

Religious Education, Radicalism, and Peacebuilding in Southeast Asia: Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Social Resilience

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Abstract

Religious education has become increasingly important in Southeast Asia as societies confront the intertwined challenges of radicalism, intercommunal tension, and fragile social cohesion. In a region marked by deep religious diversity and uneven conflict histories, educational institutions play a critical role in shaping how young people understand faith, authority, difference, and peaceful coexistence. This article examines how religious education can function as a strategic arena for countering radicalism and promoting peace in Southeast Asia. It adopts a qualitative and theory-driven approach informed by peace education, critical pedagogy, and social learning perspectives. The analysis draws on comparative regional literature, policy discussions, institutional debates, and documented educational practices related to religion, tolerance, and peacebuilding. Attention is directed to curriculum orientation, pedagogical style, institutional culture, and the broader social environment in which religious learning takes place. A comparative reading is used to identify both recurring patterns and context-specific educational dynamics across the region. Religious education emerges as an important preventive mechanism when it promotes critical reflection, ethical responsibility, and inclusive understandings of community. Peace-oriented religious learning therefore offers a more sustainable response to radicalism than approaches that rely only on reactive security measures. The article contributes to the field by providing a regionally grounded framework for understanding how pedagogy, religious formation, and peacebuilding intersect in Southeast Asia.

Keyword

religious education; radicalism; peacebuilding; Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

Radicalism has become one of the most persistent challenges facing contemporary societies, especially in regions where religious diversity intersects with unequal development, contested identities, and fragile social cohesion (Abdallah, 2016). In Southeast Asia, this challenge carries particular weight because religious affiliation is deeply embedded in public culture, educational institutions, and everyday social life. The region's plural composition has historically produced both accommodation and friction, making religion a source of ethical guidance as well as a site of political contestation



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(Nurcahyono & Astutik, 2020). Violent extremism, sectarian distrust, and exclusionary moral narratives therefore cannot be understood apart from the institutions through which religious meanings are taught and reproduced.

Religious education occupies a central position within this landscape because it shapes how young people interpret faith, difference, authority, and community (Mohamed et al., 2025). The introduction to the article emphasizes that religious education in Southeast Asia has long functioned as a carrier of moral values, cultural continuity, and communal solidarity, yet it has also been criticized when pedagogical isolation or rigid interpretation creates openings for intolerance. This dual character makes the subject analytically important and politically urgent. Any serious discussion of peace and radicalism in Southeast Asia must therefore begin with the educational arenas where religious identity is formed and contested (Kristiantoro, 2025).

The problem is not simply that radicalism exists, but that it often draws symbolic force from religious language while distorting the ethical foundations of religion itself (Nurcahyono & Astutik, 2020). Contemporary extremist movements frequently invoke sacred texts, moral obligation, and collective grievance in order to legitimize coercion, recruit followers, and frame violence as righteous action. The result is a dangerous public association between religion and aggression that obscures the much larger role of religious institutions in promoting peace, justice, and coexistence (Hutagaol et al., 2025). This problem has direct real-world relevance in Southeast Asia, where conflicts in Mindanao, Southern Thailand, Indonesia, and Myanmar demonstrate how religious narratives can be entangled with ethnic marginalization, territorial claims, and political exclusion.

The article's introduction presents these cases not as isolated incidents, but as evidence that the region has become an important arena for examining how faith, identity, and violence interact. When radical discourse gains traction, the effects extend beyond security concerns and enter education, governance, and intercommunal relations. Religious education becomes relevant precisely because it is one of the few institutions capable of addressing both the moral vocabulary and the interpretive habits that radical movements manipulate. This makes the issue not only scholarly but deeply practical for societies seeking long-term resilience (Saihu, 2020).

