



Negotiating Religious Identity in State Schools Within the Flow of National Curriculum Policy

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ABSTRACT

Religious identity in Indonesian public schools is not a stand-alone entity, but rather part of a broader social construct of Indonesianness and modernity. The purpose of this study is to explore in depth how religious identity is negotiated in Indonesian public schools amid the dynamics of an ever-changing national curriculum policy. This study uses library research by combining relevant inter-theoretical interactions. The results confirm that the negotiation of religious identity in Indonesian public schools is not merely a clash between state secularism and expressions of faith, but a manifestation of the nation's efforts to rewrite the relationship between religion, morality, and nationality. Public schools become a space for cultural politics where teachers and students transform policy into meaningful practice, making the curriculum both an ideological text and an arena for ethical dialogue. In this process, religiosity does not oppose secularism, but rather reinterprets it into a spiritual awareness that respects diversity. Thus, national education finds its most profound meaning not merely in producing obedient citizens but in making people who are reflectively faithful, critically rational, and authentically pluralistic.

A. Introduction

Negotiations over religious identity in Indonesian public schools are one of the most dynamic discursive arenas in contemporary debates about education, nationality, and plurality (Harjatanaya, 2025; Witriani et al., 2024). This issue is rooted in the long-standing tension between the principles of secularism adopted by the modern state and the sociocultural reality of Indonesia's highly religious society. State schools, as representatives of state institutions, are expected to be religiously neutral spaces that uphold the values of Pancasila and teach tolerance within the framework of diversity (Suryani & Muslim, 2024). However, in practice, classrooms in state schools often become arenas for identity negotiation where teachers, students, and curriculum policies interact in a social context laden with religious, political, and cultural meanings.

Religious identity in education in Indonesia has been the focus of numerous social and educational scientists, both within and outside the country. For example, Hefner (2019), in his work on Islamic education in Indonesia, shows that the educational process is always closely related to the formation of collective identity and public morality. Meanwhile, Parker and Nilan (2013) highlight how the Indonesian national curriculum embodies ambivalence between efforts to shape modern, rational citizens and the demands of religious morality deeply embedded in society. In this context, public schools become a locus where national ideology and religious values compete and negotiate. The state, through the national curriculum, seeks to instil national identity and tolerance. Still, actors at the micro level, such as teachers, students and parents, often interpret and implement these policies through their own religious lenses.

The negotiation of religious identity in public schools not only reflects the debate about religious education but is also related to identity politics and the construction of Indonesianness (Muhaimin, 2023). Schools in Indonesia have become an arena for shaping good Muslim citizens who are not only religiously devout but also loyal to the state (Mujahid, 2021). This process is a form of religious domestication in which religiosity is incorporated into a national moral framework controlled by state discourse. The negotiation of religious identity in the context of education cannot be understood dichotomously as a relationship between religion and the state, but rather as a complex and dynamic process involving multiple levels of social interaction.

From a historical perspective, the relationship between education and religion in Indonesia has undergone significant transformations from the colonial era to the post-reform era (Zamjani, 2022). During the Dutch East Indies period, secular education was introduced to develop modern administrative personnel, while Islamic boarding schools and madrasas flourished as cultural resistance to colonialism (Makruf & Asrori, 2022; Nurizka et al., 2025). After independence, the Indonesian state attempted to unite the two systems through a national education policy that recognised the role of religious education. Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution and the National Education System Law (Law No. 20 of 2003) emphasise that national education must foster faith and devotion to God Almighty, while guaranteeing freedom of religion for every citizen.

Changes to the national curriculum, starting from the 1994 Curriculum, 2004 (KBK), 2006 (KTSP), 2013, to the Merdeka Curriculum introduced in 2022, show how education policy has always sought to adapt to social and political dynamics. In each revision, the emphasis on the position of religious education and moral values has been different. The 2013 Curriculum, for example, strengthened character education grounded in religiosity and nationalism, while the Merdeka Curriculum emphasised flexibility and school autonomy, which could increase the space for negotiating religious identity at the local level.

Negotiation of religious identity occurs not only between students and teachers, but also between the ideology of the national curriculum and local communities' interpretations of spiritual values (Karimpour et al., 2024). Schools in Muslim-majority areas may implement

religious education more conservatively, while schools in multi-religious areas seek to balance recognition of plurality and avoidance of identity conflicts (Matemba, 2021). This phenomenon shows that national policies are not consistently implemented but are always negotiated within the local social and cultural context.

