tinggi negeri dan swasta di daerah Ajatappareng. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, studi dokumen (silabus, RPS, pedoman akademik), dan dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penguatan literasi agama dilakukan melalui integrasi nilai-nilai keagamaan moderat dalam materi ajar, pendekatan kontekstual dalam pembelajaran, serta pelibatan mahasiswa dalam kegiatan keagamaan yang membentuk sikap toleran. Tantangan yang dihadapi meliputi minimnya inovasi pembelajaran, dominasi pendekatan kognitif, dan kurangnya pelatihan dosen dalam literasi agama berbasis multikultural. Implikasinya, kurikulum pendidikan agama perlu direformulasi agar tidak hanya bersifat teologis, tetapi juga membekali mahasiswa dengan keterampilan berpikir kritis, empatik, dan dialogis untuk membangun masyarakat yang inklusif dan damai

Kata Kunci: Literasi Agama; Kurikulum; Pendidikan Tinggi; Moderasi Beragama

Introduction

The development of science and technology in today's era of globalization has brought significant impacts to various aspects of life, including the realm of higher education. One of the main challenges that arises is how to prepare the younger generation, particularly university students, to be not only academically excellent but also to possess strong moral and spiritual foundations. In the context of Indonesia's multicultural and religious society, strengthening religious literacy becomes an urgent need to shape students' character to be tolerant, critical, and morally upright.

Religious literacy is not only defined as the ability to read and understand religious texts, but also encompasses the capacity to internalize religious teachings contextually, respect differences in beliefs, and build a peaceful social life. Sound religious literacy enables individuals to avoid exclusivism or intolerance toward others, and instead fosters the ability to engage in dialogue, collaborate, and live side by side in diversity. In today's complex and modern society, such skills are increasingly essential.

However, amid rapid progress, there is growing concern over the declining depth of religious understanding among students. Several studies have shown a trend of formalism in religious practices, where religion is understood narrowly and textually without taking broader social and cultural contexts into account. This condition is exacerbated by the widespread dissemination of extreme religious ideologies through social media, which students can access easily. These circumstances highlight the need for the religious education curriculum in higher education to be reviewed and strengthened within a more inclusive and moderate religious literacy framework.

Previous studies have examined the role of religious education in shaping students' character. For example, Zainuddin (2021) found that integrating religious values into learning can foster religious

tolerance among students. Meanwhile, a study by Rahmawati and Yusuf (2022) emphasized the importance of a dialogical approach in religious studies courses to prevent dogmatic and exclusive attitudes. However, these studies are generally limited to analyzing the content of religious education or its impact on students' attitudes in general, and few have systematically examined how religious literacy is strengthened through curriculum design and implementation in higher education.

In this context, the novelty of this study lies in its focus on strategies for strengthening religious literacy within the higher education curriculum, both in terms of policy, instructional design, and field practices. The study also aims to identify the challenges faced by universities in developing religious literacy amidst social complexity and educational digitalization.

The urgency of this research becomes even more evident when linked to the strategic role of higher education as a key pillar in producing the nation's future leaders. A higher education curriculum must not only emphasize the mastery of hard skills but also develop students' soft skills, including critical thinking, empathy, and the ability to engage in healthy religious dialogue. In this sense, religious literacy is not merely the responsibility of lecturers who teach religion, but is an integral part of the broader mission of higher education to produce graduates who are ethical, inclusive, and socially responsible.

The purpose of this study is to explore how religious literacy is designed and implemented within the higher education curriculum in the Ajatappareng region. It also aims to identify various strategies, learning approaches, and obstacles faced by higher education institutions in realizing religious literacy that is contextual, moderate, and transformative. By understanding these aspects, this research is expected to make a meaningful contribution to the development of a more relevant and adaptive religious education curriculum.

In general, this research is grounded in the belief that religious education developed through integrative and contextual approaches can be a vital foundation for shaping students who are not only intellectually competent but also spiritually and socially mature. Strong religious literacy will contribute to the creation of an academic culture that is peaceful, inclusive, and oriented toward the common good.

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of deeply exploring strategies for strengthening religious literacy within the higher education curriculum in the Ajatappareng region. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand phenomena in their original context and to highlight the meaning embedded in policies, teaching practices, and the experiences of educational stakeholders.

The method used is a case study, focusing on several public and private universities in the Ajatappareng area that actively implement efforts to strengthen religious literacy in their curricula. Case selection was conducted purposively, considering the diversity of institutional backgrounds, religious visions and missions, and openness to the approach of religious moderation.

Data collection was carried out using three main techniques: 1) In-depth interviews with lecturers teaching religious subjects, curriculum managers, and students to explore their perspectives, experiences, and practices related to religious literacy both inside and outside the classroom; 2) Document analysis of curricula, syllabi, Semester Learning Plans (RPS), and academic guidelines to assess the extent to which religious values are explicitly integrated into official documents; 3) Limited observation of classroom activities or campus programs related to religious literacy.

