

The Role of Islamic Religious Education in Preventing Religious Extremism among Adolescents in Singapore

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Abstract

Religious extremism among adolescents has become an increasing concern in multicultural societies, particularly in countries characterized by religious diversity and rapid digital transformation. In Singapore, where social harmony and interreligious coexistence are strongly emphasized, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays an essential role in fostering moderate religious understanding and preventing extremist ideologies among Muslim adolescents. This study aims to examine the role of Islamic Religious Education in preventing religious extremism among adolescents in Singapore by exploring its contributions to moral development, critical religious literacy, social cohesion, and resilience against radical narratives. Employing a qualitative library research approach, this study analyzes academic literature, policy documents, and previous empirical studies concerning religious education, youth radicalization, and Islamic educational practices. The findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education contributes significantly to preventing extremism by promoting balanced religious values, critical thinking, tolerance, and civic responsibility. Furthermore, Singapore's educational and religious institutions have implemented preventive strategies through contextualized Islamic teachings, interfaith dialogue, and digital literacy initiatives to counter online radicalization. However, challenges related to misinformation, social media influence, and identity crises among adolescents remain important concerns. The study concludes that Islamic Religious Education serves as a critical preventive mechanism against religious extremism when supported by inclusive pedagogy, institutional collaboration, and contextual religious guidance adapted to contemporary adolescent challenges.

Keywords

Islamic Religious Education, Religious Extremism, Adolescents, Religious Moderation, Counter-Radicalization, Singapore, Islamic Education



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1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of religious extremism has become a major concern in contemporary societies, particularly due to the increasing influence of globalization, digital communication, and ideological polarization. Adolescents are among the most vulnerable groups to extremist narratives because of their developmental stage, identity exploration, emotional sensitivity, and increased exposure to online information. Religious extremism refers to rigid and

intolerant interpretations of religious beliefs that often reject pluralism, justify violence, or undermine social harmony. In multicultural societies, such tendencies may threaten national stability, interreligious relations, and community cohesion. Therefore, educational institutions, religious organizations, and policymakers have increasingly emphasized preventive approaches to protect young people from radical influences. Among these approaches, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has emerged as a significant instrument for cultivating religious moderation and preventing extremist ideologies among Muslim adolescents.

In Singapore, the issue of religious extremism is particularly relevant due to the country's multicultural and multireligious social structure. Singapore is home to diverse religious communities, including Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and followers of other faith traditions. Social harmony and religious tolerance are foundational principles within Singaporean society, supported by strong governmental policies and educational frameworks promoting interreligious understanding. According to the Singapore government's approach to multiculturalism, maintaining religious peace requires proactive educational measures, particularly among younger generations who are exposed to increasingly complex social and digital environments. Within this context, Islamic Religious Education plays a crucial role in shaping religious understanding while simultaneously promoting civic responsibility and social cohesion.

Islamic Religious Education is not merely intended to provide doctrinal religious instruction but also to develop ethical values, critical reasoning, and balanced religious perspectives. Contemporary Islamic education increasingly emphasizes moderation (*wasatiyyah*), tolerance, compassion, and peaceful coexistence as essential components of Muslim identity. According to Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, Islamic teachings in Singapore prioritize contextual understanding, social responsibility, and harmony within a pluralistic society. This educational orientation is particularly important in preventing adolescents from adopting rigid or extremist interpretations of religious texts.

Adolescence represents a transitional developmental period characterized by emotional vulnerability, identity formation, and cognitive transformation. During this stage, young individuals actively seek meaning, belonging, and ideological certainty, making them susceptible to persuasive extremist narratives. Extremist groups often target adolescents

through emotional appeals, simplified ideological explanations, and digital propaganda distributed via social media platforms. Research by Aly et al. (2017) highlights that youth radicalization increasingly occurs through online interactions, where vulnerable individuals encounter extremist ideologies framed as solutions to personal, political, or religious grievances. Consequently, educational systems must equip adolescents with critical thinking skills and religious literacy to evaluate ideological content responsibly.