Theoretically, the negotiation of religious identity in education can be understood through the perspectives of social constructivism and practice theory (Stewart & Brown, 2023). Religious identity is not something static or essential, but rather the result of social construction that is continuously negotiated in the context of interaction and power (Yang & Li, 2021). Identity does not stem from a fixed cultural essence, but from a process of articulation in specific historical situations. State schools as discursive spaces become arenas where various identity positions compete for legitimacy. Teachers, for example, act within religious and professional habits formed through their educational experiences and social contexts. At the same time, schools function as spaces where symbolic capital, such as piety, modernity, and nationalism, is exchanged.

The political changes following the 1998 reform also reinforced this dynamic. The decentralisation of education gave local governments and schools greater authority to adapt the curriculum to local needs. However, this autonomy also opened up opportunities for the emergence of identity politics at the regional level. Several regions introduced policies for religious schools that, de facto, reinforced the dominance of the majority religion's values (R. W. Hefner, 2021; Wiranti et al., 2025). In this context, the negotiation of religious identity has become increasingly complex, as it involves not only the central government and schools but also local governments, religious institutions, and local communities. In some regions, spiritual values are integrated into school activities such as ceremonies, dress codes, and celebrations of important days, which, although strengthening collective morality, also have the potential to erode space for diversity.

Epistemologically, this study departs from the assumption that religious identity in public schools is not a stand-alone entity, but part of a broader social construction of Indonesianness and modernity. Within this framework, the negotiation of religious identity is understood as a dialectical process between a national ideology that emphasises pluralism and local practices that often prioritise religious homogeneity. Public schools are a meeting point where these two tendencies converge and influence each other. In practice, the national curriculum policy serves as a text that embodies the state's values and ideology, but its implementation in the field always involves reinterpretation and adaptation (Puad & Ashton, 2023).

This study aims to explore in depth how religious identity is negotiated in Indonesian public schools amid the dynamics of an ever-changing national curriculum policy. This study not only seeks to describe the phenomenon but also to reveal the social and political logic underlying these practices. By examining the interaction between policy, actors, and social context, this study seeks to show that the negotiation of religious identity is an integral part of the process of forming citizens in a pluralistic society. Meanwhile, its essence is to highlight that education in public schools not only shapes knowledge and skills but also shapes how individuals stand in relation to themselves and others within the broader framework, reflecting on it.

B. Method

This study utilises a library research approach that focuses on searching, analysing, and synthesising various academic literature sources to understand the dynamics of religious identity negotiation in Indonesian public schools in the context of national curriculum policy. This approach was chosen because the issues under review are conceptual and discursive, making them more suitable for analysis through the interaction of ideas rather than empirical measurement. Through library research, this study not only collects data from books, journals,

policies, and curriculum documents but also engages various theories in critical dialogue to create a deep, integrative understanding.

This study combines social constructivism theory to explain identity formation through social interaction (Agopian, 2022), Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field to understand the position of educational actors (Husu, 2022), Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity as a dynamic discursive position (Colpani, 2022), and Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to examine power relations in education (Stevenson, 2023). In addition, Lipsky's policy implementation theory and Foucault's discourse theory are also used to analyse how national curriculum policies are translated into practice and how power works through language, discourse, and knowledge in educational spaces (McKay & Robson, 2023; Scanlon et al., 2023). The interaction between these theories enables this study to interpret public schools as social arenas in which state ideology, religious values, and academic practices are intertwined in an ongoing process of negotiation.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Tension Between State Secularism and Religious Expression in the Public Space of Schools

State schools in Indonesia were initially designed as public institutions that serve to instil national values, educate the nation, and strengthen a sense of unity in diversity (Mariyono, 2024). In their ideal vision, public schools are supposed to be secular spaces in an administrative sense, i.e., neutral towards religion, not favouring any particular belief, and providing equal access to education for all citizens without discrimination. However, in a complex social reality, schools have instead become spaces where the boundaries between state secularism and religious expression are constantly being negotiated. On the one hand, the Indonesian state is constitutionally not religious but a Pancasila-based state, with the principle of Belief in One God, which affirms the recognition of religious diversity (Ichwan & Slama, 2022; Karimullah, Akbar, et al., 2025). On the other hand, Indonesian society is highly spiritual, and spiritual expression is an integral part of its citizens' social and moral identity.

This tension between secularism and religiosity is then manifested in schools, from uniform policies and communal prayer practices to the implementation of religious education, which is formally grounded in universal values but, in practice, often shows bias towards the majority group. Secularism in the Indonesian context is not synonymous with secularism in the Western sense, which strictly separates religion and the state. Indonesian secularism is unique and contextual, as the state continues to recognise and support religion as a source of public morality while striving to balance this with the principle of equality among citizens (Intan, 2023).

