



Revitalizing the Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Higher Education: Integrating Ecotheology and Social Justice to Support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Alwazir Abdusshomad

Politeknik Penerbangan Indonesia Curug, Indonesia

e-mail: alwazir@ppicurug.ac.id

Abstract

The implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Indonesian higher education has largely emphasized environmental and social dimensions, while ethical and spiritual aspects remain relatively overlooked. This study positions Islamic Education (PAI) as a vital instrument to address this moral gap through a transformative education approach. This article aims to formulate a conceptual framework for integrating Islamic values rooted in ecotheology and social justice into the PAI curriculum to strengthen the achievement of the SDGs agenda, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The study employs a systematic literature review combined with a critical analysis of 45 reputable academic publications from 2020–2025. The findings highlight three key pillars: Tauhid as the basis of an ecological paradigm, Khilafah as an ethical mandate of stewardship, and Maqasid al-Shari'ah as a socio-ecological justice framework. Theoretically, this study offers a new pedagogical model that shifts PAI from mere normative knowledge transfer to action-based education aligned with global sustainability concerns

Keywords: Islamic Eco-Theology; Islamic Religious Education; Social Justice; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); University Curriculum

Abstrak

Penerapan Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan (Sustainable Development Goals/SDGs) di perguruan tinggi Indonesia selama ini lebih menekankan aspek lingkungan fisik dan sosial, sementara dimensi etis dan spiritual masih relatif terabaikan. Studi ini menempatkan Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) sebagai instrumen vital untuk mengisi kekosongan moral tersebut melalui pendekatan pendidikan transformatif. Penelitian ini bertujuan merumuskan kerangka konseptual integrasi nilai-nilai Islam berbasis ekoteologi dan keadilan sosial ke dalam kurikulum PAI guna mendukung pencapaian agenda SDGs, khususnya SDG 4 (Pendidikan Berkualitas), SDG 12 (Konsumsi dan Produksi yang Bertanggung Jawab), SDG 13 (Penanganan Perubahan Iklim), dan SDG 16 (Perdamaian dan Keadilan). Penelitian dilakukan melalui kajian literatur sistematis (Systematic Literature Review) dengan analisis kritis terhadap 45 publikasi akademik bereputasi periode 2020–2025. Hasil kajian merumuskan tiga pilar utama: Tauhid sebagai paradigma ekologis, Khilafah sebagai mandat etis stewardship, dan Maqasid al-Shari'ah sebagai kerangka keadilan sosial-ekologis. Implikasi teoretis studi ini menawarkan model pedagogis baru yang menggeser PAI dari sekadar transfer pengetahuan normatif menjadi pendidikan berbasis aksi yang selaras dengan keberlanjutan global

Kata kunci: Ekoteologi Islam; Keadilan Sosial; Kurikulum Perguruan Tinggi; Pendidikan Agama Islam; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Introduction

The contemporary era is marked by the emergence of increasingly complex global challenges, ranging from climate crises and social inequality to environmental degradation. In response to these issues, the (United Nations, 2015) launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal development agenda aimed at eradicating poverty, protecting the planet, and enhancing human well-being. Within this framework, higher education institutions occupy a strategic position not only as centers of knowledge production, but also as agents of social transformation that cultivate sustainability awareness among future generations. In Indonesia, the SDGs have been adopted as part of the national development agenda, and various universities have begun responding through the integration of sustainability issues into curricula and research activities (Filho et al., 2024). Nevertheless, such implementation remains largely partial. Integration efforts tend to emphasize physical environmental aspects and socio-economic dimensions (Hong et al., 2022), while the ethical and spiritual foundations that should serve as the moral grounding of sustainability have received limited attention. Without a strong ethical basis, commitment to sustainability risks being reduced to administrative formality rather than becoming an intrinsic consciousness embedded within the academic community.

In this context, Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) in public universities holds significant yet underutilized potential. Fundamentally, PAI addresses the relationship between humans and God, fellow human beings, and the natural environment, thereby offering a comprehensive value framework to respond to sustainability challenges (Mohamed, 2014). Islamic principles derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah encompass teachings on environmental stewardship and social justice that resonate with the spirit of the SDGs (Blankinship et al., 2024). This alignment creates an opportunity to cultivate graduates who are not only academically competent but also possess moral integrity, ethical awareness, and social responsibility.

