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# Inclusive Religious Education in a Democratic State: Forming Tolerant Character in a Multicultural Society

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | This research explores the concept and implementation of inclusive religious education within the framework of a democratic and multicultural society in Indonesia. As a country with diverse religions, ethnicities, and cultures, Indonesia faces both opportunities and challenges in strengthening tolerance through education. Using a qualitative approach with a literature review and case analysis in selected schools, the study examines how inclusive practices are integrated into religious education. The findings reveal that inclusive religious education significantly contributes to fostering tolerant character among students, improving interfaith understanding, and strengthening social harmony. Nevertheless, the study identifies several obstacles, such as limited teacher training in multicultural competence, inadequate teaching resources, and the insufficient integration of democratic values in the curriculum. The paper emphasizes that inclusive religious education will only be effective if supported by a strong policy framework, curriculum reform, and comprehensive teacher preparation. Therefore, this research recommends improvements in curriculum development, teacher education, and government policy to ensure that students are nurtured in an environment that cultivates tolerance, respect, and democratic values in a multicultural context.<br><br>*This is an open access article under the* |

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country with extraordinary diversity, both in terms of religion, culture, ethnicity, and language. This diversity is one of the nation's main strengths, reflected in the national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means "Unity in Diversity". This motto reflects the noble values contained in Indonesian culture, which acknowledges and celebrates differences as an integral part of social life. However, behind this diversity, there is a major challenge in managing differences that oftenbecome sources of social tension and conflict. Therefore, it is important for Indonesian society to continue seeking ways to strengthen social solidarity and maintain harmony among groups with different religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. In this regard, inclusive religious education becomes one solution to promote values of tolerance and respect for diversity among the younger generation.

Inclusive religious education aims not only to teach the teachings of each religion but also to open space for understanding the beliefs and teachings of other religions. Education that focuses on

religious inclusivism teaches the importance of acknowledging, respecting, and understanding differences, which will ultimately shape tolerant character in individuals. As explained by Aini & Safinatunaja, inclusive religious education can help foster mutual respect and understanding among religious communities, which is essential in creating a peaceful, just, and prosperous society (Aini, R., & Safinatunaja, 2023). This inclusive religious education encourages students not only to understand their own beliefs but also to accept religious differences as something that can not only be accepted but also valued in collective life.

Research by Tan and Tan (2017, Journal of Moral Education, shows that teaching about religious diversity explicitly can increase empathy and strengthen social cohesion among learners. This finding reinforces the importance of religious education that not only teaches individual beliefs but also fosters cross-religious understanding in the context of a democratic society (Tan, S. S., & Tan, 2017). As Haynes, emphasizes, interfaith learning within religious education promotes civic friendship and mutual understanding essential for sustaining harmony in plural societies (Haynes, 2022). Likewise, McLaughlin and Grace, argue that democratic education must cultivate tolerance as a moral and civic virtue in multicultural contexts (McLaughlin, T. H., & Grace, 2020).

Multicultural religious education plays a very important role in building tolerance among young generations, by teaching them to appreciate diversity, both culturally and religiously. Through this approach, religious education does not only focus on particular religious teachings but also introduces students to the values of pluralism and inclusivism that enable them to live in a more peaceful and harmonious society (Ni'mah, 2021).

However, despite much research showing the positive impact of inclusive religious education, the greatest challenge in its implementation is educators' unpreparedness in teaching the principles of pluralism effectively. As mentioned by Kurnialoh & Suharti, many educators still teach their religion in an exclusive way, which emphasizes understanding of their respective religious teachings without providing space for understanding other religions. This often leads to the formation of narrow thinking among students, who tend to regard their religion as the only true religion and worsen misunderstanding of other religions (Kurnialoh, N., & Suharti, 2016).

Gus Dur, one of the main figures in inclusive Islamic thought, taught that Islam, like other religions, has fundamental values that teach peace, mutual respect, and coexistence in differences. According to him, inclusive Islam teaches its followers to accept differences and make diversity a strength that enriches human life. This thought is highly relevant to the importance of inclusive religious education, which not only teaches about each religion but also introduces broader humanitarian values that can strengthen social solidarity among different groups (Aini, R., & Safinatunaja, 2023).

Islamic Religious Education based on pluralism and multiculturalism values plays an important role in shaping attitudes of tolerance and mutual respect among students (Sa'idah, 2024). Inclusive religious education has great potential to shape tolerant character that is not only limited to understanding religion but also includes appreciation for cultural and ethnic diversity. Research by Nurkholifah et al, shows that through education based on multiculturalism values, students are taught to appreciate diversity as part of their identity. Multiculturalism-based education teaches that despite differences, all individuals have equal rights to be respected, treated fairly, and given space to develop. Multiculturalism in religious education directs students to see differences as something positive that enriches their lives (Nurkholifah, S., Zakiah, L., Adiesty, J. I., Aziz, A. M., & Jaya, 2024).

