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## Revisiting Abdurrahman Wahid's Concept of Pluralism: Implications for Inclusive Islamic Education in Indonesia

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### Abstract

Indonesia's religious and cultural diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for Islamic education in fostering social cohesion, tolerance, and mutual respect. In recent years, increasing concerns regarding religious intolerance, identity-based polarization, and exclusivist interpretations of religion have highlighted the need for inclusive educational approaches grounded in Islamic values. This study aims to revisit Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of pluralism and examine its implications for inclusive Islamic education in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative library research design, the study utilizes philosophical and historical approaches to analyze Abdurrahman Wahid's writings and relevant scholarly literature. The findings reveal that Gus Dur's concept of pluralism is constructed upon three major pillars: Islamic universalism, Islamic cosmopolitanism, and the indigenization of Islam. These concepts collectively promote respect for human dignity, openness to intercultural dialogue, and the harmonious integration of Islamic teachings with local cultural traditions. The study further demonstrates that Gus Dur's pluralistic thought provides a strong conceptual foundation for inclusive Islamic education by emphasizing tolerance, mutual understanding, social justice, and democratic values while maintaining commitment to Islamic principles. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on the political or theological dimensions of Gus Dur's thought, this article highlights its educational significance in addressing contemporary challenges related to diversity and social cohesion. The study concludes that Abdurrahman Wahid's pluralistic vision remains highly relevant for strengthening inclusive, moderate, and socially responsive Islamic education in contemporary Indonesia.

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## **Introduction**

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the most culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse countries in the world. The coexistence of multiple religious traditions, ethnic identities, languages, and cultural practices has shaped the nation's social and political landscape since its inception. While diversity constitutes an important social asset, it also presents significant challenges for maintaining social cohesion, mutual respect, and national unity. In recent decades, the emergence of religious intolerance, identity-based conflicts, and exclusivist interpretations of religion has intensified concerns regarding the sustainability of pluralistic values in Indonesian society. These developments highlight the urgent need for educational approaches capable of nurturing tolerance, inclusivity, and respect for diversity among younger generations.

Within this context, Islamic education occupies a strategic position in promoting social harmony and religious moderation. Islamic education is not merely concerned with transmitting religious knowledge but also aims to cultivate ethical values, social responsibility, and peaceful coexistence within diverse communities. As a result, contemporary Islamic education faces the challenge of balancing commitment to Islamic teachings with the need to develop inclusive attitudes toward individuals from different religious, cultural, and social backgrounds. The growing discourse on religious moderation, multiculturalism, and inclusive education has therefore encouraged scholars to revisit Islamic intellectual traditions that support pluralistic and humanistic values.

One of the most influential Muslim intellectuals who consistently advocated pluralism, democracy, and religious tolerance in Indonesia was K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (1940–2009), widely known as Gus Dur. As an Islamic scholar, cultural thinker, social activist, and former President of Indonesia, Gus Dur developed a distinctive perspective on pluralism grounded in Islamic teachings while remaining responsive to Indonesia's multicultural realities. His ideas emerged from a rich intellectual tradition that combined classical Islamic scholarship, pesantren education, modern Islamic thought, and engagement with global intellectual discourses. Consequently, his concept of pluralism represents an important contribution to contemporary discussions on Islam, diversity, and citizenship.

For Gus Dur, pluralism was not merely the acknowledgment of social diversity but a moral and theological commitment to respecting human dignity and protecting the rights of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. He viewed diversity as a manifestation of God's will (*sunnatullah*) that should be embraced rather than resisted. Through concepts such as Islamic universalism, Islamic cosmopolitanism, and the indigenization of Islam (*pribumisasi Islam*), Gus Dur articulated an inclusive understanding of Islam that encourages dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect among different communities. His ideas continue to be relevant in addressing contemporary challenges related to religious intolerance, social polarization, and identity politics.

Several studies have examined Gus Dur's thoughts on pluralism, democracy, multiculturalism, and Islamic education. Existing research generally highlights his commitment to interreligious dialogue, religious freedom, human rights, and democratic values. Other studies have explored the relationship between his pluralistic ideas and the broader development of Islamic thought in Indonesia. While these studies have significantly contributed to understanding Gus Dur's intellectual legacy, most of them focus either on

theological interpretations of pluralism or on his socio-political contributions. Research that specifically investigates the educational implications of his pluralistic thought remains relatively limited.