However, several research gaps remain. First, PAI curricula in many universities continue to prioritize theological-normative dimensions, while contemporary issues such as climate crisis and ecological justice have yet to receive adequate attention.

Second, existing studies rarely develop systematic pedagogical frameworks for integrating Islamic values into the PAI curriculum. Third, there is a paucity of learning models capable of transforming theological knowledge into concrete praxis (Torres, 2020).

Based on these gaps, this article proposes the urgent revitalization of the PAI curriculum through the integration of an ecotheological framework and Islamic principles of social justice. Such revitalization entails not merely the addition of new content, but a paradigmatic reorientation of the learning process. The objective of this study is to formulate a conceptual framework that can guide PAI educators in redesigning curricula aligned with the SDGs agenda, particularly in the areas of education, environment, and justice. By linking Islamic theological discourse with contemporary global sustainability challenges (Droubi et al., 2023), this article seeks to contribute academically by offering a more holistic, transformative, and applicable model of PAI-SDGs integration for higher education institutions in Indonesia.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the integration of Islamic values within the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum. The SLR procedure adopted the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol developed by (Moher et al., 2009), with modifications to the qualitative inclusion criteria to accommodate the specific context of religious education.

The selection process was conducted through four systematic stages. The first stage, identification, involved formulating research questions focused on the implementation of ecotheology and social justice within PAI, followed by a comprehensive literature search across the Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Garuda, and SINTA databases. The second stage, screening, consisted of selecting publications based on titles and abstracts within the publication range of 2020–2025. The third stage, eligibility, entailed a full-text analysis to ensure substantial relevance to the themes of Islam, PAI, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The fourth stage, inclusion, involved data extraction using thematic analysis to identify major patterns and recurring themes.

The justification for employing this method lies in its capacity to map the dispersion of existing theoretical perspectives and synthesize them into a new pedagogical framework. From the initial search results, a rigorous screening process

yielded 45 publications, which were subsequently analyzed as primary data for the development of the proposed conceptual framework.

Result and Discussion

Based on a thematic analysis of 45 selected articles, the discourse on Islam and sustainability consistently converges on three dominant themes. The integration of Islamic values into the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be constructed upon three foundational principles: (1) *Tawhid* as an ecological paradigm, (2) *Khilafah* as a mandate of trusteeship, and (3) *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* as a framework of justice. These principles do not operate independently; rather, they mutually reinforce one another in translating transcendental values into practical global guidance.

Tawhid as an Ecological Paradigm

Tawhid functions as the central axis of Islamic theology with profound ecological implications. The literature findings affirm that *Tawhid* shapes the vision of an integrated cosmos, rejecting any dualism between humanity and nature. In the curricular context, this paradigm challenges anthropocentrism. The PAI curriculum should therefore emphasize that caring for the environment constitutes an act of worship, rather than merely a lifestyle choice.

As the foundational principle of Islam affirming the absolute oneness of God, *Tawhid* occupies a pivotal position in Islamic theology and carries broad implications not only within the domain of personal spirituality but also within ecological thought. Ontologically, *Tawhid* asserts that because there is only one Creator, all creation from the cosmic order to its smallest elements emanates from a single divine will, forming an integrated cosmos. As elaborated by (Almirzanah, 2020) and (Kureethadam, 2023), this worldview rejects all forms of fragmentation and dualism. Nature is not perceived as a passive object, but as a series of divine signs (*ayatullah*) living and dynamic manifestations that demand reverence and contemplative reflection (*tadabbur*), rather than mere exploitation for human interests.

This *Tawhidic* paradigm simultaneously offers a critical response to the anthropocentric worldview that has dominated modern discourse since the Enlightenment. Anthropocentrism constructs a dichotomy between humans, regarded

as subjects of intrinsic value, and nature, reduced to an object devoid of inherent worth. Philosophically, such a dichotomy legitimizes the excessive exploitation of natural resources (Ruuska et al., 2020). In contrast, *Tawhid* proposes a theocentric framework that positions God as the ultimate center and purpose of all existence. Within this perspective, both humanity and nature share an equal ontological status as created beings. Human distinction is not defined by the right to dominate, but by an ethical responsibility as *khalifah* entrusted with preserving cosmic harmony.

