

Religious Humanism and Educational Renewal: Reinterpreting Abdurrahman Wahid's Philosophy for Contemporary Education

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Abstract

Globalization presents challenges that necessitate an approach to religious education capable of integrating religious values and humanistic principles. This study aims to explore K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur) educational philosophy and identify its relevance to the reform of Islamic education. This qualitative library research employs a philosophical-hermeneutic interpretation of scholarly literature on Gus Dur's educational thought, focusing on its ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions. The findings indicate that Gus Dur's thought represents religious humanism as a foundation for education by integrating Islamic intellectual traditions with contextual dialogue and orienting educational processes toward the development of individuals who value diversity, uphold justice, and demonstrate social responsibility. The study contributes a philosophical foundation for developing inclusive curricula, dialogical pedagogies, and equitable governance in contemporary Islamic education.

Keywords: Abdurrahman Wahid, Religious Humanism, Philosophy of Education

Abstrak

Tantangan globalisasi menghendaki konstruksi pendidikan agama yang dapat mengintegrasikan nilai religiusitas dan kemanusiaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi filsafat pendidikan K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) dan mengidentifikasi relevansinya bagi pembaruan pendidikan Islam. Penelitian kualitatif melalui studi kepustakaan ini menggunakan interpretasi filosofis-hermeneutis terhadap berbagai literatur ilmiah yang menjelaskan pemikiran Gus Dur dalam bidang pendidikan pada aspek ontologi, epistemologi, dan aksiologi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemikiran Gus Dur merepresentasikan humanisme religius sebagai landasan pendidikan dengan mengintegrasikan tradisi keilmuan Islam dan dialog kontekstual, serta mengarahkan proses pendidikan pada pembentukan individu yang menghargai keberagaman, keadilan, dan tanggung jawab sosial. Kontribusi temuan penelitian ini menawarkan landasan filosofis bagi pengembangan kurikulum inklusif, pedagogi dialogis, dan tata kelola pendidikan Islam kontemporer yang berkeadilan.

Kata Kunci: Abdurrahman Wahid, Humanisme Religius, Filsafat Pendidikan

INTRODUCTION

Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia are expected to sustain religious learning while preparing students to live amid rapid social change and persistent differences of belief, culture, and circumstance. These demands cannot be met through the transmission of doctrine alone. An institution may deliver a rigorous curriculum yet leave students with few opportunities to question an argument, encounter unfamiliar perspectives, or consider the consequences of their choices for others. Research on tolerance in pesantren points to the importance of everyday relationships and educational environments, alongside the content of formal instruction (Umar & Nurrohman, 2024; Thoyib et al., 2024). Recent scholarship similarly emphasizes that Islamic education must negotiate globalization without reducing its ethical and spiritual purposes to technical adaptation (Hanin et al., 2026; Kamila & Jannah, 2026).

K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid provides a particularly fruitful starting point for examining this problem. His understanding of pesantren reaches beyond the classroom and the religious text: he describes a distinctive social world shaped by authority, shared values, and habits of learning. The essays collected in *Menggerakkan Tradisi* also attend to the tension between institutional continuity and renewal. Read educationally, they suggest that reforms cannot be assessed solely by their novelty; they must also be judged in relation to the communities and intellectual traditions in which they take root (Wahid, 2001).

Wahid's reflections on religious life likewise resist the assumption that fidelity to a tradition requires withdrawal from difference. In *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita*, he engages the place of Islam within a diverse public sphere rather than describing religious identity as a reason to avoid social encounter (Wahid, 2006). This stance raises a practical educational question: how might students develop firm intellectual commitments without losing the capacity to listen carefully and act fairly toward those who disagree?

Studies of Wahid's educational ideas have offered valuable but differently focused answers. Lutfiana et al. (2023) examine multicultural dimensions of Islamic educational philosophy; Nurfitriani et al. (2024) discuss the continuing relevance of multicultural education; Choiri and Anam (2025) foreground humanistic Islamic education; and Masyhuri et al. (2026) compare Wahid's religious humanism with that of Nurcholish Madjid. These contributions establish the significance of inclusion and respect for others, although their emphases do not fully resolve how such commitments relate to assumptions about persons, knowledge, and educational ends. A related comparative reconstruction by Khaqim (2026) integrates theological and cultural dimensions of holistic education; unlike the present study, its central sources are Hasan Langgulung and Ki Hadjar Dewantara rather than Wahid.

The difficulty, then, is not a lack of writing about Wahid's humanism or pluralism. It is the absence, within the particular literature reviewed here, of a sufficiently explicit account of how those themes fit together as educational philosophy. Treating them as a list of virtues risks obscuring the arguments on which they depend. At the same time, assigning Wahid a neatly finished philosophical system would misrepresent the essayistic and

historically situated character of his work. This article therefore offers a reconstruction and identifies where its interpretation moves beyond what Wahid expressly stated.