The collected data were analyzed thematically, through a process of categorization, interpretation of meaning, and conclusion drawing based on emerging patterns in the data. To enhance the validity of the findings, source triangulation and member checking techniques were used.

The results of the analysis were used to formulate a comprehensive understanding of how higher education curricula contribute to the development of students' religious literacy in a critical, tolerant, and contextual manner.

Results and Discussion

This research was conducted at five universities located in the Ajatappareng region (Pinrang, Parepare, Barru, Enrekang, and Sidrap Regencies), representing both public and private higher education institutions. The Ajatappareng area was selected due to its unique socio-religious dynamics, cultural diversity, and strategic position as a cultural crossroads between the Bugis and Toraja communities, both of which are rich in local religious values.

The findings indicate that the strengthening of religious literacy in the higher education curriculum in this region is carried out through three main approaches: 1) the integration of religious values into the curriculum and learning process, (2) the use of contextual and reflective pedagogical approaches, and (3) the reinforcement of community-based religious activities.

1. Integration of Religious Values into Curriculum and Instruction

Most higher education institutions in the Ajatappareng region have incorporated religious values into their curricula, particularly in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) courses. Beyond that, religious values are also integrated into general courses such as Civics, Bahasa Indonesia, and institutional subjects.

This integration is evident in the Semester Learning Plans (RPS), which include spiritual and social attitude outcomes aligned with the values of Islam as

rahmatan lil 'alamin (a mercy to all creation). For example, at one private Islamic university, religious instruction is directly linked to local social issues such as poverty, inter-community conflict, and the challenges of digitalization that affect shifts in values.

However, in general, the integration remains more conceptual than practical. Some lecturers admitted that the current approach tends to be normative and has not fully addressed the plural realities of Ajatappareng society. As one lecturer remarked:

“We teach religious doctrines, but not all students are able to connect them with the social situations around them—even though our society is highly diverse.”

This illustrates that the effort to strengthen religious literacy has not yet fully led to a contextual understanding that is responsive to the complexities of society.

2. Contextual and Reflective Pedagogical Approaches

The learning approach plays a crucial role in shaping religious literacy that is not dogmatic. Several lecturers in this region have begun to develop instructional models that are reflective, participatory, and problem-based.

For instance, at one university in Parepare, an Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lecturer raised issues such as free association, intolerance, and the digital *hijrah* trend as classroom discussion topics. Students were encouraged to conduct social observations and engage in religious reflection openly and critically.

Students responded positively to this approach. One student shared:

“Learning religion in class is no longer just about memorizing religious texts. We discuss how to deal with differences, how to relate to non-Muslim friends, and how to understand the meaning of tolerance in society.”

However, not all lecturers are yet able to implement this approach effectively. The lack of pedagogical training and limited availability of contextual learning materials

remain significant barriers. On campuses that do not yet have Islamic Studies Centers or Institutes for Religious Moderation, teaching methods still tend to be predominantly cognitive in nature.

3. Strengthening Community-Based Religious Activities

In the Ajatappareng region, the reinforcement of religious literacy also takes place through co-curricular and extracurricular activities rooted in local religious values. Religious traditions in this area—such as campus-based Islamic study groups (*pengajian*), inter-Islamic organization dialogues, and community-based *dakwah* in villages, serve as spaces for actualizing religious values in local contexts.

Several campuses have initiated programs such as “*Students as Mosque Companions*,” “*Digital Islamic Literacy*,” and “*Youth Dialogues Across Islamic Organizations*.” These activities foster empathy, appreciation for diversity, and promote an image of Islam that is peaceful and inclusive.

In Enrekang and Sidrap, collaborative activities between students and local religious leaders represent a unique practice that cultivates an understanding of the local roots of religious culture. These initiatives bridge the younger generation with the wisdom of local Bugis Islamic traditions, which highly uphold *sipakatau* (mutual respect) and *mappakalebbiri* (mutual honor).

However, several challenges persist. Some students from certain religious backgrounds express discomfort with inter-group dialogue due to concerns about potential deviations from their doctrinal beliefs. This indicates that theological exclusivism remains strong among some student groups.

Some of the key challenges in this region include:

1. The dominance of cognitive approaches in religious education, with instruction still focused on memorizing religious texts without linking them to students’ social realities.

2. The lack of pedagogical training for lecturers in developing religious literacy methods based on multiculturalism and local wisdom.
3. Unequal access to digital infrastructure supporting religious literacy, even though students in Ajatappareng are heavily exposed to religious content via social media.
4. Limited forums for interfaith or inter-organizational dialogue on campuses.

These challenges must be addressed through institutional capacity-building, curriculum reform, and ongoing pedagogical training for lecturers in religious education.