State schools, as state-owned educational institutions, are the most tangible representation of this model of secularism, a secularism that neither rejects religion nor favours any particular religious teaching. However, in practice, religious values often dominate public school spaces, creating a situation in which certain religious expressions are considered the norm, while others are seen as exceptions. For example, the policy on wearing the hijab in some public schools, although formally voluntary, is often accompanied by intense social pressure, turning it into an unwritten obligation. This phenomenon shows how state secularism, which should maintain neutrality, is weakened by social practices that normalise the religious expression of the majority.

From a social constructivist perspective, as explained by Berger and Luckmann, social reality is constructed through a process of interaction and institutionalisation of meaning (Döbler, 2022). Schools as social institutions not only transmit knowledge but also shape and reinforce specific structures of meaning about what is considered valid, reasonable, and appropriate. Religious identity in schools does not arise naturally; it is shaped by daily practices, language, symbols, and repeated policies. When students begin each day with a

prayer in accordance with the majority religion, or when certain religious symbols dominate the classroom, this social process shapes the perception that the majority's religious expression is a standard form of diversity. In this context, the secularity of the state becomes paradoxical; it appears as a formal principle in policy documents, yet in practice it continues to be eroded by social constructs that prioritise the religiosity of the majority as a shared cultural norm. Pierre Bourdieu's perspective on habitus and field helps to explain further how the dominance of the religious values of the majority is rooted in the education system.

Religious habitus, formed through the social experiences of teachers, students, and the surrounding community, influences how they interpret religious neutrality in schools (Wahyudi et al., 2025). For example, teachers from communities with high levels of religiosity may unconsciously regard communal prayer as a universal moral obligation rather than a particular religious expression. This kind of habitus then operates in the school sphere, where symbolic capital is unequally distributed.

Religious capital, namely the ability to display piety and conformity with majority norms, is often valued more than other forms of academic or cultural capital. In this context, students who exhibit a different religious identity, for example, by not wearing a headscarf, or who belong to a minority religion, have the potential to lose symbolic capital and become marginalised within the school's social structure. Schools, which should be spaces for the reproduction of universal values, end up becoming arenas for symbolic battles, where certain religious piety gains greater legitimacy than other expressions. Identity as a discursive position deepens this analysis by highlighting that religious identity is never fixed but is always shaped by discourse and power relations. In Indonesian educational discourse, religiosity is often positioned as an indicator of morality and national character.

The national curriculum, which emphasises character education based on religious values, although intended to strengthen moral integrity, indirectly associates goodness with religious piety (Karimullah et al., 2022; Wati et al., 2022). Within this discursive framework, students who do not display religious expressions in line with the dominant discourse may be perceived as lacking in morality or character. Religious identity in public schools is thus not only a matter of personal faith, but also a social sign regulated by policy discourse and cultural norms. When the state institutionalises certain religiosities through the curriculum and educational practices, the public space of schools is no longer entirely secular. Still, it becomes a field where religious identities are negotiated, contested, and normalised.

Schools can be understood as instruments of state hegemony that work to shape public consciousness in accordance with the dominant ideology. Through its education policy, the state seeks to create ideal citizens: religious, nationalistic, and of good character. However, in such hegemonic practices, there is always room for resistance, especially when policies that appear neutral actually benefit certain groups. For example, the obligation to attend religious classes based on one's respective religion seems to uphold the principle of plurality. Still, in practice, the infrastructure and teaching staff are more supportive of the majority religious group, so that students from minority religions often do not get an equal learning experience. This shows that religious hegemony in public schools is not always repressive, but instead operates through a social consensus accepted as usual.

In the context of Indonesian public schools, power is not only present in formal regulations and policies, but also in bodily discipline and social control inherent in everyday practices (Rifa'i et al., 2025). The use of religious uniforms, dress codes, or communal prayer rituals is not merely an expression of spirituality but part of a mechanism of power that shapes obedient and characterful subjects. Foucault explains that power is not only oppressive, but also productive; it creates subjects who internalise social and moral norms without the need for explicit coercion. In this context, public schools function as disciplinary apparatuses that instil forms of religiosity deemed appropriate to public morals. Students learn not only about religion as knowledge, but also about how to be religious citizens in accordance with the state

narrative (Mahrus & Karimullah, 2022). Secularism, which should maintain distance from matters of belief, instead operates through the management and supervision of spiritual expression.