The distinction matters when educational ideals are translated into institutional policy. Rahmadi and Hamdan (2023) approach religious moderation through a multidisciplinary lens; Zalnur et al. (2023) consider multicultural Islamic education in relation to moderation; and Zulkifli et al. (2023) examine how policy and sociocultural conditions inform moderation among Muslim academics. These studies address settings and questions different from Wahid's own writings. They are used here to clarify the contemporary educational stakes, not as evidence that Wahid endorsed their particular frameworks. In a distinct domain, Aini et al. (2026) show how Gus Mus's multicultural da'wah connects Islamic moderation with local cultural wisdom. Their subject is religious communication, not Wahid's philosophy, but the comparison helps situate contextual engagement with plurality.

Work on present-day pesantren makes this challenge more concrete. Athoillah et al. (2024) examine how moderation is addressed through institutional policies and practices, while Dzofir and Nur (2024) consider its incorporation into educational life. Their findings bring attention to a gap between endorsing values and establishing routines in which students can actually practise them. A philosophical account is useful only to the extent that it helps explain what those routines should aim to cultivate. Erifsany et al. (2026) further foreground the institutional dimension by discussing quality standards, curriculum integration, and staff development in pesantren, although their conceptual study does not assess a Wahidian educational model.

Two questions guide the discussion. First, what account of the learner, knowledge, and educational purpose can reasonably be developed from Wahid's writings? Second, what might that account contribute to current debates over curricula, pedagogy, and institutional life in Islamic education? The intention is to interpret a connected set of ideas, rather than to catalogue desirable character traits or retell Wahid's biography.

Accordingly, this study pursues two objectives. First, it seeks to reconstruct the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that can reasonably be inferred from Wahid's selected writings about pesantren, pluralism, and the public role of Islam. Second, it aims to explore how this reconstruction of religious humanism might inform educational renewal through inclusive curricula, dialogical teaching, and equitable institutional governance. These objectives concern philosophical interpretation and conceptual implications; they do not include an empirical test of educational outcomes or the attribution of a formal system to Wahid.

The article consequently proposes a contextual account of religious humanism centred on human dignity, an intellectually active relationship with tradition, and responsibility toward others. Its contribution is chiefly analytical: it explains the connections among these commitments and considers where they might lead in educational practice, while acknowledging that the proposed connections require further examination.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on qualitative documentary inquiry and philosophical-hermeneutical interpretation. Its primary texts are Wahid's *Menggerakkan Tradisi: Esai-Esai Pesantren* (2001) and *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita* (2006), chosen because they address the relationships among religious learning, culture, social life, and change. Secondary materials include studies of Wahid's educational thought and scholarship on pesantren, multicultural education, and religious moderation. The analysis focuses on passages concerning personhood, authority, knowledge, dialogue, justice, tradition, and social change. It does not draw on interviews, classroom observation, or new institutional data.

The reading moved through four stages. Relevant passages were identified in the primary works; recurring themes were compared across texts; those themes were examined in relation to ontological, epistemological, and axiological questions; and possible educational implications were developed. Throughout, a distinction was maintained between positions attributable to Wahid and interpretations proposed in this article. Secondary research was used to test the plausibility and limits of the reading, not to supply views missing from the primary sources. This method supports a reasoned conceptual argument, but it cannot establish whether the proposed educational practices improve learning outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Educational Ontology: Human Beings as Dignified and Social Subjects

Three questions organize the philosophical discussion. What understanding of the person is implied by education? How should learners relate to knowledge and its sources? And what ends make an educational practice worth pursuing? Ontology, epistemology, and axiology provide useful names for these questions. They are employed here as interpretive categories; Wahid did not present his scattered reflections as a formal treatise arranged under these headings.

Religious humanism is used in a similarly careful sense. It describes an ethical orientation in which concern for human dignity is informed by religious commitments rather than set against them. In the reading offered here, Wahid's religious commitments do not justify withholding recognition from people of other backgrounds. Accounts of humanistic education in his thought (Choiri & Anam, 2025) and comparisons with Nurcholish Madjid (Masyhuri et al., 2026) support the relevance of this perspective. Yet the term has little explanatory value unless it can clarify particular decisions about teaching, discipline, access, and institutional authority. A philosophical reconstruction by Uyun et al. (2026) likewise resists treating Islamic education as an instrument of market efficiency alone. Its tawhidic critique provides a useful contrast, rather than evidence of an explicitly shared theoretical position with Wahid.