Theocentric environmental ethics, as articulated by (DeWeese, 2023), reorients conservation discourse. Whereas secular approaches often rely on utilitarian arguments preserving nature for human survival or rights-based arguments recognizing the inherent rights of nature *Tawhidic* ethics introduces the dimension of worship. Efforts such as protecting rivers, safeguarding biodiversity, or reducing carbon emissions are understood not merely as social actions or lifestyle preferences, but as expressions of obedience and gratitude to the Creator. Within this framework, environmental destruction constitutes not only a legal violation or ethical deviation, but also a denial of divine blessings and the majesty manifested in creation.

Thus, *Tawhid* provides a robust metaphysical foundation for sustainability. It affirms the interconnectedness and interdependence of all elements within the cosmos an understanding that resonates with contemporary ecological insights regarding the web of life. The linear economic model characterized by “take-use-dispose,” as exemplified in modern industrial civilization, clearly contradicts the principle of unity and balance inherent in *Tawhid*. Conversely, the *Tawhidic* paradigm supports circular economic models and a moderate (*wasatiyyah*) way of life, in which resources are managed prudently, reused responsibly, and maintained within ecological equilibrium. In this sense, *Tawhid* is not merely a theological creed, but a comprehensive ecological paradigm that offers an ethical and value-based framework for constructing a just and sustainable civilization.

Humanity as Khalifah (Vicegerent) on Earth

The concept of *khalifah* is often understood primarily in political or social leadership terms. However, the findings of this analysis underscore the urgency of strengthening its ecological dimension namely, eco-stewardship within the PAI curriculum. The status of *khalifah* constitutes a moral contract to refrain from causing corruption (*fasad*) on earth. Its relevance to the SDGs is particularly evident in SDG 12

(Responsible Consumption and Production), where responsible consumption forms an integral part of the trusteeship mandate.

The notion of humanity as *khalifah fi al-arḍ* (vicegerent on earth), as affirmed in the Qur'an (Qur'an 2:30), provides both a theological and ethical foundation for structuring the relationship between humans, God, and the natural world. This position does not confer absolute ownership; rather, it designates human beings as trustees entrusted with the responsibilities of governance (*tadbir*), care (*ri'ayah*), and the cultivation and flourishing of the earth and its ecosystems. In line with (Mubarak et al., 2024), this responsibility is collective in nature, requiring a serious commitment to safeguarding both human sustainability and ecological preservation. Thus, the status of *khalifah* is not a license for exploitation, but a moral-spiritual covenant imbued with profound responsibility.

The distinctive feature of the vicegerency paradigm lies in its dimension of transcendental accountability, which extends beyond the framework of secular ethics. Whereas the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau regulate accountability primarily within the horizontal sphere among individuals or between individuals and the state (Stanton & Buttle, 2024; Warner, 2022) the concept of *khalifah* introduces a vertical axis of accountability directly to God. This additional layer of accountability generates a deeper ethical motivation, whereby every act of resource management and social leadership is perceived as a form of worship. Consequently, environmental degradation is not merely a legal violation or economic loss, but also a betrayal of divine trust and a manifestation of spiritual failure.

Furthermore, the mandate of vicegerency resonates with contemporary leadership theory and environmental ethics. In the domain of social leadership, the concept of *khalifah* intersects with the principles of servant leadership, wherein leaders are oriented toward service, empowerment, and the promotion of communal well-being rather than domination (Hanafiah, 2024; Vesal & Alam, 2025). From an ecological perspective, it aligns with theocentric environmental ethics, which recognize nature as God's creation possessing intrinsic value (*ayatullah*), rather than as a mere instrument for human utility. Such a worldview fundamentally challenges the anthropocentric paradigm that underlies the global ecological crisis, while offering a vision that emphasizes the inseparable connection between social justice (*al-'adl*) and environmental preservation (*hifz al-bi'ah*) within the practice of vicegerency.

Theoretically, the status of *khalifah* functions as a bridge between faith and action, spirituality and social responsibility. Practically, this framework informs the development of public policies, economic models, and lifestyles that prioritize distributive justice, resource efficiency, and long-term sustainability. Failure to internalize these principles risks distorting the meaning of vicegerency, transforming it from a mandate of stewardship into an instrument of tyranny. Therefore, revitalizing the concept of *khalifah* is imperative not merely as a theological discourse, but as an applicable ethical guideline capable of addressing the complex global challenges of the twenty-first century.