School uniform policies are a concrete example of how the tension between secularism and religiosity plays out in the educational sphere. Normatively, school uniforms are intended to uphold equality and erase social class differences among students (Cumming-Potvin, 2023). However, in practice, uniforms also become a means of expressing identity and cultural symbols. When local governments or schools issue regulations requiring Muslim students to wear the hijab, such policies can be understood as a form of representation of the moral values of the majority that are institutionalised in the education system.

Although in some areas these regulations have been revised because they are considered contrary to the principle of individual freedom, their social effects remain strong, as the hijab has become a social norm regarded as morally obligatory, even though it is not legally required. On the other hand, non-Muslim female students who choose not to wear the hijab often face social pressure or are treated differently. This phenomenon shows that religious expression in public schools is not entirely voluntary but occurs in a context where the social norms of the majority function as symbolic power that determines the limits of acceptance.

The practice of communal prayer in schools is also a powerful symbol of this tension. Ideally, communal prayer can foster spirituality and solidarity, but in the context of multi-religious public schools, this practice often creates ethical dilemmas. Prayers are usually conducted in a format that follows the customs of the majority religion. In contrast, students from minority religions are faced with the difficult choice of participating so as not to be considered different or refusing at the risk of being ostracised.

In many cases, schools claim that these prayers are universal and not specific to any one religion (Idris et al., 2022). Still, in practice, the language, symbols, and gestures used clearly represent a particular tradition. From Foucault's perspective, such practices create a mechanism of 'moral discipline' that frames piety as a prerequisite for good citizenship. In the long term, this instils the idea that a particular religiosity is synonymous with nationality, while other religious expressions are marginalised.

The curriculum and religious education are another aspect of this arena of negotiation. The state attempts to maintain plurality by providing spiritual education according to each student's religion, but its implementation reveals structural inequalities. Students from minority religions often lack religious teachers or are forced to attend majority religious classes due to limited resources. In this case, Lipsky's theory of policy implementation regarding street-level bureaucracy helps explain how pluralistic policies at the central level are translated differently at the local level.

Teachers and school principals, as policy implementers in the field, have considerable interpretive power in determining the form of implementation, so that the state's neutrality often gives way to majority bias due to social and cultural factors. It is this context-dependent implementation that makes the state's secularism in education fragile and easily pulled towards the dominance of established religious values.

This phenomenon becomes even more complex in the context of Stuart Hall's description of cultural identity. Religious identity in public schools is not only a matter of spiritual belief, but also a social representation that carries political meaning. The religious identity of the majority is often associated with images of morality, decency, and nationalism. In contrast, the spiritual expression of minorities is placed in a different position that needs to be tolerated but is not equal.

In this context, tolerance becomes an ambiguous mechanism because it appears inclusive, but, in fact, reinforces the symbolic hierarchy between the centre and the periphery (Hayatullah et al., 2025). Hall emphasises that identity is a process of articulation that

constantly changes according to the context of discourse. In Indonesian public schools, the articulation of religious identity is always influenced by policy, the media, and social dynamics.

When public schools are used as venues for large-scale celebrations of certain religious holidays, but there is minimal space for other religious expressions, the symbolic message that emerges is not pluralism, but cultural domination softened by the rhetoric of diversity. The tension between secularism and religiosity in public schools cannot be separated from the political history of post-reform Indonesia. The decentralisation of education gives regions and schools considerable authority to adapt policies to local contexts. Still, it also opens the door to the emergence of religion-based identity politics at the local level.

Several regional governments have introduced religiously oriented education policies, such as Islamic character schools or daily religious habituation programmes, which, although aimed at shaping students' morals, often reinforce cultural homogeneity. In this situation, the secularity of the state faces serious challenges because the principle of educational neutrality clashes with the aspirations of a society that wants to make religion the basis of public morality. This process shows that secularity in Indonesia has never been pure but has been constantly negotiated between the need for social morality and a commitment to plurality.

Indonesian public schools function as spaces where state and societal power meet to form new forms of civic piety (Hasan, 2025). The state no longer defines neutrality as the absence of religion, but rather as the management of religious expression to align with national values. The result is a form of public religiosity that is controlled and not extreme, but still reflects the norms of the majority. In this context, majority bias is not merely a residue of social tradition, but part of the state's ideological mechanism for maintaining stability. However, every hegemony always contains the potential for resistance. Students, teachers, and school communities who recognise the importance of pluralism can resist through symbolic practices, such as holding interfaith dialogues, fighting for equal worship spaces, or rejecting pressure to suppress personal identity (Demosthenous, 2021). These small actions become a form of counter-hegemony that reaffirms the value of secularism as a guarantee of freedom, not the exclusion of religion.