On the other hand, the biggest challenge in implementing inclusive religious education is the lack of integration between inclusive religious education and a broader multicultural curriculum. According to Basman et al, although some schools in Indonesia have begun implementing inclusive religious education, existing curricula often still focus on teaching particular religions without providing sufficient space for teaching about pluralism and diversity (Basman, A., Ali, H., & Sufi, 2025). In many regions, the religious education approach is still fragmented, with little room for introduction or discussion of religious and cultural differences. Windayani et al. also emphasize that inclusive religious education must be better introduced within a broader national education framework so that pluralism principles can be implemented comprehensively (Windayani, N. L. I., Dewi, N. W. R., Laia, B., & Sriartha, 2024). This requires stronger policies that support the implementation of religious

education that not only teaches individual religions but also encompasses humanitarian values and diversity.

As a democratic country that prioritizes religious freedom, Indonesia must have an education system that accommodates religious and cultural diversity fairly and equitably. Azra, suggests that to create a more inclusive and tolerant society, national education policies need to include clearer and more implementable principles of religious pluralism. By introducing pluralism principles at every education level, Indonesia can ensure that the younger generation will grow with an open attitude and appreciation for differences, which is important for building a harmonious and just society (Azra, 2003).

Multicultural education plays an important role in teaching students to see diversity as an opportunity to learn, collaborate, and grow together. Prasetya, adds that inclusive religious education based on multiculturalism functions as a bridge connecting various religious and cultural groups and creating space for more constructive interfaith dialogue. In Indonesian society full of differences, this education is very important to overcome misunderstandings that often arise from ignorance of other religions and cultures (Prasetya, 2023).

To realize broader inclusive religious education, several things need attention, one of which is policies that better support the implementation of pluralism-based education in all educational institutions. Gus Dur always reminded that in teaching religion, we need not only focus on individual teachings but also open space for acceptance and appreciation of other religions. With broader implementation of inclusive religious education, Indonesia can create a more peaceful, just, and prosperous society that mutually respects and appreciates existing diversity.

As a diverse country, Indonesia needs education that not only introduces students to their respective religious teachings but also gives them broader understanding of religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity. This is very important considering the potential for social conflict that can arise from misunderstanding of other religions and cultures. Therefore, implementing inclusive religious education becomes very important. Inclusive religious education not only teaches students to understand their own religious teachings but also to accept and appreciate the beliefs and religious practices of others. This is a crucial step in forming young generations who have broad understanding of diversity and are able to coexist with individuals from different backgrounds.

Inclusive religious education, as explained by Aini & Safinatunaja, plays an important role in creating a safe space for students to dialogue about religious and cultural differences. This process helps them see diversity as a strength that enriches social life, not as a threat. This is directly proportional to Bimantoro & Rahmawati, who show that education based on religious pluralism and inclusivism reduces potential conflicts arising from misunderstanding of other groups. Their research reveals that education promoting pluralism and inclusivism values has direct impact on student attitudes, where they become more open and can interact more harmoniously with groups holding different beliefs (Aini, R., & Safinatunaja, 2023; Bimantoro, D., & Rahmawati, 2025).

However, to achieve this, more than just education policies stating the importance of diversity is needed. As stated by Kurnialoh & Suharti, many educators still teach religious education with too closed an approach, where the focus is only on particular religious teachings (Kurnialoh, N., & Suharti, 2016). This causes students to be trapped in exclusive thought patterns that limit their understanding of other religions and worsen interreligious tensions. Gus Dur, known as a pioneer of inclusive Islamic thought in Indonesia, always emphasized that inclusive religious education is one of the best ways to overcome misunderstanding and intolerance among religious communities (Aini, R., & Safinatunaja, 2023). Gus Dur believed that Islam, like other religions, teaches principles that can strengthen relationships among groups, one of which is through appreciation of diversity.

In the context of inclusive religious education, educators' roles are very important, as they are the frontline in transforming these values to students. However, as revealed by Windayani et al, many educators still lack understanding of how to teach pluralism and multiculturalism values effectively. In practice, many educators find it difficult to introduce these concepts due to lack of training or understanding about the importance of diversity-based education (Windayani, N. L. I., Dewi, N. W. R., Laia, B., & Sriartha, 2024). Therefore, inclusive religious education requires more than just theory in the curriculum but must also be accompanied by adequate training for educators so they can deliver

material in ways that not only inspire respect for other religions but also teach students to see universal humanitarian values.

