

RECONCILING LIBERALISM AND ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL VALUES IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

The encounter between liberalism and Islamic education creates a complex set of challenges and opportunities, particularly regarding the authority of revelation, the role of scholars, and the spiritual orientation of Islamic pedagogy. This article critically analyzes the historical evolution and foundational principles of liberalism, examining their implications for global education and their specific tensions within the context of Islamic educational frameworks. Drawing on a literature-based methodology with historical and philosophical approaches, the study explores how reformist figures and institutions in Indonesia have developed adaptive, integrative models that selectively incorporate liberal values, such as critical thinking, rational inquiry, and curricular flexibility, while steadfastly preserving core Islamic beliefs and communal identity. The findings reveal that a critically reflective and value-based engagement with liberalism can enrich Islamic education and enhance its relevance, provided it is guided by strong spiritual foundations and ethical discipline. The study offers important implications for curriculum design, educational policy, and future empirical research aimed at sustaining the integrity and adaptability of Islamic education in a globalized world.

Keywords: Liberalism, Islamic Education, Critical Thinking, Integrative Models, Reformist Approaches, Indonesia

A. Introduction

Islamic education has continually evolved in response to the dynamic tides of history and civilization. The current era of globalization, marked by rapid advancements in science and technology, has accelerated the exchange of educational philosophies among diverse traditions, notably between Islamic educational thought and the principles of liberalism (Widiyanto & Pahrudin, 2025). Liberalism, which foregrounds individual freedom and intellectual autonomy, has become a prominent force in shaping modern educational paradigms. For Islamic education, rooted in normative revelation and a distinct scholarly tradition, the rise of liberalism introduces a new set of challenges (Minarti, 2022). This development has prompted fundamental questions about the relevance, impact, and consequences of liberal ideas for Islamic education, and how—if

at all, these ideas might be integrated without compromising the core identity of the Islamic educational system.

In the context of education, liberalism champions academic freedom, learner autonomy, and pedagogies that promote critical and rational engagement (Raikhan, 2021). Historically, liberal educational thought originated in Western philosophy, where rationality and freedom of thought were considered essential pathways to truth. In contemporary settings, liberalism has redefined educational paradigms in many countries by fostering open-minded, research-driven learning environments (Qadir, 2002). This approach seeks to cultivate creativity, innovation, and critical thinking skills among students, equipping them to navigate complex challenges of the modern age. Liberal educational systems grant learners the freedom to explore diverse perspectives without strict normative boundaries, and extend academic freedom to educators and institutions in determining curricula and pedagogical approaches aligned with evolving knowledge.

However, the influence of liberalism in Islamic education brings a host of complex implications. On the one hand, it has the potential to sharpen students' critical faculties and encourage a more contextual understanding of Islamic teachings (Maslan, 2024). On the other, it raises concerns about the erosion of core religious principles. The concept of unrestricted intellectual freedom is seen by some as a pathway to interpretations that deviate from the foundational precepts of the Qur'an and Hadith (Muliawan & Hafizi, 2024). Islamic education is grounded in a unique philosophical tradition—anchored in revelation, transcendent moral values, and spiritual aims that are central to the educational process (Maghfirah et al., 2025). Liberalism's emphasis on individual autonomy and free inquiry can threaten the traditional authority of scholars and Islamic academic institutions that have long served as the custodians of knowledge and orthodoxy.

Specific consequences of liberalism's influence on Islamic education include curricular transformation, increased critique of religious authority, the secularization of education, and challenges to the integration of science and religion (Rachman, 2010). In several Muslim-majority countries, educational systems have begun to adopt more secular frameworks, often reducing the presence of religious education within the mainstream curriculum. This trend has sparked concerns about the potential "de-Islamization" of education and the weakening of Islamic identity among younger generations. Islamic education has a deep-rooted tradition of integrating knowledge and

spiritual values. Yet, when academic freedom is embraced without normative boundaries, it risks creating a rift between modern science and Islamic teachings.

To remain relevant without losing its distinctive identity, Islamic education must navigate these challenges with balance. It is essential to develop pedagogical models that integrate contemporary scientific knowledge with Islamic values. Integrated approaches that harmonize science and revelation can ensure that students retain critical faculties while maintaining a firm spiritual foundation (Suradi, 2018). To prevent intellectual freedom from devolving into moral relativism, Islamic education must also strengthen character education rooted in Islamic teachings, emphasizing ethics, social responsibility, and respect for scholarly authority.