These findings are consistent with James A. Banks' theory of contextual religious literacy in *Multicultural Education*, which emphasizes the need for education to be based on cultural diversity and the lived experiences of students in order to become more inclusive and democratic.

This approach is also supported by Zuhairini et al. (2022), who argue that religious education should not only impart knowledge, but also cultivate attitudes and skills for navigating real-life situations. In this context, religious literacy should not merely involve rote memorization of dogma, but rather the ability to understand, reflect upon, and actualize religious values in social life.

Similarly, Abdullah (2022), in his concept of *Islam as Social Ethics*, stresses that religion must serve as a transformative force, not merely an individual doctrine. Therefore, higher education institutions in Ajatappareng are expected to play a significant role in producing religious generations who are critical, inclusive, and oriented toward the greater social good.

Conclusion

This study shows that the strengthening of religious literacy in higher education institutions in the Ajatappareng region (Pinrang, Parepare, Barru, Enrekang, and Sidrap) has progressed through the integration of religious values into the curriculum, the implementation of

contextual pedagogical approaches, and community-based religious activities. These three approaches reflect institutional awareness of the importance of developing students' religious understanding in a way that is contextual, moderate, and responsive to the region's diverse socio-cultural realities.

Nevertheless, efforts to strengthen religious literacy continue to face several challenges, such as the dominance of normative, cognitive approaches, limited pedagogical capacity among lecturers, a lack of contextual learning materials, and restricted space for inter-group religious dialogue. These issues indicate that the integration of religious values has not yet fully reached the practical dimension of campus and social life. Strategic steps are therefore needed to promote a form of religious literacy that is transformative and inclusive, not only as instructional content but also as a lived social practice.

The implications of these findings highlight the need to reformulate the Islamic Religious Education curriculum to emphasize multicultural, reflective, and locality-based approaches. Higher education institutions in Ajatappareng are encouraged to strengthen centers for moderate Islamic studies, provide contextual pedagogical training for lecturers, and build learning ecosystems that support interfaith and inter-organizational dialogue.

Bibliography

- Hanafie Das, S. W., Halik, A., Iman, B., Tahir, M., Hamid, E., Djollong, A. F., & Kenre, I. (2020). Developing a sociocultural approach in Learning Management System through Moodle in the era of the Covid-19. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 13(27), 941-958.
- Hastini, L. Y., Fahmi, R., & Lukito, H. (2020). Apakah Pembelajaran Menggunakan Teknologi Dapat Meningkatkan Literasi Manusia Pada Generasi Z Di Indonesia?. *Jurnal*

- Manajemen Informatika (JAMIKA)*, 10(1), 12-28.
- Jahnke, F. (2023). Religious literacy: how do we recognize it when we see it, and then what?: Arguments for a reformed use of religious literacy in RE research, international knowledge transfer and teacher training programs.
- Kadi, T. (2020). Literasi agama dalam memperkuat Pendidikan multikulturalisme di perguruan tinggi. *Jurnal Islam Nusantara*, 4(1), 81-91.
- Mawikere, M. C. S., Daud, M. I., Hura, S., Birahim, G. N., & Tulung, V. R. (2023). Religions, Religious Moderation and Community Development and the Role of Higher Education to Strengthen It. *International Journal of Education, Information Technology, and Others*, 6(3), 368-379.
- Nurhidin, E. (2022). Peran Guru Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam Meningkatkan Kualitas Literasi Membaca Qur'an Siswa Sekolah Menengah Atas. *Edudeena: Journal of Islamic Religious Education*, 6(1), 1-11.
- Nurzakiyah, C. (2018). Literasi Agama Sebagai Alternatif Pendidikan Moral. *Jurnal Penelitian Agama*, 19(2), 20-29.
- Puji, P. S., & Hakim, L. (2021). Peran Gender sebagai Variabel Moderating Pembelajaran Perbankan Syariah, Literasi Keuangan Syariah, Religiusitas, Inklusi Keuangan Syariah Terhadap Minat Menabung Bank Syariah. *Jurnal Pendidikan Akuntansi (JPAK)*, 9(1), 1-12.
- Sukanti, L., Sutarman, S., & Nurislamiah, S. (2025). Extracurricular Learning For Students in Religious Moderation at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri, South Tangerang City. *Indonesian Research Journal on Education*, 5(2), 287-293.
- Susilo, A. (2021). Peran Perguruan Tinggi Pesantren dalam Implementasi Literasi Ekonomi. *This study aims to determine the role of Islamic boarding schools in the application of economic literacy. The research method used is descriptive qualitative. The object of this research is Darussalam Gontor University. The results of this study indica*, 2(02), 162-173.
- Syawal, S., Ismaya, I., Galib, A. A. C., Bando, U. D. M. A., Elihami, E., & Sudirman, M. Y. (2022). Komunikasi Dalam Persepektif Islam. *EduPsyCouns: Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 4(2), 122-131.