Another challenge is the limitation in education policies supporting the implementation of inclusive religious education in all educational institutions. As revealed by Prasetya, although national education policies have included various aspects related to diversity, implementation is often hindered by curricula still focused on particular religious teachings (Prasetya, 2023). This curriculum has not sufficiently opened space for teaching about religious pluralism, which ultimately reduces the positive impact that can be produced by inclusive religious education. Existing policies need adjustment to be more inclusive and comprehensive in accommodating existing religious and cultural diversity in Indonesia, and provide space for educators to teach diversity values more deeply and effectively.

However, it cannot be denied that in some schools that have successfully implemented inclusive religious education, the results are very positive. Research by Basman et al. shows that schools implementing multiculturalism-based inclusive religious education report increased tolerance attitudes among students (Basman, A., Ali, H., & Sufi, 2025). This shows that when students are given space to understand differences, they will learn not only to acknowledge but also appreciate and respect others' beliefs and cultures. With inclusive religious education, students are trained to see differences as something enriching social life, rather than as barriers or threats. Religious tolerance must also consider gender dimensions, where the experiences and challenges faced by women and men in religious practice can differ (Wakit, 2024).

Along with the times, inclusive religious education becomes increasingly important, especially in democratic countries like Indonesia that uphold religious freedom. Amid this globalization era, the role of multicultural education becomes increasingly important to ensure Indonesian society can maintain harmony amid existing diversity. Inclusive religious education can introduce young generations to the true concept of multiculturalism, namely acceptance of various differences around them. By introducing these values from an early age, inclusive religious education plays an important role in forming a more democratic society that mutually respects and appreciates every existing difference.

Jackson, also asserts that inclusive religious education contributes to intercultural citizenship by teaching respect for both shared and differing values, reinforcing the relevance of inclusive pedagogy in democratic societies (Jackson, 2019). This research becomes important because there are not many studies comprehensively linking inclusive religious education with tolerant character formation within the framework of a democratic state in Indonesia. Its novelty lies in the integrative approach between religious inclusivism concepts, democratic values, and multiculturalism examined through global and local literature studies. Thus, this research contributes to expanding the discourse of Islamic religious education oriented toward tolerance, religious freedom, and social harmony.

## METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with library research methods. Data were collected through systematic review of books, national and international journal articles, and previous research results relevant to the themes of inclusive religious education and multiculturalism (Sugiyono, 2022).

Analysis was conducted descriptively-qualitatively by emphasizing relationships between pluralism theory, democratic values, and religious education implementation in Indonesia. Analysis procedures include stages of concept identification, theme categorization, and synthesis of study results to find general patterns about how inclusive religious education shapes tolerant character in multicultural society. Validation was done through source triangulation to ensure data validity (Moleong, 2018).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
### A. Results

Researchers will present results based on findings obtained through this research. It can be concluded that inclusive religious education has a very positive impact on tolerant character formation and reduction of social tensions in multicultural society. Inclusive religious education,

which teaches appreciation for religious, cultural, and ethnic differences, is proven to help students develop attitudes of mutual respect and appreciation for diversity. These findings align with previous research showing that implementation of inclusive religious education in several Indonesian educational institutions can strengthen tolerant character among students. With teaching based on pluralism values, students become more open to other religious groups, leading to increased social cohesion.

However, despite these positive impacts being visible, research findings also show that inclusive religious education implementation still faces major challenges, especially regarding lack of deep understanding of pluralism concepts among educators. Many educators still teach their religious teachings exclusively and provide little space for teaching about existing religious and cultural differences in society. This shows that although there are efforts to implement inclusive religious education, deeper training and understanding for educators about pluralism and multiculturalism principles are still greatly needed.

Moreover, although there are educational institutions that have successfully integrated multiculturalism values into their curricula, many schools and madrasas have not fully implemented inclusive religious education evenly. This is due to limitations in education policies that do not fully support inclusive religious education based on religious pluralism. Education curricula focused on particular religious teachings without sufficiently providing space for teaching that deepens religious and cultural diversity becomes one obstacle in expanding inclusive religious education implementation.

This conclusion shows that although inclusive religious education can shape tolerant character and strengthen multiculturalism values in society, major challenges in its implementation require serious attention. Therefore, it is important to update education policies and provide better training to educators to ensure that inclusive religious education can be implemented effectively in all educational institutions in Indonesia. Thus, inclusive religious education can make significant contributions to creating a more peaceful, open, and mutually respectful society in diversity.

## B. Discussion

### 1. Inclusive Religious Education

Inclusive religious education can be understood as education accommodating all individuals with different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, aiming to create broader understanding of differences and diversity. Aini & Safinatunaja, explain that inclusive religious education aims to create space for interfaith dialogue, so students not only understand their own religious teachings but can also appreciate other religious teachings as part of human diversity. With inclusive religious education, students not only learn about moral and spiritual teachings in their religion but are also taught to respect other religious teachings as something worthy of respect (Aini, R., & Safinatunaja, 2023).