Furthermore, previous studies often discuss pluralism as a social or political concept without adequately exploring its potential contribution to the development of inclusive Islamic education. As educational institutions increasingly encounter issues related to diversity, tolerance, and social cohesion, there is a need to revisit Gus Dur's intellectual framework and examine its relevance for contemporary educational contexts. Such an inquiry is particularly important because Islamic education plays a crucial role in shaping students' attitudes toward religious and cultural differences within a pluralistic society.

Against this background, this study seeks to revisit Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of pluralism and analyze its implications for inclusive Islamic education in Indonesia. Using a philosophical and historical approach, the study examines the fundamental principles underlying Gus Dur's understanding of pluralism and explores their relevance to contemporary educational challenges. The analysis focuses on three major dimensions of his thought—Islamic universalism, Islamic cosmopolitanism, and the indigenization of Islam—as foundations for fostering inclusive educational practices.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to reposition Gus Dur's concept of pluralism within the framework of inclusive Islamic education. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize political, theological, or sociocultural dimensions of his thought, this article highlights the educational significance of his pluralistic vision and its contribution to developing tolerance, mutual respect, and democratic values in Islamic educational settings. By doing so, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on religious moderation, multicultural education, and the future direction of Islamic education in Indonesia.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative library research design to examine Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of pluralism and its implications for inclusive Islamic education in Indonesia. Library research was considered appropriate because the study focused on analyzing ideas, concepts, and intellectual contributions derived from written sources rather than empirical field data. The research aimed to explore the philosophical foundations of Gus Dur's pluralistic thought and assess its relevance to contemporary educational discourse.

The study adopted both philosophical and historical approaches. The philosophical approach was used to critically interpret the fundamental principles underlying Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of pluralism, particularly those related to Islamic universalism, Islamic cosmopolitanism, and the indigenization of Islam. Meanwhile, the historical approach was employed to understand the socio-political, cultural, and intellectual contexts that shaped the development of his ideas. Combining these approaches enabled a comprehensive understanding of both the conceptual substance and historical significance of his pluralistic thought.

Data sources consisted of primary and secondary materials. Primary sources included books, essays, speeches, and other writings authored by Abdurrahman Wahid that discuss pluralism, Islamic thought, democracy, culture, and education. Key works

examined in this study include *Islam Kosmopolitan*, *Islamku*, *Islam Anda*, *Islam Kita*, and *Islam di Tengah Pergulatan Sosial*. Secondary sources comprised scholarly books, journal articles, research reports, and other academic publications addressing pluralism, Islamic education, multiculturalism, religious moderation, and studies on Abdurrahman Wahid's intellectual legacy.

Data were collected through document analysis. Relevant literature was identified, selected, classified, and organized according to the themes of pluralism and inclusive Islamic education. The collected materials were then examined systematically to identify key concepts, arguments, and educational values embedded in Gus Dur's writings.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis. The analysis involved several stages, including data reduction, thematic categorization, interpretation, and synthesis. Particular attention was given to recurring concepts and philosophical arguments concerning diversity, tolerance, human dignity, religious coexistence, and educational transformation. The findings were subsequently interpreted within the broader framework of contemporary Islamic education to formulate a comprehensive understanding of the educational implications of Abdurrahman Wahid's pluralistic thought.

## **Results**

### ***Islamic Universalism as the Foundation of Pluralism***

The analysis of Abdurrahman Wahid's writings reveals that the foundation of his pluralistic thought lies in the concept of Islamic universalism. For Gus Dur, Islam is not merely a religious identity but a moral framework that promotes universal human values applicable to all people regardless of religious, ethnic, or cultural background. He argued that the primary objective of Islamic teachings is the protection of fundamental human rights and dignity.

This universalistic perspective is closely related to the objectives of Islamic law (*maqashid al-shari'ah*), which emphasize the protection of life, religion, intellect, family, and property. Gus Dur interpreted these principles as evidence that Islam fundamentally supports justice, equality, and human dignity. Consequently, differences in religion, ethnicity, and culture should not become sources of discrimination or exclusion. Instead, they should be understood as part of God's design for humanity.

Within this framework, pluralism is viewed not as a threat to Islamic identity but as a manifestation of Islamic ethical values. The acceptance of diversity therefore becomes an integral component of religious commitment and social responsibility.

### ***Islamic Cosmopolitanism and Intercultural Engagement***

A second major dimension of Gus Dur's pluralistic thought is Islamic cosmopolitanism. The findings indicate that Gus Dur consistently emphasized the openness of Islamic civilization toward external cultures, ideas, and traditions. He rejected exclusivist interpretations that isolate Muslims from broader human experiences and argued that Islamic civilization historically developed through interaction with diverse cultural and intellectual traditions.