The tension between secularism and religious expression in public schools shows that secularism is never socially neutral. It is constantly shaped through power relations, policy discourse, and concrete social practices. In the Indonesian education system, state secularism operates through the recognition of religion rather than separation from it. However, this recognition is often uneven, as the religious values of the majority still dominate social and cultural structures. Thus, public schools become social laboratories where the state and society negotiate the boundaries between religion and citizenship, between morality and freedom, between piety and humanity. Every uniform rule, group prayer, and religious lesson is not merely an administrative routine, but a symbolic field in which the collective identity of the Indonesian nation continues to be defined and questioned.

2. The National Curriculum as an Ideological and Political Arena for Identity

Historically, Indonesia's national curriculum emerged from the spirit of post-independence nation-building, in which education played a strategic role in shaping national consciousness and strengthening collective identity (Bazzi, 2025). From the outset, the government recognised that schools were an effective instrument for instilling state ideology; accordingly, the curriculum was designed to realise this goal. In this case, Pancasila served as the foundation for values that unite religious, ethnic, and cultural differences. However, in practice, the meaning of Pancasila itself has often been a subject of debate.

During the New Order era, the curriculum emphasised political stability and ideological uniformity. Civic Education (then known as Pancasila Moral Education) aimed to instil loyalty to the state and obedience to authority. At the same time, Religious Education

was used to shape morality in line with the state's conservative values. After the 1998 reform, the direction of the curriculum shifted from a tool of indoctrination to a more open arena for critical reflection and diverse values. However, post-reform political and social changes also opened the door for the resurgence of identity politics and the strengthening of religious values in education policy.

The curriculum was born out of a social process in which the state, educators, religious groups, and society negotiated to determine which values were appropriate to instil in the younger generation. In this context, subjects such as Civics and Religious Education became vehicles for articulating values considered essential to the formation of national identity. Values such as religiosity, nationalism, and tolerance do not stand alone; they intersect and even negate one another depending on the dominant political context.

When the state emphasises the importance of religious morality, pluralism is often marginalised as a secondary value that must be adjusted to the norms of the majority. Conversely, when the discourse on pluralism and human rights is strengthened, the curriculum is encouraged to place greater emphasis on the values of democracy and diversity. This process shows that the national curriculum cannot be understood merely as an educational document, but also as an ideological arena where various social forces compete to define the ideal citizen. The curriculum operates in the realm of education, where actors such as the state, teachers, and educational institutions are engaged in a symbolic struggle to define legitimate cultural capital.

The habitus of nationalism and religiosity, shaped by the long history of Indonesian education, makes these two values a strong source of legitimacy in the curriculum development process. The state uses the curriculum as a symbolic instrument to maintain its ideological dominance, while social groups, especially religious groups, use it as a medium to expand their moral influence. In this context, Civics Education becomes an instrument for shaping a citizenship habitus aligned with state ideology. At the same time, Religious Education serves as a means of internalising a moral habitus framed within a religious narrative. When these two subjects are developed, debates over whether citizen identity should be defined by the universality of Pancasila or by the particularity of religion become inevitable.

This contestation often creates ambiguity in the formulation of the curriculum, because, on the one hand, it affirms pluralism. At the same time, it reinforces religious morality as the primary foundation of national character. The change from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum reflects a significant ideological transformation in the discourse on national education. The 2013 Curriculum emphasised the importance of character education grounded in religious values and nationalism, aiming to shape individuals who are faithful, pious, and virtuous. Religious values were placed as a universal moral basis, but in practice, this often led to the domination of majority values.

Religious education became a means of reproducing homogeneous morality, while civic education reinforced loyalty to the state ideology. The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced in 2022, brings a different spirit by promoting the principles of flexibility, freedom of learning, and recognition of the diversity of local contexts. In this paradigm, multicultural and pluralistic values are given more space, with an emphasis on the development of critical thinking and social empathy. However, behind this spirit of freedom, there are concerns that relaxing state control over curriculum content could open the door to local interpretations that reinforce religious exclusivity or group identity (Karimullah, 2023; Suwarni et al., 2024).

The national curriculum can be read as a text that produces and reproduces national identity through the discourse of education, which holds that identity is not something essential and fixed but rather the result of articulation continuously shaped by discursive forces. In this context, the curriculum acts as an articulative device that negotiates various discourses on Indonesianness, nationalism, religion, and plurality. When Civics teaches the

concept of a Pancasila-based citizen, it not only teaches political theory but also constructs an image of a citizen who adheres to particular moral norms.