This article seeks to offer an in-depth analysis of the intersection between liberalism and Islamic education, examining their epistemological, methodological, and practical dimensions. The discussion aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of liberalism's impact on Islamic education, as well as to explore alternative strategies for maintaining equilibrium between modernity and Islamic values in educational systems. Notably, there remains a theoretical gap regarding how liberal principles can be adopted critically and contextually without undermining the integrity of Islamic values. Much of the existing literature addresses liberalism from either normative or historical perspectives, often neglecting the epistemological reconstruction necessary for contemporary Islamic education. This article, therefore, seeks to advance an integrative framework that not only critically analyzes the influence of liberalism but also articulates a conceptual model for harmonizing liberal and Islamic spiritual values. Ultimately, this study aims to offer a critical-conceptual contribution that can serve as a foundation for developing Islamic education curricula and policies that are both adaptive and value-driven.

B. Method

This study employed a library research approach, drawing upon primary and secondary literature as the main sources of data (Nasir et al., 2023). The research focused on critical analysis of scholarly works—including books, journal articles, and relevant documents—addressing the emergence, development, and implications of liberalism in Islamic education. The study incorporated both Western philosophical texts, such as those

by John Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, and seminal contributions by major Islamic education reformers, including Ahmad Dahlan, Hasyim Asy'ari, and Zainuddin Abdul Majid.

Data were collected through a systematic review of books, peer-reviewed articles, and accredited journals relevant to the themes of liberalism and Islamic education. The analysis was conducted using both historical and philosophical perspectives, with the research process comprising several key stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The historical approach was employed to examine the origins and foundational principles of liberalism, while the philosophical approach was used to analyze its impact on Islamic religious education. Analytical steps were carried out systematically, beginning with a critical reading of the collected literature, identification and synthesis of main ideas, classification of information into relevant thematic categories, and interpretation of the relationships between liberal principles and the values underlying Islamic education. Through this methodology, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive, contextually grounded assessment of the dynamic between liberalism and Islamic educational traditions.

C. Result and Discussion

1. The Concepts and Principles of Liberalism

1) Historical Foundations

Liberalism, as an ideology and intellectual tradition, traces its origins to the profound transformations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. While the roots of individual liberty and justice can be found in the works of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, it was not until the rise of Enlightenment thinking that liberalism emerged as a systematic movement shaping political, social, and educational spheres. The Middle Ages had witnessed severe restrictions on individual freedom, primarily as a result of the feudal order and the absolute authority of the Catholic Church (Afifah & Luthfy, 2024). The advent of the European Enlightenment marked a turning point, as leading thinkers challenged these old structures and introduced new ideals of liberty, equality, and rational inquiry.

John Locke, often referred to as the "Father of Liberalism," articulated the doctrine of natural rights—insisting that all humans are inherently entitled to life, liberty, and

property. Montesquieu's theory of the separation of powers (*trias politica*) provided a framework to prevent the concentration of authority, while Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the social contract emphasized that government should exist to serve the people's collective will (Devi et al., 2018). These revolutionary ideas underpinned major political upheavals: the Glorious Revolution in England (1688), the American Revolution (1776), and the French Revolution (1789), each embedding liberal principles at the heart of their respective new orders (McClelland, n.d.).

In the context of Islamic civilization, the history of liberalism and its intersection with education is both unique and complex. The golden age of Islam was characterized by remarkable openness to intellectual influences from Greek, Persian, and Indian traditions. Centers of learning such as the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikmah*) in Baghdad symbolized this intellectual tolerance (Alam & Munawaroh, 2024). Muslim philosophers such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and especially Ibn Rushd championed rationalism and critical thought, advocating for the use of reason in the interpretation of revelation (Harahap & Ikhlas, 2022; Azra, 2019).

Yet, this openness did not last unchallenged. The rise of orthodox currents, notably following al-Ghazali's influential critiques of philosophy in *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, led to a narrowing of intellectual space within Islamic education. Rational sciences were gradually marginalized in favor of more textual and traditionalist approaches (Mahmud, 2019). By the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, intellectual stagnation had set in: education became increasingly centered on madrasah institutions, emphasizing rote memorization and doctrinal learning, with diminishing space for *ijtihad* and innovation (Kadir, 2017). This decline was compounded by the consolidation of authoritarian rule, turning education into an instrument for the preservation of tradition rather than creative inquiry.

The colonial encounter in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, reintroduced elements of Western modernity and liberal reform into the Muslim world. In Egypt, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida led educational reforms inspired by rationalism and modern science, urging for the revival of *ijtihad* and criticizing rote religious instruction that stifled critical thought (Halim & Masykuri, 2024). In India, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan established Aligarh Muslim University, integrating Western educational systems while striving to preserve Islamic identity and values. Turkey, under

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, embarked on radical secular reforms, dissolving traditional Islamic schools or integrating them into the secular public system (Khudri et al., 2025). In Indonesia, figures such as Ahmad Dahlan, Hasyim Asy'ari, and Maulana Sheikh Zainuddin Abdul Majid developed models of Islamic education that synthesized religious and secular sciences, rational methodologies, and systematic curricula (Haris & Syarqowi, 2025).