Maqasid al-Shari'ah as the Foundation of Justice and Public Welfare

Contemporary elaborations position *ḥifẓ al-bī'ah* (environmental protection) as an integral component of the *Maqasid*. In curricular discourse, this perspective trains students to think teleologically and critically. Policies that damage the environment are thus regarded as inconsistent with the objectives of the Shari'ah. This orientation aligns with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), in which Islamic law must be directed toward universal public welfare.

Maqasid al-Shari'ah is widely regarded as a fundamental framework in Islamic legal theory because it explicates the objectives, wisdom, and underlying philosophy of legal rulings. Linguistically, *maqasid* is the plural of *maqṣad*, meaning purpose or objective. The concept centers on the principle of *jalb al-maṣāliḥ wa dar'u al-mafāsīd* – the promotion of benefit and the prevention of harm in human life (Rane, 2023). Classical scholars such as Imam al-Ghazali and al-Shatibi formulated the higher objectives of the Shari'ah into five universal essentials (*al-darūriyyāt al-khamsah*): the protection of religion (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), intellect (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*), lineage (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), and property (*ḥifẓ al-māl*) (Rane, 2023; Ahmed, 2025; Komath, 2025; Possumah, 2024). These five dimensions serve as primary parameters for assessing whether a legal ruling or policy aligns with the noble orientation of the Shari'ah.

In contemporary developments, Islamic legal scholars emphasize the dynamic and adaptive character of the *Maqasid* framework. Global transformations including environmental crises and social injustice – necessitate an expansion of its scope to ensure continued relevance. One significant modern elaboration is the recognition of *ḥifẓ al-bī'ah* (environmental protection) as either a new objective or, at minimum, an integral dimension of the existing *Maqasid* (Atta & Sharifi, 2024). The principal argument is that

the protection of life, property, and lineage cannot be fully realized without a healthy and sustainable environment. Consequently, *hifz al-bi'ah* is not an artificial addition, but rather a logical extension of a holistic understanding of the Shari'ah's objectives in responding to modern challenges.

Methodologically, the adoption of the *Maqasid* framework encourages a shift from a purely textual approach toward a teleological and consequentialist orientation. This shift reframes normative inquiry from "What is the ruling?" (*mā hukmuhu?*) to more substantive questions such as "What are the objectives and socio-ecological consequences of this ruling?" (Hutla & Rompanen, 2023). In this sense, *Maqasid* functions as a critical hermeneutical instrument, enabling *ijtihad* on emerging issues not explicitly addressed in classical texts, while also providing a basis for re-evaluating earlier juristic formulations to maintain their relevance in contemporary contexts.

In the sphere of public policy and governance, *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* offers a normative ethical framework for assessing justice, sustainability, and policy effectiveness (Ahmed, 2025). This perspective requires that policies and regulations be evaluated not only in terms of formal legality, but also in light of their contribution to public welfare (*maṣlahah 'ammah*) and environmental sustainability (Reid, 2022). Accordingly, policies that are procedurally legitimate yet produce environmental degradation, structural injustice, or violations of fundamental rights are considered contrary to the spirit of the *Maqasid*. Thus, *Maqasid* is not merely a legal theory, but may also be understood as a theory of social justice affirming that legal, economic, and social systems must be directed toward comprehensive well-being for both humanity and the natural world.

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of Islamic values into the PAI curriculum to support the achievement of the SDGs can be systematically formulated through the three principal pillars outlined in the theoretical review. The relevance of each pillar to the SDGs agenda, along with illustrative examples of its application within the PAI curriculum, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Integration of Islamic Theological Pillars and Their Relevance to the SDGs within the PAI Curriculum