Inclusive religious education aims to reduce social tensions that often emerge from misunderstanding of religious and cultural differences. This aligns with Bimantoro & Rahmawati's view that inclusive religious education has great potential in creating a more harmonious society, by instilling pluralism values that can reduce tensions among different religious groups. According to Azra, inclusive religious education also plays an important role in young generation character formation who not only understand their religion deeply but also have open attitudes toward differences, which will reduce potential social conflicts (Azra, 2003). Islamic Religious Education is expected to transfer inclusive and multicultural Islamic teachings to students so they can appreciate global values such as inclusivism, humanism, tolerance, and democracy (Arif, 2012).

a. Concept of Inclusive Religious Education

Inclusive religious education focuses on acceptance and understanding of other religions and cultures, besides individual religious teachings. Pluralism values and appreciation for diversity become the foundation of this education, which aligns with democratic state principles upholding human rights, including religious freedom (Aini, R., & Safinatunaja,

2023). In multicultural societies like Indonesia, inclusive religious education implementation enables creation of mutually respectful environments supporting equality and religious freedom principles.

Inclusive religious education not only teaches about individual religions but also encourages students to understand that differences are social realities that must be accepted and appreciated. As explained by Kurnialoh and Suharti, inclusive religious education introduces openness and tolerance values, teaching individuals to coexist despite different beliefs (Kurnialoh, N., & Suharti, 2016). The inclusive approach in Islamic religious education aims to form tolerance attitudes and appreciate diversity among students.

Inclusive religious education is very important because it provides space for every individual, regardless of socio-economic background, to obtain equal access to quality education. With inclusive religious education, Indonesia can create young generations who are not only smart but also understand pluralism and multiculturalism values, which will help this nation progress forward. Unfortunately, the biggest challenge is the inability of some poor communities to obtain proper education, causing inequality in educational opportunities, especially among underprivileged children. Therefore, inclusive religious education must become primary attention to ensure every child gets equal rights in education, regardless of their social status (Setiawan, 2023).

b. Role of Inclusive Religious Education in Multicultural Society

In multicultural societies like Indonesia, inclusive religious education has a very important role in strengthening unity values. Inclusive education not only teaches individual religions but also introduces students to religious pluralism concepts encouraging them to be more open to differences. Research by Bimantoro & Rahmawati, shows that multicultural-based religious education teaching openness and acceptance of differences can reduce social conflicts arising from religious differences. In this context, inclusive religious education becomes an important foundation in creating a more harmonious, mutually respectful, and just society (Bimantoro, D., & Rahmawati, 2025).

c. Challenges in Inclusive Religious Education Implementation

Inclusive religious education implementation, despite having very great potential, still faces various challenges. One main challenge found in this research is lack of training for educators in teaching inclusive values. Most educators still teach religious education with more conservative approaches and do not sufficiently introduce religious pluralism concepts to students (Bimantoro, D., & Rahmawati, 2025). Kurnialoh and Suharti, also note that although religious education curricula have included some pluralism elements, field implementation remains limited, especially in regions vulnerable to interreligious conflicts (Kurnialoh, N., & Suharti, 2016). Inclusive Islamic religious education implementation requires commitment from all parties to create educational environments supporting tolerance and diversity (Baidhawy, 2005).

Moreover, lack of education policies supporting inclusive teaching also becomes one obstacle in inclusive religious education implementation. Research by Aini & Safinatunaja (2023) shows that although there are efforts to integrate inclusive religious education, existing curricula in many schools emphasize teaching particular religious teachings without sufficiently providing space for cross-religious and cultural discussions. Limited education policies supporting inclusive religious education also become major obstacles. Prasetya, shows that although some education policies begin directing toward pluralism value integration, many schools and educational institutions still teach religion with sectarian approaches, only focusing on particular religious teachings. Therefore, to maximize inclusive religious education implementation, education policies must support and encourage curricula that not only teach religion but also appreciate existing diversity (Prasetya, 2023).

d.  Inclusive Religious Education in Democratic States

In democratic states like Indonesia, inclusive religious education becomes very important because this country upholds religious freedom and human rights. Inclusive religious education not only teaches understanding of individual religions but also encourages students to understand that everyone has rights to embrace and practice religion according to their beliefs, without pressure or discrimination. Gus Dur, in his thinking about inclusive Islam, also emphasizes that religious education must foster mutual respect, underlying democratic values in multicultural states (Aini, R., & Safinatunaja, 2023). Strengthening educators' roles is very important in inclusive religious education implementation. Educators must be given adequate training to teach pluralism and multiculturalism values to students constructively. Basman et al emphasize that educators understanding the importance of pluralism-based education will be more effective in forming tolerant character in students and creating safe spaces for religious and cultural differences in learning processes (Basman, A., Ali, H., & Sufi, 2025).