Wahid's writings invite an understanding of learners as persons who interpret, judge, and participate in shared social worlds, rather than as passive recipients of approved information. His reflections on Islam in public life allow human dignity and the

diversity of lived experience to become central educational concerns (Wahid, 2006). On this reading, learners remain accountable to standards of inquiry, but their capacity to reach and defend reasoned judgments deserves recognition.

Respect for dignity does not make educational discipline unnecessary. It changes the grounds on which discipline must be defended: correction should support learning and responsibility rather than humiliate the student. In a diverse classroom, the same principle calls for attention to differences in experience and opportunity, and for spaces in which students can explain their views without fear of ridicule. Recent interpretations of Wahid's pluralistic educational thought similarly emphasize the significance of recognition and inclusion (Nurfitrani et al., 2024; Syaifudin & Syafi'i, 2025). Haq and Khaqim (2026) propose epistemic integrity, dignified interaction, responsible digital agency, equitable participation, and reflective self-discipline as dimensions of digital character pedagogy. These are productive contemporary points of comparison, not categories directly articulated by Wahid.

There is also a communal dimension to this account of personhood. Families, schools, and pesantren shape the conditions in which students learn to understand themselves and others. Wahid's portrayal of pesantren as a cultural setting with its own norms and forms of authority is instructive here (Wahid, 2001). The educational task is not to choose individual freedom over community, but to ask how collective belonging can be sustained without silencing dissent or marginalizing students whose experiences differ from those of the majority.

This normative interpretation is supported, though not empirically validated as a Wahidian model, by recent studies of learners' social relations. Prasetyo et al. (2026) discuss a multicultural instructional model oriented toward tolerance, while Ma'arif et al. (2024) examine educational communication informed by Qur'ānic religious pluralism. Both studies suggest useful contexts in which learner dignity can be operationalized through interaction rather than confined to abstract declarations.

Educational Epistemology: Tradition, Critique, Dialogue, and Contextualization

Wahid's reflections on pesantren place inherited knowledge and institutional change in a productive, if sometimes uneasy, relationship. Questions of modernization, curriculum, and independence appear throughout *Menggerakkan Tradisi*, but the value of a tradition is not exhausted by its age (Wahid, 2001). A defensible educational implication is that students should learn to interpret inherited arguments seriously while also considering the social circumstances in which those arguments are used. Anamisari et al. (2026), in their study of Fatah Syukur, also argue for contextual and transformative Islamic learning that addresses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions; the convergence concerns educational orientation rather than direct intellectual influence.

This reading is strengthened by Wahid's engagement with religious and social differences in *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita* (Wahid, 2006). Intellectual openness need not mean that every claim is equally persuasive. On the contrary, dialogue becomes meaningful when participants examine textual evidence, make their reasoning explicit, and remain willing to reconsider a conclusion. Teachers might cultivate these habits through

close reading, comparison of interpretations, structured disagreement, and ethically demanding case discussions.

Such an approach also unsettles a rigid division between religious and nonreligious fields of knowledge. Social research, environmental concerns, and digital literacy can illuminate questions raised within Islamic intellectual traditions, just as those traditions can inform judgments about the use of new knowledge. The decisive issue is not whether a technology makes answers available more quickly, but whether it helps students read, reason, and respond to disagreement with greater care. The opportunities and constraints of educational technology discussed by Hanin et al. (2026) reinforce the need to distinguish access to information from ethically guided educational development.

This proposed dialogue between tradition and change finds contemporary parallels in research on digital and linguistic practices in pesantren. Subair et al. (2024) investigate multilingualism, technology, and religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools, suggesting that language and technology may mediate encounters between inherited learning practices and wider social realities. Their empirical subject differs from Wahid's intellectual writings; the connection drawn here is explicitly interpretive.

Educational Axiology: Justice, Pluralism, and the Common Good

For Wahid, recognition of religious difference is closely connected to questions of justice in common life. The pluralism discussed in this article concerns fair coexistence among people who need not share theological conclusions. Abidin (2012) situates Wahid's views of Islam and plurality, while Lutfiana et al. (2023) explore their significance for multicultural Islamic education. In educational terms, the point is not to weaken religious learning but to ask what responsibilities accompany conviction when others have an equal claim to dignity. As a parallel discussion outside formal education, Nuralik et al. (2026) examine Gus Baha's account of Islam, nationalism, and social harmony. This source offers comparative context on moderate public religious reasoning but should not be construed as a study of Wahid.

This ethical concern broadens what counts as educational achievement. Knowledge and examination results matter, but so do the practices through which students listen, disagree, recognize exclusion, and take responsibility for shared problems. Carefully facilitated dialogue, collaborative work across social backgrounds, and reflection on community engagement are possible means of developing these capacities. Studies of Islamic education and tolerance indicate why these questions deserve attention (Habibulloh, 2024; Umar & Nurrohman, 2024).