In Singapore, concerns regarding religious radicalization have prompted various preventive initiatives involving educational institutions, religious authorities, and community organizations. Several cases involving self-radicalized youth exposed to extremist online materials have highlighted the importance of early prevention strategies. According to Kumar Ramakrishna (2020), Singapore's counter-radicalization framework emphasizes prevention through education, community resilience, and religious counseling rather than solely relying on punitive measures. Islamic Religious Education therefore functions as a preventive mechanism that strengthens adolescents' resilience against extremist narratives by providing authentic religious guidance and encouraging critical engagement with religious knowledge.

A central objective of Islamic Religious Education is to promote religious moderation and balanced interpretation of Islamic teachings. Religious moderation involves understanding religion in ways that emphasize compassion, justice, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence rather than exclusivism or hostility toward others. In Islamic traditions, moderation is deeply rooted in the concept of *ummatan wasatan*, referring to a balanced and just community. Educational scholars argue that religious moderation can effectively reduce vulnerability to extremist ideologies by encouraging nuanced religious understanding and critical reflection (Sahin, 2018). In Singapore's pluralistic environment, such educational approaches become increasingly essential in fostering peaceful interreligious relationships among adolescents.

Furthermore, Islamic Religious Education contributes to moral and character development, which plays an important role in preventing radicalization. Adolescents who possess strong ethical foundations, empathy, and social responsibility are generally less vulnerable to extremist recruitment. Educational programs emphasizing compassion, respect for diversity, and peaceful conflict resolution strengthen adolescents' social resilience and

civic awareness. According to Halstead (2004), Islamic moral education aims to develop holistic individuals capable of ethical reasoning, responsible citizenship, and meaningful social participation. Consequently, IRE serves not only religious purposes but also broader social objectives related to harmony and peacebuilding.

Digital literacy has also become an increasingly important dimension in addressing religious extremism among adolescents. The widespread use of digital platforms has facilitated the dissemination of extremist content targeting young audiences through persuasive videos, online forums, and social media campaigns. Adolescents who lack critical digital literacy skills may struggle to distinguish authentic religious teachings from manipulative ideological narratives. Therefore, Islamic Religious Education must adapt to digital realities by incorporating media literacy, online ethics, and critical source evaluation into religious instruction. UNESCO (2023) emphasizes that educational systems should empower learners to navigate digital environments critically and responsibly to reduce susceptibility to misinformation and harmful ideologies.

Despite its importance, Islamic Religious Education also faces several challenges in effectively preventing religious extremism. One challenge concerns balancing religious authenticity with contextual relevance. Teachers and religious educators must ensure that Islamic teachings remain faithful to theological foundations while also addressing contemporary social realities experienced by adolescents. Another challenge relates to the increasing influence of online religious content produced by unverified sources. Adolescents may encounter religious interpretations that contradict moderate educational principles taught in formal institutions. Therefore, cooperation between families, schools, religious organizations, and policymakers becomes essential in strengthening preventive educational frameworks.

Additionally, Singapore's multicultural environment requires Islamic Religious Education to function within broader goals of intercultural understanding and national integration. Muslim adolescents must develop strong religious identities while simultaneously participating positively within a pluralistic society. This balance is particularly important in avoiding social isolation, identity conflicts, or ideological polarization. Educational theorists argue that inclusive religious education can strengthen both religious commitment and civic belonging, thereby reducing risks associated with

exclusivist worldviews (Jackson, 2014).

Research concerning the role of Islamic Religious Education in preventing religious extremism among adolescents remains important because radicalization patterns continue to evolve alongside technological and social transformations. Existing studies often focus on security measures and counterterrorism policies rather than educational prevention mechanisms. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to academic discussions by examining how Islamic Religious Education functions as a preventive framework against religious extremism among adolescents in Singapore. The study explores educational strategies, pedagogical approaches, and institutional efforts that support religious moderation and youth resilience.