Religious Education, on the other hand, produces the moral image of a faithful citizen as the foundation of nationality. The meeting of these two discourses produces an ambiguous form of national identity: on the one hand, it emphasises diversity as the nation's wealth, while on the other hand, it demands moral uniformity as a prerequisite for social integration. The tension between the two is evident in everyday school practices, for example, in the implementation of flag ceremonies that begin with interfaith prayers or in determining the theme of the P5 (Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project), which must balance national and religious values. This is where the curriculum becomes an arena for the articulation of a constantly negotiated national identity (Rifki et al., 2024).

The curriculum can be understood as an ideological instrument of the state to build social consensus and maintain political legitimacy. The state does not impose its ideology through violence, but through a hegemonic process in which specific values are voluntarily accepted by society as universal truths. Civics and Religious Education are two subjects that play this hegemonic role very effectively. Through these two subjects, the state shapes citizens' consciousness as both religious and nationalistic by associating morality with loyalty to the state.

In the discourse of Indonesian education, terms such as *berkarakter* (character), *beriman* (faithful), and *berakhlak* (moral) serve a regulatory function, governing how students should think and behave (Suyadi et al., 2021). The knowledge presented in the curriculum is not merely neutral information, but a form of power that determines what is considered right and wrong, moral and immoral. Power not only oppresses, but also produces obedient subjects through discipline and normalisation. In this context, the curriculum becomes an apparatus that produces subjects who are both religious and nationalistic, in line with the state's ideological needs. However, power always creates opportunities for resistance. When the Merdeka Curriculum provides space for freedom of thought and the development of local contexts, the space for resistance to the dominant discourse widens.

Teachers and students have the opportunity to deconstruct universal values and replace them with more inclusive perspectives. In practice, the debate between multicultural-pluralistic and moral-religious approaches in curriculum policy extends beyond the ideological level to the implementation of policies. In schools in areas with a Muslim majority, for example, Civics and Religious Education are often taught using a moral-religious approach that emphasises compliance with religious norms (Karimullah, Ghani, et al., 2025). In contrast, in schools in multi-religious areas, teachers place greater emphasis on tolerance and dialogue.

These differences show that although the national curriculum is centrally formulated, in practice it is always local and contextual. It is at this point that the negotiation between pluralism and religious morality takes concrete form. Schools are not only implementers of policy but also social arenas where the curriculum's ideology is reinterpreted in accordance with the local community's conditions and interests (Boyask & Smith, 2025). Criticism of the national curriculum policy often focuses on its normative and moralistic tendencies. In its efforts to shape the nation's character, the state tends to assume that morality must come from religion. As a result, universal values such as justice, empathy, and responsibility are often articulated through particular religious language. This creates a paradox: on the one hand, the state guarantees freedom of religion and religious plurality, but on the other hand, it standardises morality based on specific spiritual values.

In the context of religious education, this is evident in the dominance of a doctrinal approach that emphasises the memorisation of teachings rather than critical reflection on experiences of diversity. Meanwhile, in civic education, teaching about Pancasila and citizenship often stops at the cognitive level. It fails to engage in critical dialogue about social conflict, intolerance, or absolute inequalities (Karimullah et al., 2023). However, the emergence

of the Merdeka Curriculum provides an opportunity to revise the old paradigm that places students as objects of ideologisation. This curriculum seeks to position students as active learners, emphasising the strengthening of the Pancasila learner profile, which combines the values of religiosity, global diversity, and cooperation. Although progressive on the surface, the Merdeka Curriculum still contains tensions between the spirit of pluralism and religious morality. The values it promotes, such as faith in God Almighty and global diversity, are not always in harmony with one another.

On the one hand, it opens up space for the recognition of cultural and religious diversity. On the other hand, it reaffirms the importance of the spiritual dimension as the moral foundation of the nation. Epistemologically, the national curriculum in Indonesia is the result of a dialectic between administrative secularity and cultural religiosity. It functions as a state apparatus to instil national ideology, but at the same time reflects the moral aspirations of a religious society.

In every change in curriculum policy, there is always a shift in the balance between these two poles. The 2013 curriculum emphasises religious morality as the core of national character, while the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to expand on this with a more inclusive and reflective approach. However, behind all the changes in terminology and pedagogical approaches, the ideological substance of the curriculum remains grounded in the idea that education is a means of forming moral subjects in harmony with state values.

3. Teacher and Student Identity as Agents of Negotiation

The identities of teachers and students in Indonesian public schools are not static constructs or entirely determined by education policy, but rather the result of a continuous process of social negotiation in educational spaces. Public schools, which are ideologically designed to be secular public spaces in an administrative sense, have instead become arenas where religious expression, social morality, and national values intertwine and compete (Maemonah et al., 2023). In this context, teachers and students not only implement the curriculum but also act as active agents who interpret, adapt, and negotiate the religious and national values embedded in national education policy. Through daily practices ranging from dress codes and participation in religious activities to the ways tolerance values are conveyed, teachers and students actively reshape the meanings of religious and national identity in accordance with their social and cultural contexts.