Studies focused on curricular and instructional practice illuminate the policy dimension of this argument. Mulyana (2023) examines moderation in Islamic religious education textbooks and school implementation; Sayekti (2023) reviews the role of teachers in fostering religious moderation in elementary education. Mo'tasim (2022) describes multicultural values in pesantren as a resource for moderation. These studies provide relevant comparisons, but they do not constitute tests of the specific philosophical reconstruction advanced in this article.

A commitment to justice also reveals contradictions within institutions. A school cannot credibly celebrate diversity while maintaining practices that exclude students with disabilities or disadvantage those from low-income households. Nor can a message of tolerance compensate for complaint procedures that discourage students from speaking. If the ethical dimension of education is to be taken seriously, it must inform admission, classroom interaction, assessment, and everyday decision-making, not simply appear in a mission statement.

A Synthesis of the Conceptual Framework of Gus Dur's Philosophy of Education and Its Relevance to the Renewal of Contemporary Islamic Education

The proposed framework connects three claims rather than treating them as independent values. Learners possess dignity and develop through social relations; knowledge grows through disciplined engagement with both inherited traditions and present realities; and education should be judged partly by its contribution to justice and shared responsibility. Each claim corrects a possible weakness in the others. Respect for persons without intellectual engagement risks becoming sentimental, while debate without ethical commitments can ignore unequal power. Appeals to justice, meanwhile, may turn paternalistic when students are denied a voice in determining what justice requires. In this framework, educational renewal means reorienting relationships and institutional practices, not discarding the inherited intellectual traditions of Islamic education. It joins participation and inclusion, accountable interpretation of knowledge, and socially just governance; the connection is the authors' analytical inference, not a formulation explicitly set out by Wahid. Read alongside Kamila and Jannah's (2026) triadic reconstruction of Islamic educational philosophy and Uyun et al.'s (2026) critique of instrumental rationality, the present framework remains distinctive in grounding its interconnected claims in an interpretation of Wahid's own selected writings.

These connections have implications at several levels. A curriculum informed by the framework would place questions of human welfare and local social life alongside the study of religious texts. Classroom dialogue would invite students to test and defend interpretations, with explicit standards for evidence and respect. School governance would need to extend the same commitments to student participation and equitable treatment. Research on moderation policies (Athoillah et al., 2024) and the integration of moderation values (Dzofir & Nur, 2024) offers pertinent context, but neither study directly tests the framework developed here. A related integrative curriculum proposal (Khaqim, 2026) helps illustrate how philosophical synthesis may generate curricular principles, while the digital character framework of Haq and Khaqim (2026) offers examples of ethical pedagogical dimensions; neither supplies outcome evidence for the Wahidian model proposed here.

At an institutional level, Setiawan et al. (2026) discuss inclusive pesantren and moderate religious practices, whereas Efendi et al. (2026) analyze how moderation is sustained through leadership and institutional culture in pesantren-based higher education. Ardhy and Fauziah (2025) identify curricular integration, dialogue, and

educators' example as patterns in multicultural moderation practice. Padedeng and Hanafie Dos (2026) also offer a conceptual framework for moderation in plural societies. Their varied approaches underscore the importance of evaluating the proposed framework across curricular, interpersonal, and governance dimensions. In this respect, the discussion of educational quality and institutional development by Erifsany et al. (2026) provides a further comparative lens for translating ideals into organizational processes.

The reconstruction has important limits. Its ontological, epistemological, and axiological structure is supplied by the authors rather than taken from Wahid's own organization of his work. The selected texts foreground education, plurality, and social life, leaving aspects of his political and theological writings beyond the present analysis. Finally, no classroom data are offered to show that the proposed framework improves outcomes. Its practical usefulness remains a question for research in schools, madrasahs, and pesantren.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion presented in this study, it can be concluded that K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid's thought reflects an educational perspective in which religious commitment and respect for human dignity are mutually reinforcing. In practical terms, implementing this perspective requires viewing learners as participants in social life rather than merely as recipients of information. Furthermore, knowledge entails a reflective engagement between tradition and the dynamics of changing times. Finally, the aims of education encompass justice, harmonious coexistence, and responsibility toward others.

The findings of this study contribute to show how these claims can be considered together as a conceptual basis for educational renewal in Islamic curricula, teaching practices, and institutional culture. Its conclusions remain interpretive and do not demonstrate effectiveness in classrooms. Subsequent research could examine how students and teachers experience dialogical learning, develop observable indicators of inclusion and social responsibility, and compare these practices across educational settings.

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