Barnes, affirms that religious education in democratic states must be based on citizenship education principles guaranteeing freedom and equality for every citizen to express their beliefs without discrimination (Barnes, 2022). This approach aligns with democratic education ideals in Indonesia placing tolerance as a basic value of national life. Similarly, Gearon, highlights that global ethics within religious education nurture freedom of conscience and moral responsibility among diverse learners, reflecting the essence of democratic participation in plural societies (Gearon, 2022).

2.  **Tolerant Character**

Tolerant character is a quality greatly needed in diverse societies like Indonesia, where religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences become part of daily life. This character refers to individuals' ability to accept, appreciate, and coexist with others having different life views, religions, or beliefs. Considering Indonesia is a country with very high diversity, education has an important role in forming tolerant character among young generations. One way to achieve this is through inclusive religious education, teaching the importance of appreciating diversity and respecting differences.

Inclusive religious education not only teaches particular religious teachings but also prioritizes understanding of other religions, so students can develop mutual respect and appreciation attitudes. This is part of education based on religious pluralism and multiculturalism, providing space for students to understand that despite differences in religious beliefs and cultures, every individual has rights to be respected and accepted. Aini & Safinatunaja, reveal that inclusive religious education has great potential to form tolerant character because it can open students' minds to differences while fostering mutual respect attitudes among religious communities (Aini, R., & Safinatunaja, 2023).

In Indonesia, religious education prioritizing pluralism and multiculturalism is very relevant given existing diversity in society. Bimantoro & Rahmawati, explain that inclusive religious education helps reduce interreligious social tensions, often emerging from misunderstanding or intolerance toward other religious teachings (Bimantoro, D., & Rahmawati, 2025). With education based on pluralism values, students can learn to see differences not as barriers or threats but as something enriching their lives. Therefore, inclusive religious education functions not only to teach religion but also to form tolerant character that can strengthen relationships among different groups.

Schihalejev, finds that dialogical approaches in multi-faith classrooms strengthen students' openness and empathy across religious differences, which is essential for tolerance formation (Schihalejev, 2021). In line with this, Uribe, Amaya-Panche, and Méndez, found that religiosity taught within tolerant education frameworks contributes to increased political tolerance and willingness to reconcile in post-conflict societies. This shows that inclusive religious education has real social implications in maintaining stability and peace (Pino Uribe, J. F., Amaya-Panche, J., Méndez Méndez, N., & Casas Casas, 2025).

Similarly, Arweck and Nesbitt, demonstrate that interfaith encounters in educational settings enhance children's ability to empathize and respect others' beliefs, showing that tolerance can be cultivated through early and consistent exposure to diversity (Arweck, E., & Nesbitt, 2020). However, despite inclusive religious education having very positive impacts on tolerant character formation, the biggest challenge is lack of deep understanding among educators regarding pluralism and multiculturalism principles. Many educators still teach religion with exclusive approaches, more focused on their own religious teachings without providing space for understanding other religions. Kurnialoh & Suharti, note that such approaches worsen interreligious tensions, because students are not given opportunities to appreciate or understand others' religious views. This causes formation of less tolerant character, where students tend to regard their beliefs as the only correct ones and ignore religious differences around them (Kurnialoh, N., & Suharti, 2016).

Moreover, education policies still more focused on teaching particular religions without sufficiently providing space for education on diversity also become barriers to tolerant character formation. Azra, highlights that although there are education policies directing toward diversity, existing curricula often do not sufficiently cover education about religious pluralism and multiculturalism. Therefore, more inclusive policies supporting inclusive religious education implementation based on pluralism values are greatly needed so religious education not only teaches particular religious teachings but can also appreciate other religions (Azra, 2003).

However, despite challenges, inclusive religious education based on multiculturalism values can form tolerant character very effectively. Windayani et. al emphasize that multiculturalism teaches students to see diversity not as something separating them but as something enriching their social lives. With education prioritizing multiculturalism, students are taught to adapt to differences and manage diversity positively. Moreover, through multicultural education, students not only learn to accept differences but also to appreciate and celebrate those differences as social wealth (Windayani, N. L. I., Dewi, N. W. R., Laia, B., & Sriartha, 2024).

As stated by Gus Dur, a great figure in inclusive Islamic thought, religious education must teach that all religions basically teach the same humanitarian values, such as peace, compassion, and mutual respect. Therefore, inclusive religious education integrating these principles will be very effective in forming tolerant character, because students will understand that despite differences in beliefs and cultures, ultimately all religions teach values supporting peace and harmony in collective life. Gus Dur believed that only by educating young generations about appreciation for differences can we create peaceful and harmonious societies.