2) Core Principles

At the heart of liberalism lie several enduring and interconnected principles that have shaped its impact on philosophy, politics, and education. Julio Teenhakee, a liberal thinker from the Philippines, identified six foundational values within the liberal tradition: individualism, rationalism, freedom, responsibility, justice, and tolerance (Abu Bakar, 2012). Although these categories capture the breadth of liberal thought, most liberal theorists emphasize three fundamental and adaptive ideas: freedom of thought, rationalism, and pluralism.

Freedom of Thought stands as the cornerstone of the liberal worldview. This principle asserts that each individual possesses the inherent right to form, express, and revise personal opinions and beliefs, grounded in reason, personal experience, and critical engagement with the world (Rahmat, 2016). Freedom of thought extends beyond the mere possession of private beliefs, encompassing the public articulation, defense, and transformation of ideas without fear of censorship or coercion. For liberalism, such intellectual freedom is indispensable to the flourishing of creative, open, and progressive societies. It enables individuals to realize their full intellectual and imaginative capacities, and underpins the rejection of all forms of dogmatism and authoritarian control that stifle human potential.

Rationalism is equally central to the liberal tradition. Rooted in confidence in human reason, rationalism holds that the intellect is the primary instrument for comprehending reality and distinguishing truth from falsehood. Liberal rationalism opposes the acceptance of dogma or tradition without critical scrutiny, and champions scientific inquiry, skepticism, and debate as essential for advancing knowledge (Akrim, 2022). Rationalism is not only an epistemological commitment but also a social and political ideal: it demands that all claims to authority or truth be open to rational

evaluation and public justification (Adnan, 2021). In education, this ethos fosters a culture of dialogue, critical analysis, and openness to dissent, seeing these as prerequisites for the growth of both individuals and societies.

Pluralism rounds out the central pillars of liberal philosophy. This principle affirms the value of diversity in perspectives, lifestyles, and belief systems. In pluralist thought, no single worldview or doctrine is presumed to possess a monopoly on truth; instead, the coexistence of divergent opinions is considered an intellectual and civic good (Husin, 2014). Liberal pluralism does not imply that all views are equally valid, but it does insist that, within a free society, every individual and group is entitled to articulate and defend their positions so long as they respect the rights of others. This respect for diversity is seen as a safeguard against intolerance and a means of cultivating empathy, cooperation, and social harmony.

These principles, freedom of thought, rationalism, and pluralism, provide the philosophical foundation for liberalism's influence across different sectors, most notably in education. They inform the liberal commitment to academic freedom, dialogic pedagogy, interdisciplinary learning, and the protection of minority viewpoints within academic settings. Nevertheless, as the following sections will show, the application of these principles within religious educational systems such as Islamic education introduces distinct challenges and requires careful negotiation to ensure that foundational religious and ethical values are not compromised.

3) Overview of Implications for Global Education

The principles of liberalism—particularly freedom of thought, rationalism, and pluralism, have profoundly transformed educational systems worldwide. One of the most significant impacts is the fundamental reorientation of curriculum structures. Liberal educational models promote curricular flexibility, allowing students greater autonomy to select subjects that align with their interests, aptitudes, and career aspirations. This approach rejects rigid, one-size-fits-all frameworks and instead recognizes the diverse talents and intellectual needs of learners (Makiyyah et al., 2024).

Liberalism has also triggered a revolution in pedagogical methods. The traditional, instructor-centered approach that emphasizes rote memorization is increasingly replaced by student-centered, dialogic pedagogy. In this model, teachers function as facilitators

who encourage students to engage in open dialogue, debate, and research-driven inquiry. Students are not passive recipients of information; rather, they are expected to analyze, question, and construct arguments based on evidence and critical reasoning. Research-based learning and interdisciplinary approaches have become cornerstones of liberal educational practice, fostering holistic understanding and the development of lifelong learning skills.

The democratization of academic environments is another hallmark of liberal influence. Liberal educational systems cultivate open and inclusive atmospheres where freedom of expression and equality of access are paramount. Every student is granted the right to voice their opinions and engage in academic discourse without fear of repression. This democratization is reflected in policies that ensure equal opportunities regardless of religious background, race, or socioeconomic status. Multicultural education is thus integral, aiming to foster mutual respect and prevent discrimination within increasingly diverse academic communities.