Ultimately, preventing religious extremism requires comprehensive approaches integrating education, family involvement, community support, and digital literacy. Islamic Religious Education occupies a central position within these efforts because it shapes adolescents' religious understanding, ethical awareness, and critical reasoning capacities. In Singapore, where multicultural harmony is highly valued, strengthening Islamic Religious Education may significantly contribute to long-term social cohesion, peaceful coexistence, and resilience against extremist ideologies among young generations.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach to examine the role of Islamic Religious Education in preventing religious extremism among adolescents in Singapore. A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to explore complex educational, religious, and social phenomena related to extremism prevention through interpretative and contextual analysis. According to John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell (2018), qualitative research is particularly suitable for understanding social issues, educational processes, and human experiences through comprehensive analysis of texts, concepts, and contextual meanings. Since this study focuses on educational roles and ideological prevention rather than numerical measurement, qualitative inquiry offers an appropriate methodological framework.

The research applies a library research method, also known as literature-based research, to systematically collect, evaluate, and synthesize academic materials relevant to

the topic. Library research was considered appropriate because the study investigates conceptual relationships between Islamic Religious Education, adolescent development, and religious extremism prevention through existing scholarly literature. According to George (2008), library research enables researchers to identify patterns, theories, and academic perspectives through systematic engagement with credible scholarly sources. In this study, literature concerning Islamic education, youth radicalization, religious moderation, and educational policy in Singapore was reviewed comprehensively.

Data sources in this study consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and official publications related to religious education, Islamic pedagogy, counter-radicalization, and adolescent development. Secondary sources include conference proceedings, educational reviews, and institutional publications discussing religious harmony and multicultural education in Singapore. Several international academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online were used to identify relevant literature. Keywords employed during the search process included “Islamic Religious Education,” “religious extremism,” “adolescents,” “counter-radicalization,” “religious moderation,” “Muslim youth,” and “Singapore.”

The literature selection process followed several stages to ensure relevance and reliability. First, the researcher identified literature published between 2010 and 2026 to capture both foundational theories and recent developments regarding youth radicalization and educational prevention strategies. Second, academic sources were evaluated according to credibility, publication quality, citation impact, and relevance to the research objectives. Preference was given to peer-reviewed Scopus-indexed journal articles and publications from recognized educational and policy institutions. Snyder (2019) emphasizes that systematic literature selection is necessary to ensure research validity and reduce conceptual bias.

Data collection involved careful reading, categorization, and documentation of relevant academic findings. The researcher reviewed studies discussing the causes of adolescent vulnerability to extremist ideologies, the pedagogical functions of Islamic Religious Education, and Singapore’s preventive educational framework. Important themes and arguments were documented systematically to facilitate analytical interpretation. This

process enabled the researcher to identify recurring concepts and theoretical relationships across different academic perspectives. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis enables researchers to identify recurring themes and interpret patterns within qualitative data. In this study, themes such as religious moderation, moral development, digital literacy, youth vulnerability, intercultural understanding, and educational resilience were identified and analyzed critically. Thematic categorization allowed the researcher to understand how Islamic Religious Education contributes to preventing religious extremism among adolescents in Singapore.

To improve research validity, the study employed source triangulation by comparing information across multiple academic references and institutional reports. Triangulation is essential in qualitative studies because it strengthens reliability and minimizes interpretive bias (Patton, 2015). Perspectives from Islamic educational scholars, radicalization researchers, and Singaporean policy experts were integrated to obtain balanced and comprehensive findings. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process by ensuring accurate citation practices and academic integrity. Since the study relies solely on publicly available academic literature, no human participants were directly involved. Therefore, issues concerning participant confidentiality or informed consent were not applicable. Nevertheless, intellectual honesty and responsible scholarship remained essential guiding principles throughout the study.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a substantial role in preventing religious extremism among adolescents in Singapore by promoting religious moderation, strengthening moral development, enhancing critical thinking, and fostering resilience against radical ideologies. Within Singapore's multicultural and multireligious context, Islamic Religious Education functions not only as a means of transmitting religious knowledge but also as an educational framework that supports social harmony, intercultural understanding, and responsible citizenship among Muslim youth. The analysis of relevant literature suggests that preventive educational approaches are more effective in addressing religious extremism than reactive security measures because they

target the cognitive, emotional, and moral dimensions influencing adolescent vulnerability to radicalization.