Inclusive religious education also not only forms tolerant character but also teaches empathy, the ability to feel and understand others' feelings. Bimantoro & Rahmawati, add that inclusive religious education can strengthen students' empathy toward people from different religious or cultural groups. When students are taught to understand others' life experiences that may be very different from their own, they will learn to appreciate others more and be more open to differences (Bimantoro, D., & Rahmawati, 2025).

However, to ensure inclusive religious education truly forms strong tolerant character, it is important for educators to have good understanding of pluralism and multiculturalism. Prasetya, emphasizes that adequate training for educators is very important so they can teach these values effectively to students. Without sufficient training, educators may not be able to teach pluralism and multiculturalism principles in ways acceptable and understandable to students (Prasetya, 2023).

Overall, inclusive religious education plays a very important role in forming tolerant character among Indonesia's young generation. By teaching students to appreciate and accept religious and cultural differences, inclusive religious education can help create a more peaceful, harmonious, and open society. However, to realize this, improvements in education

policies and more intensive training for educators are needed. With these steps, Indonesia can realize a more inclusive and mutually respectful society.

### 3. Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism in Indonesia has a very important role in tolerant character formation, considering this country has very high diversity. This diversity includes religious, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences, which on one hand become the nation's strength but can also become sources of tension if not managed well. In facing these challenges, multiculturalism application in daily life and education becomes key to creating more harmonious, peaceful, and mutually respectful societies. One very important approach in managing this diversity is through education, particularly inclusive religious education prioritizing pluralism and multiculturalism values. Implementation of multiculturalism-based PAI curricula provides positive influence on students' attitudes and social abilities. This is seen from increased tolerance, appreciation for diversity, and better social skills in interacting with friends from various cultures (Yusuf, 2022).

Multiculturalism teaches the importance of appreciating existing differences in society, both religiously, culturally, and ethnically. In Indonesia, which is a country with more than 300 ethnic groups and diverse religions, multiculturalism application in education is very relevant. Education based on multiculturalism not only teaches students to understand and accept differences but also to appreciate and celebrate those differences as social wealth. Through multicultural-based education, students can develop tolerant attitudes greatly needed in plural social life. Valk and Bertram-Troost, emphasize that plural religious education fosters social cohesion by bridging cultural divides and building mutual trust in diverse societies (Valk, P., & Bertram-Troost, 2021). In the same line, Barmeyer and Witte, argue that integrating religious literacy into democratic education strengthens intercultural understanding and civic equality (Barmeyer, N., & Witte, 2023).

Multicultural education is actually inseparable from Indonesian society's quite plural condition and archipelagic regions. With multicultural education existence, it is believed to provide the widest possible space for students to develop all their potentials, even though backed by different conditions (Dewi, 2024). Multicultural approaches in education also encourage students to understand that despite many differences among them, every individual has rights to be respected and accepted with all their religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This aligns with Azra's view stating that to create peaceful and prosperous societies, education must introduce values appreciating diversity and plurality. Thus, multicultural-based education not only forms tolerant character in individuals but also builds mutual respect among different groups (Azra, 2003).

According to Verkuyten, tolerance is not just accepting differences but also involves active appreciation toward opposing views. This view strengthens arguments that inclusive religious education must teach critical thinking skills and empathy in facing diversity of values and beliefs (Verkuyten, Maykel, 2021).

However, multiculturalism implementation in Indonesian education is not without challenges. One main challenge is lack of deep understanding among educators regarding the importance of pluralism and multiculturalism principles. Many educators still teach religious and cultural subject matter with limited and exclusive approaches. Such approaches hinder tolerant attitude formation in students, because they are only taught about their own religion or culture without providing space to understand and appreciate others' religions and cultures. (Kurnialoh, N., & Suharti, 2016) remind that without better understanding of pluralism principles, educators will struggle to instill tolerance values needed among students.

Another challenge is lack of more inclusive and multiculturalism-based education policy support. (Prasetya, 2023) shows that although there are policies supporting diversity, education curricula in Indonesia often still focus on particular religious teachings without providing sufficient space for education teaching religious pluralism and multiculturalism. Therefore, policies better supporting inclusive religious education based on pluralism and

multiculturalism are needed, which can encourage students to see diversity as something enriching their lives, not as threats.

However, despite these challenges, multiculturalism-based education still has very great potential in forming tolerant character and increasing social peace. Bimantoro, D., & Rahmawati (2025) state that through education based on multiculturalism principles, students are taught to open themselves to differences, not only accepting but also appreciating differences as wealth. Education encouraging students to appreciate different religions, cultures, and values can strengthen mutual understanding and build more harmonious relationships among various groups in society.