Institutional autonomy is similarly emphasized. Liberalism supports the decentralization of educational administration, granting schools and universities the authority to design curricula and select pedagogical approaches that best serve their students' needs. Academic freedom for teachers and lecturers is protected, enabling them to teach according to scientific standards and ethical considerations without undue interference from political or ideological interests. Students, likewise, are encouraged to consult a broad spectrum of scholarly resources and perspectives.

Finally, liberalism has driven modernization and innovation in education. Curricula are continually updated to reflect advances in science and technology, and digital tools—such as e-learning platforms and artificial intelligence—are integrated to enhance teaching and learning processes. Education is no longer confined to mastering academic theory but now prioritizes the cultivation of twenty-first-century skills: critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. The ultimate goal is to prepare students to thrive in a complex, rapidly changing world and to equip them for lifelong learning and adaptability.

While these liberal innovations have enriched many aspects of global education, they also present significant challenges, especially when applied within religious and traditional educational frameworks. The subsequent sections will examine how these

global shifts intersect with Islamic education, highlighting both the tensions that arise and the strategies employed to navigate them.

2. Liberalism and Islamic Education: Tensions, Challenges, and Integrative Responses

1) Challenges and Risks for Islamic Education

While the liberal approach to education has contributed greatly to advancing critical thinking, creativity, and academic freedom in many parts of the world, its encounter with Islamic education introduces a range of complex and sometimes contentious challenges. At the heart of this tension lies the foundational difference in worldview: whereas liberalism privileges unbounded intellectual freedom, individual autonomy, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, Islamic education is fundamentally anchored in the authority of divine revelation, transcendent moral values, and the cultivation of spiritual and communal purpose.

One of the most pressing risks is the fragmentation of values within Muslim communities. As liberal ideals prioritize personal autonomy and the right of individuals to shape their own destinies, there is an increased tendency for individuals to place personal rights and freedoms above collective responsibilities and long-standing communal norms. This phenomenon can gradually erode virtues that have historically defined Islamic society, such as simplicity, loyalty, and shared moral commitment. The resulting complexity and fragmentation of social identity may, over time, threaten the cohesion and resilience of the collective Muslim character (Imaduddin, 2017).

Closely related to this is the challenge of moral relativism. Liberalism's tendency to regard moral standards as context-dependent or negotiable, rather than absolute or divinely mandated, weakens the internalization of ethical codes grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith. The interpretation of right and wrong becomes subject to personal or situational preferences, rather than being derived from universally binding religious teachings. This development can undermine moral reasoning and the process of character formation, making it more difficult for religious educators to instill a consistent and coherent sense of ethics in students (Nazaruddin, 2011).

Another significant challenge arises in the realm of religious authority. Liberal thought encourages the use of independent reasoning and personal interpretation (*ijtihad*)

in understanding religious texts, while rejecting blind adherence (*taqlid*) to traditional scholarly authorities. Although *ijtihad* is a valuable aspect of Islamic intellectual tradition, the unchecked proliferation of individual interpretations can weaken the authority of scholars and institutions that have historically safeguarded the orthodoxy and continuity of Islamic teachings. This decentralization of religious authority may foster confusion, division, and inconsistency in religious practice and belief. It is concerns such as these that have prompted organizations like Indonesia's Council of Ulama (MUI) to issue formal statements cautioning against the uncritical adoption of liberalism within Islamic thought, arguing that it poses a threat to doctrinal unity and the integrity of faith (M. Atho Mudzhar, 2011).

b. Integrative Solutions and Reformist Models

Despite the significant challenges liberalism poses to Islamic education, the historical and contemporary experience of Muslim societies—particularly in Indonesia—demonstrates a capacity for adaptive, integrative responses that balance modernity and tradition. Rather than simply rejecting liberal ideas, leading Islamic educators and reformers have selectively engaged with liberal principles, adopting innovations that enhance critical thinking, rational inquiry, and openness to scientific knowledge, while remaining firmly rooted in Islamic values and identity.

A prominent example of such integrative reform is found in the educational movement initiated by KH. Ahmad Dahlan and Muhammadiyah. Founded in the early twentieth century, Muhammadiyah schools established a curriculum that combined Islamic religious sciences with modern general subjects such as science, mathematics, and languages. This integration was not merely additive; it embodied a deliberate effort to cultivate both rational inquiry and spiritual depth. The Muhammadiyah model prioritized understanding, discussion, and critical analysis over rote memorization, promoted the use of modern teaching methods, and expanded educational opportunities from early childhood to higher education, including the establishment of Muhammadiyah universities across Indonesia (Barizi, 2011). Muhammadiyah's approach was influenced by the rationalism and reformism of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida in Egypt, advocating *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and engagement with the broader currents of modern science, while consistently drawing clear boundaries against secularism,

relativism, and the dilution of Islamic teachings (M. Amien Rais, M. Syukriyanto AR, 2010).