No.	Theological Pillar	Conceptual Foundation	SDGs Relevance	Implications for the PAI Curriculum	Examples of Academic Implementation
1	Tawhid as an Ecological Paradigm	Unity of the cosmos (integrated cosmos); theocentrism; rejection	SDG 13 (Climate Action); SDG 14 (Life Below	Reorientation of students' worldview from	Integration of Qur'anic exegesis on ayat kauniyyah;

		of human–nature dualism	Water); SDG 15 (Life on Land)	anthropocentric to theocentric; ecological integration within <i>aqidah</i> studies	ecological reflection through <i>tadabbur</i> ; discussions on environmental ethics as an act of worship
2	Khalifah as a Mandate of Trusteeship	Trust (<i>amanah</i>); vertical-horizontal accountability; eco-stewardship; prohibition of <i>fasad</i> (corruption/destruction)	SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities); SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)	Internalization of socio-ecological responsibility; strengthening sustainable leadership ethics	Project-based learning; campus consumption audits; public policy case studies
3	Maqasid al-Shari'ah as a Framework of Justice	Jalb al-masalih wa dar'u al-mafasid (promoting benefit and preventing harm); expansion of <i>hifz al-bi'ah</i> ; teleological approach	SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities); SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)	Development of critical policy analysis skills grounded in public welfare (<i>masalahah</i>)	Maqasid-based policy analysis; policy brief writing; discussions on contemporary <i>fiqh</i>

The findings of this study indicate that the three conceptual pillars *Tawhid*, *Khalifah*, and *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* may serve as strategic foundations for revitalizing the PAI curriculum to render it more responsive to the global sustainable development agenda. The paradigm of *Tawhid* aligns with (Almirzanah, 2020), who emphasizes that Islamic spirituality perceives the universe as an integrated cosmic unity. This perspective simultaneously critiques anthropocentric approaches which, as noted by (Bonnett, 2024), necessitate re-envisioning nature as a central entity within climate change education. Accordingly, *Tawhid* should not be confined to a purely doctrinal level; rather, it functions as an ecological framework that cultivates sustainability consciousness.

The second pillar, *Khalifah*, underscores the ethical mandate of humanity as steward of the earth, paralleling the concept of stewardship in sustainability literature. (Eom & Ng, 2023) assert that faith-based stewardship plays a significant role in advancing sustainability agendas. However, within PAI instructional practice, the ecological dimension of vicegerency often receives less emphasis than its social dimension. Integrative efforts such as the development of *Fiqh al-Bi'ah* by linking issues like plastic waste to the prohibition of *israf* (excess and wastefulness) can strengthen ecological education. This initiative resonates with the findings of (Lan, 2025), who highlights the social responsibility of universities through concrete programs such as green campus initiatives.

The third pillar, *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, functions as an operational instrument for promoting justice and public welfare. (Junaidi et al., 2023) affirm that contemporary developments in *Maqasid* theory now encompass environmental protection (*hifz al-bi'ah*). This perspective enables critical analysis of contemporary issues such as the fast fashion industry, which generates adverse impacts on both labor conditions and the environment an issue consistent with the circular consumption model discussed by (Mesiranta et al., 2024). Furthermore, the relevance of this pillar is reflected in the study by (Umar et al., 2022), which demonstrates how corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in Islamic financial institutions can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly in the fields of education, health, and environmental sustainability.

Overall, the integration of these three pillars holds the potential to transform PAI into a more holistic educational model one that not only cultivates individual piety but also prepares students to become agents of change in advancing sustainable development. Nevertheless, the limitation of this study lies in its conceptual nature; therefore, further empirical research is required to test and validate the proposed framework.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the integration of Islamic values into the PAI curriculum to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be constructed upon three strategic foundations. First, *Tawhid* is positioned not merely as a doctrinal affirmation of faith, but as an ecological paradigm grounded in theocentrism that rejects anthropocentrism and emphasizes the unity of the cosmos in responding to the climate crisis. Second, the concept of *Khilafah* is revitalized as eco-stewardship, demanding ethical accountability in responsible consumption and production (particularly relevant to SDG 12). Third, *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* functions as a socio-ecological justice framework that shifts legal reasoning from formalistic approaches toward critical, welfare-oriented analysis in support of peace and justice (SDG 16).

Pedagogically, this framework offers a reorientation of the PAI curriculum from a predominantly theological-normative knowledge transfer model toward transformative, action-based education that connects ritual piety with global sustainability responsibility. Nevertheless, the primary limitation of this study lies in its conceptual-theoretical nature, grounded in a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), such that its practical validity in classroom implementation has not yet been empirically

tested. Therefore, future research is recommended to empirically examine this conceptual framework through classroom action research, case studies of implementation in green campus initiatives, or the development of assessment instruments designed to measure the effectiveness of integrating these three pillars in enhancing students' sustainability competencies.

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