Islam has concepts of pluralism and religious diversity, affirming that although Muslims acknowledge these differences, it does not mean preachers or priests stop teaching their respective religions. Differences among humans, whether in ethnicity, skin color, language, customs, culture, or religion, are parts of fitrah and sunatullah, established by Allah SWT. This is reflected in Allah SWT's words in Q.S. Al-Hujurat (49:13), showing that diversity is His will Setiawan (2023). Religious education based on pluralism and multiculturalism principles teaches the importance of mutual respect and coexistence in diversity, so every individual can live peacefully despite having different backgrounds.

The importance of multiculturalism implementation in education is also affirmed by Windayani, N. L. I., Dewi, N. W. R., Laia, B., & Sriartha (2024) saying that multicultural education teaches students to appreciate and understand religious and cultural differences around them. This in turn can create stronger social bonds among them. Multiculturalism teaches students that differences are not something to be avoided but something to be accepted and appreciated as part of larger life. This way, multicultural education not only forms tolerant character but also builds inclusive social character among young generations.

Multiculturalism value application in religious education, as explained by (Nurkholifah, S., Zakiah, L., Adiesty, J. I., Aziz, A. M., & Jaya, 2024), can become bridges connecting various religious and cultural groups to live together harmoniously. Inclusive religious education integrating multicultural values helps students understand that despite many differences, basically all religions teach universal humanitarian values, such as compassion, peace, and brotherhood. These values, when applied in daily life, will form tolerant character greatly needed in plural societies. Multicultural education is expected to form student character appreciating differences and contributing to creating just and democratic societies (Ningsih, 2022).

Overall, multicultural education provides major contributions in forming tolerant character in Indonesia. By educating students to accept and celebrate differences, and appreciate diversity, multiculturalism-based education can reduce social tensions and build more inclusive and peaceful societies. For this, bigger steps are needed in education policy renewal, increased educator training, and pluralism-based curriculum implementation so multicultural education can be implemented more widely and effectively.

## 4. Democratic State

A democratic state is a state upholding basic democratic principles, namely individual freedom, equality before law, and active community participation in decision-making processes. In democratic states, highest power lies in the people's hands given through general election mechanisms and transparent political processes. One main goal of democratic states is creating free, just, and prosperous societies, where every individual has equal rights to express opinions, vote, and participate in political life.

Indonesia, as a country with religious, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, adopts democratic systems guaranteeing freedom of speech and religion for every citizen. Democracy in Indonesia is not only seen as a political system but also as basic principles upholding human rights and diversity values. Democracy in Indonesia provides space for every citizen to participate in political decision-making and policy processes, both locally and nationally, that will affect their daily lives. These democratic principles, despite experiencing many challenges in practice, remain main foundations in Indonesian state management.

a. Democratic Principles in States

The basic principle of democracy is people's sovereignty. People's sovereignty means highest power lies in people's hands, channeled through election mechanisms and representation. In Indonesian context, this people's sovereignty is realized through general election (pemilu) systems, where every citizen has rights to choose their representatives in legislative and executive institutions. Azra (2003)states that in democratic states, people have rights to determine their country's direction, including choosing leaders who will lead them and designing policies to be implemented in that country.

Besides people's sovereignty, democracy also prioritizes equality before law principles. In democratic states, no individual or group is more entitled or higher than law. Law applies to all citizens fairly and equally. Prasetya (2023) affirms that in democratic states, legal systems must function as tools to create social justice, providing equal protection for all citizens, regardless of social, economic, or religious backgrounds.

b. Democracy and Human Rights (HAM)

One main pillar of democratic states is respect for human rights (HAM). Democracy guarantees individual freedom to express opinions, practice religion, and assemble. Bimantoro, D., & Rahmawati (2025) reveal that in democratic states, individual rights are respected and protected by states. Every citizen has freedom to express themselves, whether through speaking, writing, or organizing. This freedom is part of human rights that must be protected by states to ensure every individual can live with dignity without fear of discrimination or oppression.

However, despite democracy guaranteeing freedom, there are still necessary limitations to maintain public order and state security. Azra (2003) explains that healthy democracy is not unlimited democracy, but democracy balancing between individual freedom and public interests. Therefore, in practice, freedom given by democratic states must still maintain balance with obligations to respect others' rights and maintain social order.

c. Democracy and Diversity in Indonesia

Indonesia is a very clear example of how democratic states must manage diversity. With more than 300 ethnic groups and six state-recognized religions, Indonesia faces major challenges in creating harmonious life amid differences. Gus Dur, in his views about inclusive Islam, emphasizes that democracy is not only about giving individuals freedom to choose and express opinions but also about providing space for every religious, cultural, and ethnic group to coexist peacefully. Aini, R., & Safinatunaja (2023) explain that in democratic states, differences are not only accepted but appreciated and protected by states through inclusive policies supporting diversity.