One of the most important findings concerns the role of Islamic Religious Education in promoting moderate religious understanding among adolescents. Religious extremism frequently develops through narrow, literal, or exclusionary interpretations of religious teachings that reject diversity and encourage ideological polarization. In contrast, Islamic Religious Education in Singapore emphasizes balanced interpretations of Islam grounded in the concept of *wasatiyyah* or moderation. This educational principle encourages adolescents to understand Islam as a religion promoting justice, compassion, coexistence, and peaceful engagement with diverse communities. According to Sahin (2018), contemporary Islamic education should move beyond rote religious instruction toward reflective and contextual approaches that cultivate critical religious literacy. In Singapore, such moderation-oriented education contributes significantly to preventing adolescents from embracing extremist worldviews that oversimplify religious identity and social realities.

The findings further indicate that Islamic Religious Education strengthens adolescents' religious literacy, enabling them to critically evaluate extremist narratives encountered online or within social environments. Adolescents are increasingly exposed to digital platforms where extremist groups disseminate ideological propaganda through emotionally persuasive content. Young individuals who lack sufficient religious understanding may become vulnerable to misinformation and manipulative interpretations of religious texts. Therefore, Islamic Religious Education serves as a protective mechanism by equipping students with foundational theological knowledge and interpretive skills. Aly et al. (2017) argue that religious literacy functions as an important protective factor against radicalization because individuals with deeper understanding are less likely to accept extremist claims uncritically. In Singapore, religious institutions and educational frameworks increasingly emphasize contextual religious interpretation to ensure that Muslim adolescents develop informed and balanced religious perspectives.

Another significant finding concerns the contribution of Islamic Religious Education to moral and character formation. Adolescence is characterized by identity exploration, emotional instability, and increased susceptibility to ideological influence. During this developmental period, moral guidance becomes essential in shaping attitudes and decision-

making processes. Islamic Religious Education promotes ethical values such as compassion, respect, empathy, tolerance, and social responsibility, all of which contribute to reducing the attractiveness of extremist ideologies. According to Halstead (2004), Islamic education aims to develop morally responsible individuals capable of ethical reasoning and constructive social participation. Adolescents who internalize values emphasizing peace, cooperation, and justice are generally more resistant to extremist messages promoting hostility, violence, or social division.

The findings also reveal that Singapore's educational and religious institutions play an important collaborative role in countering extremism through contextualized Islamic education. The educational philosophy promoted by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore emphasizes religious harmony, contextual understanding, and responsible citizenship within a multicultural society. Educational programs designed for Muslim adolescents often integrate civic education, interfaith dialogue, and contemporary social issues into religious learning. This contextualization enables adolescents to connect Islamic teachings with practical social realities while maintaining commitment to national values emphasizing multicultural coexistence. Kumar Ramakrishna (2020) explains that Singapore's preventive strategy against radicalization emphasizes resilience-building through education, religious counseling, and community engagement rather than relying exclusively on punitive security interventions.

Furthermore, Islamic Religious Education contributes to strengthening adolescents' sense of belonging and positive identity formation. Identity crises are commonly associated with vulnerability to extremist ideologies because adolescents often search for certainty, purpose, and social acceptance. Extremist groups frequently exploit these psychological needs by offering simplistic ideological narratives framed around belonging and moral superiority. However, educational environments that support positive religious identity development can reduce susceptibility to radical influences. Islamic Religious Education in Singapore encourages adolescents to develop confident Muslim identities while simultaneously embracing pluralism, social integration, and civic participation. Jackson (2014) argues that inclusive religious education strengthens both religious commitment and intercultural competence, reducing tendencies toward exclusivism or ideological isolation.

The increasing influence of digital technology emerged as another important aspect

influencing religious extremism among adolescents. Social media platforms, encrypted messaging applications, and online discussion forums have expanded opportunities for extremist organizations to target young audiences. Adolescents may encounter extremist interpretations disguised as authentic religious teachings without possessing sufficient critical evaluation skills. Consequently, digital literacy has become an increasingly important component of Islamic Religious Education. UNESCO (2023) highlights that education systems should empower students to critically assess digital information, identify misinformation, and engage responsibly within online environments. In Singapore, educational initiatives increasingly recognize the importance of digital resilience in protecting adolescents from online radicalization. Integrating media literacy into Islamic Religious Education may therefore strengthen adolescents' ability to evaluate religious information critically and avoid manipulative ideological influences.