Within the framework of social constructivism, identity is understood not as an innate attribute but as the result of intersubjective construction through social interaction and the institutionalisation of meaning. Social reality is produced through processes of externalisation, objectification, and internalisation, in which individuals and institutions mutually shape perceptions of the social world. In the context of Indonesian public schools, teachers and students simultaneously become subjects and objects in this process. They are not merely recipients of educational policies that regulate religious expression, but also producers of meaning who interpret them through their values, experiences, and local contexts.

When teachers choose to wear religious symbols such as the hijab, or when students initiate communal prayers outside class hours, these actions are not merely a form of religious compliance but also a social strategy to negotiate their position within the framework of institutional secularism (Harjatanaya, 2025). Teachers in this context have an ambivalent yet strategic position. They are representatives of the state and members of social and religious communities. As agents of the state, teachers are required to implement national education policies, including the principles of tolerance and pluralism outlined in the curriculum. However, as individuals living in a religious society, they also carry religious values, beliefs, and habits formed from their social environment.

Teachers operate in two fields with different logics: the state sphere, which prioritises administrative secularism and religious neutrality, and the local community sphere, which

demands religious expression and loyalty. Teachers' habitus, a system of dispositions formed through social and educational experiences, becomes the internal field where these two logics meet and are negotiated. Teachers with strong religious habits tend to interpret tolerance policies in a moralistic way, viewing pluralistic values through a spiritual lens. Meanwhile, teachers with multicultural experiences tend to interpret national policies in a more dialogical and inclusive manner. In both cases, teachers are not only interpreters of policy but also ideological mediators between the state and society.

The teachers' position as ideological mediators is evident in their teaching practices and school activities (Agustin et al., 2025). In subjects such as Religious Education and Civics, for example, teachers are often faced with an epistemological dilemma: how to teach universal values such as tolerance and humanity without negating the particular religious values that underpin their personal morality. In this situation, many teachers engage in what can be called discursive negotiation, an attempt to combine national and religious discourses through narratives acceptable to the local community. Teachers may emphasise that tolerance is part of spiritual teachings, or that love for the country is a form of worship.

In this way, they build a bridge between national ideology and the religious ethics of the community, making the national curriculum more acceptable to religious communities. However, this strategy also reveals the limitations of the country's secularism, because universal values must always be justified through religion to gain social legitimacy. Meanwhile, students, as the younger generation, occupy an equally important position in the negotiation of religious identity.

School is the first place where students learn to understand the relationship between personal faith, social norms, and national identity. In practice, students face various forms of social pressure to conform to the standards of the majority, whether in how they dress, how they pray, or in their attitudes towards religious differences. However, the younger generation also demonstrates a high capacity for reflection and resistance. With access to digital media and cross-cultural interactions, they develop a more pluralistic understanding of religious identity.

Students in public schools often become agents who challenge conservative norms in subtle ways, for example, through critical discussions on the issue of tolerance, or by openly rejecting religious-based discrimination. In this case, students act as agents of symbolic resistance, negotiating religious values and state secularism in an increasingly open cultural sphere (Cantini, 2025). Cultural identity, teachers and students can be understood as subjects who shape their identities through a process of constant articulation. Religious identity is not born solely from spiritual essence, but from discursive practices in which individuals place themselves in certain social relationships.

Teachers and students in public schools articulate their religious identities amid conflicting discourses: the state's demand for plurality and the social discourse's demand for piety. In everyday practice, this negotiation manifests itself in symbols, rituals, and language. Teachers who lead prayers before lessons, for example, are not only carrying out a custom, but also affirming their symbolic position as guardians of the community's morals. Meanwhile, students who choose to refuse to participate in certain religious practices are asserting their rights as citizens free to hold their beliefs. This process shows that religious identity in public schools is not only a product of policy, but also the result of discursive articulation involving individual agency and social structures simultaneously.

The ideological dominance of the state occurs not only through coercion but also through hegemony, namely, the voluntary acceptance of dominant values by society. In the context of public schools, the state's institutional secularity serves as the dominant ideology that demands religious neutrality in the public sphere. However, teachers and students who bring spiritual values into the school space do not necessarily reject this ideology; instead, they engage in creative negotiations to adapt it to their moral values. When teachers teach tolerance

through verses from holy scriptures, or students hold religious activities outside of school hours, they are actually engaging in a form of hegemonic resistance, namely, rejecting pure secularism without opposing the institutional structures of the state. Instead, they develop a form of civil religiosity that combines faith with a commitment to nationality. Such practices show that resistance to secularisation does not always take the form of rejection, but can be a creative adaptation that enriches the meaning of pluralism in the local context.