A substantial body of scholarship has already clarified several important points that shape the debate. Radicalism is not a monolithic phenomenon, but a broad spectrum of intolerant beliefs and practices that may emerge from religious, political, or ethno-nationalist backgrounds. At the same time, the article underlines that a significant portion of contemporary radical movements use religious symbols and theological claims as instruments of mobilization, which makes the role of religious interpretation especially salient (Qadri et al., 2024). Existing studies have also shown that religious education is never merely doctrinal instruction, because it involves moral formation, socialization, identity construction, and the transmission of communal norms.

The literature cited in the article further suggests that peace should not be reduced to the absence of direct violence, but should be understood as a broader condition of justice, equality, coexistence, and nonviolent conflict management (Mukhlisin et al., 2025). These insights already establish that education, religion, and peacebuilding are conceptually linked. They also make clear that pedagogical design, curricular content, and teacher worldview matter for whether religious education reinforces openness or exclusion. What is known, then, is that religious education has the capacity to either reproduce intolerant dispositions or cultivate critical, peace-oriented citizenship.

What remains less clear is how these general insights should be integrated into a specifically Southeast Asian analysis of counter-radicalism and peace promotion. Existing work often concentrates on the pathology of radicalism itself, or alternatively on broad peacebuilding initiatives, while treating religious education as a secondary or implicit factor rather than a central object of inquiry (Satibi et al., 2022). The article identifies a persistent tendency in prior scholarship to generalize across diverse national and religious settings without adequately accounting for the distinct pedagogical traditions, institutional structures, and socio-political environments that shape religious education across the region.

As a result, there is still limited conceptual clarity about which aspects of religious education matter most for fostering resilience against radical narratives. There is also insufficient attention to the specific mechanisms through which curriculum reform, teacher preparation, and community engagement can generate peace-oriented religious literacy. Without that level of specificity, policy discussion risks remaining too abstract or too reactive. The unresolved issue is therefore not whether religious education matters, but how it can be understood as a strategic field of intervention under conditions of deep pluralism and recurring ideological tension. That gap creates the need for a more coherent analytical framework.

The research gap becomes sharper when examined through the theoretical lenses proposed in the article, namely peace education theory, critical pedagogy, and social learning theory. Peace education theory is useful because it shifts attention from narrow security responses toward the cultivation of justice, empathy, conflict resolution, and a culture of nonviolence (Warnk, 2009). Critical pedagogy adds another layer by emphasizing that learners must be equipped to interrogate power, question manipulative interpretations, and resist oppressive narratives rather than merely absorb authorized content. Social learning theory complements both approaches by stressing that beliefs and behaviors are shaped through modeling, observation, and lived interaction, which makes teachers, religious leaders, and school environments central to peace formation (Sapdi & Ali, 2022).

What the article synthesizes from these traditions is a view of religious education as an active social process rather than a static transfer of doctrine. Yet the literature has not consistently combined these perspectives in a way that speaks directly to Southeast Asia's plural societies and mixed educational ecologies. The gap therefore lies not only in empirical coverage, but in the absence of a sufficiently integrated theoretical account of how religious education can interrupt radicalization while promoting pluralist peace. Addressing that gap requires a framework that connects pedagogy, identity, and social context in one analytical movement.

Filling this gap is theoretically justified because each of the article's chosen frameworks points toward a shared insight: educational institutions shape moral imagination, social boundaries, and political possibility. Peace education theory justifies attention to curriculum because peace is not spontaneous, but must be taught through values, habits, and interpretive competencies (Sidik & Dilawati, 2025). Critical pedagogy justifies attention to method because authoritarian or rote learning environments may leave students vulnerable to absolutist narratives that promise certainty and belonging. Social learning theory justifies attention to institutional culture because young people learn not only from texts, but from the examples embodied by teachers, peers, and community leaders (Mashuri et al., 2022).