According to Gus Dur, the advancement of Islamic civilization was made possible by its ability to absorb, adapt, and creatively engage with knowledge originating from different

societies. This historical experience demonstrates that openness and dialogue are not foreign to Islam but constitute essential elements of its intellectual tradition.

The concept of cosmopolitanism also forms the basis for interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Rather than perceiving religious differences as obstacles, Gus Dur regarded them as opportunities for mutual learning and social collaboration. Such a perspective encourages the development of inclusive attitudes and constructive engagement among members of diverse communities.

***Indigenization of Islam and Cultural Inclusivity***

The third pillar of Gus Dur’s pluralistic framework is the concept of pribumisasi Islam (the indigenization of Islam). The findings show that Gus Dur viewed Islam and local culture as mutually enriching rather than contradictory. He argued that Islamic teachings can be expressed through local cultural forms without compromising their essential theological principles.

Through the concept of indigenization, Gus Dur sought to bridge the gap between religious norms and local cultural realities. He maintained that the success of Islam in Indonesia was closely linked to its ability to adapt to local traditions while preserving its core values. Consequently, cultural diversity should be appreciated as a medium through which Islamic teachings can be communicated and practiced within specific social contexts.

This perspective rejects both rigid cultural uniformity and religious exclusivism. Instead, it promotes a contextual and culturally responsive understanding of Islam that is capable of accommodating social diversity while maintaining religious authenticity.

*Table 1. Main Dimensions of Abdurrahman Wahid’s Concept of Pluralism*

Dimension	Main Idea	Educational Significance
Islamic Universalism	Human dignity and fundamental rights	Development of respect, equality, and social justice
Islamic Cosmopolitanism	Openness to dialogue and intercultural engagement	Promotion of tolerance and interreligious understanding
Indigenization of Islam	Harmonization of Islam and local culture	Contextual and culturally responsive education
Maqashid al-Shari’ah	Protection of fundamental human interests	Ethical foundation for inclusive education

***Implications for Inclusive Islamic Education***

The analysis further indicates that Gus Dur’s concept of pluralism has significant implications for Islamic education. His ideas support an educational orientation that emphasizes inclusivity, tolerance, dialogue, and respect for diversity. Education is not merely expected to transmit religious knowledge but also to cultivate democratic values, social responsibility, and peaceful coexistence.

From this perspective, inclusive Islamic education should encourage students to appreciate differences while maintaining commitment to their own religious beliefs. The objective is not theological relativism but the development of mutual respect among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Such an approach is particularly relevant in contemporary Indonesia, where educational institutions play a strategic role in strengthening social cohesion and religious moderation.

The findings suggest that Islamic universalism, cosmopolitanism, and the indigenization of Islam collectively provide a conceptual foundation for developing inclusive Islamic education that is responsive to the realities of a pluralistic society.

## **Discussion**

### ***Reinterpreting Islamic Pluralism Beyond Religious Tolerance***

The findings demonstrate that Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of pluralism extends beyond the conventional understanding of religious tolerance. Rather than merely advocating peaceful coexistence among different religious communities, Gus Dur proposed a broader ethical framework grounded in human dignity, justice, equality, and mutual respect. His understanding of pluralism is rooted in the belief that diversity constitutes a divine reality (*sunnatullah*) that should be embraced as part of God's design for humanity.

This perspective distinguishes Gus Dur's pluralism from secular notions of multiculturalism that often emphasize social accommodation without necessarily providing a theological foundation. For Gus Dur, the acceptance of diversity is not only a social necessity but also a religious obligation. The Qur'anic principle of *ta'aruf* (mutual recognition) serves as the basis for constructive engagement among different communities, allowing diversity to become a source of social enrichment rather than conflict.

The findings also reveal that Gus Dur consistently rejected exclusivist interpretations of religion that claim absolute social superiority over others. Instead, he promoted an inclusive understanding of Islam that recognizes the rights and dignity of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. Such an approach remains highly relevant in contemporary Indonesia, where religious diversity continues to present both opportunities and challenges for social cohesion.

In this regard, the study supports previous scholarship that identifies Gus Dur as one of the most influential advocates of democratic Islam and religious pluralism in Indonesia. However, the present study extends existing discussions by emphasizing the educational implications of his pluralistic thought rather than focusing solely on its political or theological dimensions.