Similarly, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) offer a distinctive model for integrating tradition and reform. While NU retains the traditional *pesantren* system and prioritizes classical Islamic scholarship, it has gradually opened itself to the teaching of modern sciences and general subjects within its educational institutions. This approach allows students to pursue both religious and secular studies, fostering flexibility and adaptability in career and life choices. The establishment of formal educational institutions such as Islamic State Universities (UIN) and *Ma'had Aly* further exemplifies NU's commitment to bridging the gap between religious and academic modernity (Fakturmen, 2020). NU's stance toward liberalism is characterized by a willingness to tolerate and critically engage with diverse perspectives, as long as these do not threaten the core doctrines of Islamic faith. NU remains vigilant against the dangers of excessive relativism or secularization and actively promotes the reinforcement of *Aswaja* (Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah) values to safeguard community integrity (Arif, 2009; Sudarto Murtaufiq, 2009).

In West Nusa Tenggara, Maulana Sheikh Zainuddin Abdul Majid and Nahdlatul Wathan (NW) provide yet another model of integrative reform. NW has advanced the modernization of Islamic education by establishing schools that offer a balanced curriculum of religious and general sciences. This approach not only prepares students for participation in the wider academic and professional world but also emphasizes the importance of maintaining spiritual discipline and traditional values. NW's commitment to educational access for women, through the creation of girls' schools, reflects its openness to social change within an Islamic ethical framework (Haris & Syarqowi, 2025). At the same time, NW resists any form of liberalism that would lead to secularization, moral relativism, or the weakening of the authority of teachers and religious guides.

These reformist efforts, though varied in form and emphasis, share a common strategy: adopting those aspects of liberalism that foster intellectual development and social progress, while actively defending the spiritual and ethical foundations of Islamic education. The result is an educational paradigm that is both responsive to the demands of the modern era and resilient in preserving its core religious identity. Through this selective and integrative engagement, Indonesian Islamic education offers a nuanced path

forward—one that is open to critical inquiry, innovation, and pluralism, but always within clear ethical and doctrinal boundaries.

D. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the encounter between liberalism and Islamic education is characterized by complexity, dynamism, and the need for ongoing negotiation. Liberalism, with its emphasis on freedom of thought, rationalism, and pluralism, is not inherently antagonistic to the principles of Islamic education. On the contrary, when engaged with critically and contextually, select liberal values can serve as catalysts for intellectual renewal, critical thinking, and curricular innovation within Islamic educational frameworks. The historical evolution of Islamic education in Indonesia reveals that reformist leaders and educational institutions have not merely resisted liberal influence, but have instead developed adaptive, integrative models. Pioneers such as Ahmad Dahlan, Hasyim Asy'ari, and Maulana Sheikh Zainuddin Abdul Majid exemplify how the selective incorporation of rationalist and modern educational principles can enrich Islamic education while preserving its spiritual and normative core. The Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Nahdlatul Wathan models each illustrate unique approaches to harmonizing tradition with change, demonstrating that the balance between modernity and faith is not only possible but also a source of strength and relevance.

Nonetheless, the adoption of liberal principles is not without risk. This study has underscored the potential dangers of value fragmentation, moral relativism, and the erosion of religious authority. The unchecked application of liberalism may undermine the coherence, unity, and spiritual foundations that are essential to Islamic education. Therefore, a selective, critically reflective, and value-driven engagement with liberalism is imperative. Islamic educational reform must remain vigilant, ensuring that openness to innovation and diversity does not compromise the integrity of revelation, communal identity, or ethical discipline. In practical terms, these findings have important implications for policymakers, educators, and curriculum designers. They underscore the necessity of developing integrative educational models that equip Muslim students to thrive intellectually and morally in a globalized world, without losing sight of their

religious heritage. Character education, dialogic pedagogy, and a curriculum that bridges scientific inquiry and spiritual values are all essential components of this endeavor.

Finally, this research highlights the need for further empirical studies on the implementation of integrative educational models across different levels of Islamic education. Future research should focus on assessing the effectiveness of these approaches in diverse contexts, developing concrete curriculum frameworks, and exploring strategies for reinforcing spiritual values amid ongoing educational modernization. By continuing to pursue this line of inquiry, the field can ensure that Islamic education remains both relevant and resilient in the face of global change.

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