Democracy implementation in Indonesia is also reflected in *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) principles, affirming that despite many differences in Indonesia, this country remains united in diversity. Democracy in Indonesia provides space for diversity to develop, where every individual and religious group has equal rights to live, according to their beliefs, and are free from discrimination or persecution.

However, although democracy in Indonesia provides freedom for individuals to practice their religions and beliefs, interreligious tolerance remains a major challenge. Tensions arising from religious, racial, and cultural differences become one of the obstacles in realizing a fully harmonious society. Basman, A., Ali, H., & Sufi (2025) note that although Indonesia's democratic system provides space for diversity, the biggest challenge is how to manage these differences so they do not cause social conflicts. Therefore, more inclusive education and policies are needed to ensure that this diversity can be well accepted by all levels of society.

d. The Role of Education in Maintaining Democracy

Education plays an important role in ensuring that democracy continues to function well. Windayani, N. L. I., Dewi, N. W. R., Laia, B., & Sriartha (2024) emphasize that education must be able to instill understanding of democratic values, such as freedom, equality, and appreciation for differences, in the younger generation. Education based on democratic

principles not only teaches students to understand their rights and obligations as citizens but also teaches them to appreciate others' rights, participate in political life, and coexist in diversity.

Prasetya, (2023) also notes that healthy democracy requires active participation from society in various aspects of life. In the educational context, this means that students must be taught to participate in social and political life from an early age, by respecting differences and working together with individuals from various backgrounds.

e.  Challenges of Democracy in Indonesia

Democracy in Indonesia, despite providing freedom and equality, still faces challenges in practice. One is the inequality of access to education and other basic services in various regions of Indonesia. Kurnialoh, N, & Suharti (2016) highlight that although democracy guarantees citizens' basic rights, not all citizens get equal opportunities in enjoying those rights, especially in remote areas. This inequality often worsens social tensions and creates divides among different groups.

For this reason, more inclusive and equitable education policies are very important to realize a more just and equitable democracy. Education teaching democratic values, human rights, and appreciation for diversity will help build a more tolerant and inclusive society, and reduce social tensions.

## CONCLUSION

This study confirms that inclusive religious education plays a vital role in fostering tolerant character and strengthening democratic values within Indonesia's multicultural society. Teaching that emphasizes interreligious understanding, empathy, and respect for diversity helps create a peaceful and open learning environment. This is consistent with Ipgrave's (Ipgrave, 2022) argument that inclusive education grounded in moral imagination promotes peacebuilding and mutual recognition among students of diverse faith backgrounds. The findings align with Tan and Barnes (Barnes, 2022; Tan, S. S., & Tan, 2017), who highlight that inclusive education promotes empathy and citizenship grounded in freedom and equality. Similarly, Uribe (Pino Uribe, J. F., Amaya-Panche, J., Méndez Méndez, N., & Casas Casas, 2025) demonstrate that inclusive religiosity enhances political tolerance and reconciliation in diverse societies.

Theoretically, this research integrates religious inclusivism, pluralism, and multiculturalism into the framework of democratic education, expanding Islamic religious education toward a more humanistic and socially oriented paradigm. Practically, the study suggests that teachers and schools need continuous training in inclusive pedagogy and interfaith dialogue to cultivate mutual respect and social harmony.

The findings of this study reveal that inclusive religious education significantly promotes empathy and mutual understanding among students, reduces interreligious tensions, and strengthens democratic citizenship by encouraging respect for freedom and equality. Moreover, it contributes to sustaining social harmony within multicultural societies by fostering open dialogue and appreciation of diversity. Future research is encouraged to empirically examine how inclusive religious education influences students' tolerance and intercultural competence, as well as to develop effective teacher-training models that can strengthen pluralism-based education both nationally and globally.

## LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, it uses a qualitative library research approach without extensive field data, so the findings are interpretative and cannot be generalized to all schools in Indonesia. The absence of large-scale surveys, classroom observations, or quantitative measurement of students' tolerance levels limits the empirical strength of the conclusions. Second, the study focuses on the Indonesian context as a multicultural democratic state, which may restrict its applicability to other countries with different social and political settings. Third, the analysis relies on secondary sources that may contain varying perspectives and methodological limitations. In

addition, rapid developments in digital media and AI-based learning were not specifically examined, even though they may influence religious understanding today. Future research should include empirical and comparative studies, broader samples, and mixed methods to strengthen and expand these findings.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

HAR conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, conducted the literature review, and drafted the manuscript. SW contributed to the development of the theoretical framework and supervised the research process. MA assisted in data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript revision. AH contributed to methodological design, validation of sources, and final editing of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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