### ***Islamic Universalism and the Foundations of Inclusive Education***

One of the most significant findings of this study is the central role of Islamic universalism in Gus Dur's intellectual framework. The principles of justice, equality, freedom, and human dignity that characterize his understanding of Islam provide a strong foundation for inclusive educational practices. These principles suggest that education should not merely transmit religious doctrines but also cultivate ethical awareness, empathy, and social responsibility.

From an educational perspective, Islamic universalism encourages learners to appreciate diversity while maintaining commitment to their own religious beliefs. This approach challenges educational models that unintentionally reinforce exclusivism, prejudice, or social segregation. Instead, it promotes the development of students who are intellectually open, morally responsible, and capable of engaging constructively with individuals from different backgrounds.

The findings further indicate that Gus Dur's reliance on *maqashid al-shari'ah* strengthens the relationship between Islamic teachings and inclusive educational values. By emphasizing the protection of religion, life, intellect, family, and property, his framework places human welfare at the center of educational objectives. Consequently, inclusive Islamic education can be understood as an effort to actualize these universal ethical principles within educational settings.

This interpretation aligns with contemporary discussions on religious moderation in Indonesia, which emphasize the importance of balancing religious commitment with respect for diversity. In this sense, Gus Dur's thought offers a valuable conceptual framework for addressing contemporary educational challenges related to intolerance, radicalism, and identity-based polarization.

### ***The Relevance of Gus Dur's Thought for Contemporary Islamic Education***

The contemporary relevance of Gus Dur's concept of pluralism becomes increasingly evident in the context of globalization, digital communication, and growing social diversity. Educational institutions today are expected not only to develop academic competence but also to prepare students to live and collaborate within multicultural societies. This challenge requires educational approaches that integrate religious values with democratic citizenship, intercultural understanding, and social inclusion.

The findings suggest that the three pillars of Gus Dur's thought—Islamic universalism, Islamic cosmopolitanism, and the indigenization of Islam—provide an integrated framework for developing inclusive Islamic education. Islamic universalism offers ethical foundations, cosmopolitanism promotes openness and dialogue, while indigenization encourages contextual and culturally responsive educational practices. Together, these elements create an educational vision that is both deeply rooted in Islamic teachings and responsive to contemporary social realities.

Furthermore, the concept of inclusive Islamic education derived from Gus Dur's thought contributes to broader efforts to strengthen social harmony in Indonesia. By encouraging dialogue, mutual respect, and recognition of diversity, educational institutions can play a strategic role in preventing intolerance and fostering peaceful coexistence among citizens. This contribution is particularly important in a pluralistic nation where educational institutions serve as key sites for character formation and civic development.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of pluralism remains highly relevant for contemporary Islamic education. His intellectual legacy provides not only a framework for understanding diversity but also a practical foundation for developing educational models that promote inclusivity, tolerance, and social cohesion in modern Indonesian society.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Abdurrahman Wahid's concept of pluralism is rooted in three interconnected foundations: Islamic universalism, Islamic cosmopolitanism, and the indigenization of Islam. These foundations reflect an inclusive understanding of Islam that embraces diversity as a divine reality while maintaining commitment to Islamic teachings. For Gus Dur, pluralism is not merely the recognition of differences but a moral

and religious commitment to respecting human dignity, promoting social justice, and fostering peaceful coexistence among diverse communities.

The findings further indicate that Gus Dur's pluralistic thought has significant implications for contemporary Islamic education. His emphasis on dialogue, tolerance, cultural openness, and humanistic values provides a strong conceptual basis for developing inclusive Islamic education in Indonesia. Such an educational approach encourages students to appreciate diversity, engage constructively with differences, and contribute to social harmony without compromising their religious identity.

This study contributes to the discourse on Islamic education by repositioning Gus Dur's concept of pluralism within the framework of inclusive education. While previous studies have largely focused on the political, cultural, or theological dimensions of his thought, this article highlights its educational relevance for addressing contemporary challenges related to intolerance, polarization, and religious diversity. Consequently, Gus Dur's intellectual legacy remains an important reference for strengthening inclusive, democratic, and socially responsive Islamic education in Indonesia.

Future studies may further explore the practical implementation of Gus Dur's pluralistic values in educational institutions, curriculum development, and classroom practices. Such investigations would provide a deeper understanding of how Islamic education can contribute to fostering tolerance, social cohesion, and religious moderation in increasingly diverse societies.

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