Religious practices in public schools, such as communal prayer, the wearing of hijab, or spiritual study groups, are not only expressions of faith but also forms of social discipline that shape individuals' bodies and morals in accordance with certain norms. However, this power is not unidirectional. Teachers and students are not only objects of power but also actors who can modify and redefine religious discourse in schools. For example, when teachers use a dialogical approach to teach tolerance, they are not merely complying with policy but creating new pedagogical practices that challenge normative teaching practices. Similarly, students who use social media to express more open religious views are expanding the discursive space beyond the control of the school institution. In this context, public schools can be seen as microcosms of power where religious subjects are both shaped and given space to negotiate and resist.

These dynamics are also greatly influenced by social and geographical contexts. In religiously homogeneous areas, religious expression in public schools tends to be more conservative and institutionalised, while in pluralistic areas, spiritual practices are more flexible and dialogical. Teachers in multi-religious schools often act as mediators between identities, ensuring that religious activities do not lead to exclusivity or symbolic domination (Harjatanaya, 2025). They create inclusive pedagogical strategies, for example, by emphasising universal human values or linking religious teachings to contemporary social issues. However, in schools dominated by a single religion, teachers more often affirm collective religious identity as the basis for public morality.

In both contexts, teachers continue to play a role as actors who negotiate the boundaries between secularity and religiosity, between national and local values. They are not merely implementers of the curriculum, but regulators of the moral discourse that determines how pluralism is interpreted and practised. The negotiation of religious identity in state schools often takes place through small symbols that appear simple but are laden with social meaning.

The way of dressing, for example, becomes a form of identity expression as well as a political statement. The hijab is not only a sign of religiosity, but also a symbol of resistance to secularisation or a representation of socially recognised piety. On the other hand, students who choose not to wear specific religious attributes may want to assert their personal autonomy from social pressure. Spiritual activities such as communal prayers or religious holidays also become arenas for collective identity negotiation. In such activities, teachers play a role in balancing respect for religious values and the principle of inclusivity. Often, they must adapt rituals to avoid offending minority groups, for example, by holding interfaith prayers or emphasising universal values.

These small actions show that secularism in public schools is never absolute, but always operates within a complex space of compromise between state principles and social values. Actors at the lower levels, such as teachers, have considerable interpretive power in implementing public policy. They are not merely executors, but also de facto policymakers, because their interpretations determine the concrete form of the policy. In education, this means that teachers act as moral decision-makers in determining the extent to which secular and pluralistic policies are implemented. When teachers emphasise the importance of interfaith tolerance through their own religious perspectives, they are interpreting national policy in accordance with their personal moral frameworks (Karimullah & Sugitanata, 2023).

Meanwhile, students, through their active participation in school activities, also influence the way these values are implemented.

Religious practices in public schools can be interpreted in two ways that are not mutually exclusive: as a form of resistance to secularisation and as a creative adaptation to pluralism. On the one hand, religious expression in public schools demonstrates society's reluctance to separate religion from the school. This resistance is not always ideological; it is also a way to preserve moral meaning in modern life, which is increasingly seen as secular. On the other hand, religious practices in public schools can also be seen as an adaptation to Indonesia's unique pluralism. Teachers and students strive to find ways to express their faith without disregarding diversity. Through continuous negotiation, they create a more flexible, contextually grounded form of religiosity that is not only grounded in doctrine but also in shared social experiences in a pluralistic society.

D. Conclusion

Negotiations over religious identity in Indonesian state schools are the sharpest reflection of the nation's ideological struggle between secular modernity and public spirituality. Schools are no longer merely places of learning, but symbolic political battlegrounds where the state, religion and society negotiate their moral legitimacy. The secularity of the state has not eliminated expressions of faith; instead, it has become a vessel for a more reflective and social religiosity. The ideologically charged national curriculum has become both a tool and a field of resistance, where teachers and students reinterpret the meaning of nationality, morality, and humanity through daily practices. It is in this space that a new form of civil religiosity has emerged, one that does not oppose secularism but rather penetrates it, becoming a religious identity that is dialogical, open, and just. Thus, national education in Indonesia is no longer merely a project of instilling values, but a challenging civilisational project that views religion not as a dividing wall, but as an ethical bridge towards a more complete humanity.

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