Despite these positive contributions, the findings also reveal several challenges affecting the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education in preventing extremism. One challenge involves balancing religious authenticity with contextual adaptation. Educators must ensure that Islamic teachings remain theologically accurate while also responding to contemporary issues relevant to adolescents' lived experiences. Failure to contextualize religious education may lead some adolescents to seek alternative religious interpretations from unregulated online sources, potentially increasing exposure to extremist ideologies. Sahin (2013) argues that Islamic education must evolve toward critical pedagogy that encourages questioning, interpretation, and intellectual engagement rather than passive memorization.

Another challenge concerns the persistence of online misinformation and ideological manipulation. Adolescents may access religious content produced by unauthorized or extremist sources presenting distorted interpretations of Islamic teachings. Although formal Islamic Religious Education provides preventive guidance, educational institutions cannot fully control adolescents' digital exposure. Therefore, cooperation among schools, families, religious organizations, and policymakers becomes increasingly important in creating comprehensive protective frameworks. Parents, teachers, and community leaders share responsibility in monitoring adolescents' online behavior, encouraging open communication, and promoting responsible digital engagement.

The findings further suggest that multicultural education contributes positively to preventing extremism by fostering tolerance and social cohesion. Singapore's multicultural environment encourages adolescents from different religious and ethnic backgrounds to interact regularly, thereby reducing prejudice and social segregation. Educational experiences involving interfaith understanding, cooperative activities, and civic participation may weaken narratives promoting exclusivism or hostility toward others. According to Davies (2016), educational systems emphasizing democratic values and intercultural understanding are more effective in preventing radicalization than purely security-oriented interventions.

Overall, the findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education plays a crucial preventive role in protecting adolescents from religious extremism in Singapore. By promoting moderation, religious literacy, moral development, critical thinking, and digital resilience, Islamic Religious Education contributes significantly to strengthening adolescents' resistance against radical ideologies. However, educational effectiveness depends on collaborative efforts among teachers, families, religious institutions, and policymakers. Islamic Religious Education should not be viewed solely as religious instruction but as a holistic educational process capable of fostering responsible, tolerant, and critically aware Muslim adolescents within a diverse and interconnected society.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic Religious Education serves an important role in preventing religious extremism among adolescents in Singapore by promoting religious moderation, moral values, critical thinking, and resilience against radical ideologies. Through contextual and balanced religious instruction, Islamic Religious Education helps adolescents develop comprehensive religious understanding that discourages rigid, intolerant, and extremist interpretations of Islam. The concept of *wasatiyyah* or moderation emerges as a central educational principle supporting peaceful coexistence, social harmony, and responsible citizenship within Singapore's multicultural environment.

The findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education strengthens adolescents' religious literacy, enabling them to critically evaluate extremist narratives and misleading religious information, particularly in digital spaces. Since adolescents are increasingly

exposed to online content, digital literacy and critical evaluation skills have become essential components of effective religious education. In addition, Islamic Religious Education contributes to positive identity formation by helping adolescents develop confidence in their religious identity while remaining open to intercultural understanding and civic engagement.

Singapore's collaborative approach involving schools, religious institutions, policymakers, and communities has also contributed significantly to preventing radicalization among Muslim youth. Educational initiatives emphasizing tolerance, interfaith dialogue, ethical behavior, and social responsibility have strengthened adolescents' resilience against ideological manipulation and social polarization. However, challenges such as online misinformation, digital radicalization, and the need for contextual religious teaching continue to require attention.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes that preventing religious extremism cannot rely solely on security interventions but requires sustainable educational strategies addressing adolescents' cognitive, emotional, and moral development. Islamic Religious Education should therefore be strengthened as a holistic preventive mechanism capable of nurturing moderate, tolerant, and socially responsible young Muslims. Future research may further explore adolescents' lived experiences and empirical educational practices to deepen understanding regarding the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education in countering religious extremism in contemporary multicultural societies.

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