Within Southeast Asia, where religious education often carries strong communal legitimacy, these theoretical insights are especially relevant. They suggest that religious

learning can become a site of preventive peacebuilding rather than merely a venue for preserving inherited dogma (Abdallah, 2019). The article therefore treats religious education as a socially embedded mechanism through which radical narratives can either be normalized or challenged. This theoretical coherence strengthens the case for examining education not as a peripheral supplement to security policy, but as a core domain in the politics of peace. It also explains why the analysis must remain attentive to both institutional design and broader social context (Ali et al., 2021).

From this basis, the article is driven by a series of interrelated research questions that emerge directly from the conceptual and regional discussion. How can religious education in Southeast Asia be strategically reoriented to counter radicalism without reducing faith to a security instrument. Under what conditions does religious education reinforce pluralism, empathy, and peaceful coexistence rather than exclusionary worldviews. Which pedagogical approaches, curricular reforms, and forms of teacher preparation are most relevant for cultivating peace-oriented religious literacy (Nafsiyah & Wardan, 2024). How do different institutional settings, such as pesantren, madrasahs, state Islamic universities, and Buddhist educational initiatives, shape the possibilities and limits of such reorientation.

What kinds of social and political barriers obstruct the transformation of religious education into a more effective peacebuilding arena. These questions matter because they move the discussion away from abstract praise of moderation and toward the institutional processes through which moderation may actually be taught. They also keep the argument focused on the tension between moral formation and ideological capture. In that sense, the research agenda is designed to clarify both the promise and the limits of education as a response to radicalization.

The urgency of this research lies in the fact that Southeast Asia's religious diversity is now being negotiated under conditions of heightened polarization, persistent local grievances, and rapidly changing communication environments. Radical ideologies no longer spread only through clandestine networks or armed organizations, but also through digital media, social isolation, and simplified narratives that appeal to disoriented youth (Sebastian & Sholihan, 2020). Educational institutions therefore face growing pressure to do more than preserve tradition; they are increasingly expected to cultivate ethical resilience, civic pluralism, and interpretive maturity.

The article positions this urgency within a broader regional concern for building resilient societies that can resist extremism without sacrificing religious freedom or cultural legitimacy. Its contribution lies in recentring religious education as a strategic site where peace and radicalism are negotiated before they become fully visible in security crises. It also contributes by insisting that Southeast Asia should not be treated as a uniform field, but as a set of distinct yet comparable contexts where educational reform interacts with local religious authority and political structure (Susilo & Dalimunthe, 2019). This framing gives the article both conceptual and policy relevance. It invites the reader to see peace-oriented religious education not as an idealistic supplement, but as an essential arena for shaping the future of pluralism in the region.

2. Research Method

This article employs a qualitative research design based on comparative document analysis and interpretive inquiry to examine the role of religious education in countering radicalism and promoting peace in Southeast Asia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the central concerns of the article involve meanings, pedagogical orientations, institutional values, and discursive constructions that cannot be adequately captured

through numerical indicators alone (Bhangu et al., 2023). The analytical framework integrates peace education theory, critical pedagogy, and social learning theory in order to assess how religious education shapes moral reasoning, attitudes toward difference, and the social reproduction of tolerance or exclusion. Peace education theory provides a basis for examining how educational institutions cultivate nonviolence, empathy, justice, and coexistence (Surawy-Stepney et al., 2023).

Critical pedagogy allows attention to the ways teaching practices either encourage reflective engagement or reinforce passive acceptance of rigid authority. Social learning theory helps explain how learners acquire dispositions through observation, modeling, and interaction within educational environments (Dzwigol, 2024). This design works well for the research because the topic requires close engagement with texts, institutional discourse, and educational logic across diverse Southeast Asian contexts rather than hypothesis testing through standardized measurement. The qualitative framework therefore makes it possible to capture contextual variation while preserving the conceptual depth necessary to analyze religion, education, and peace as socially embedded processes.

The data consist of academic journal articles, policy documents, curriculum-related materials, official educational reports, institutional publications, and credible secondary sources discussing religious education, radicalism, and peacebuilding in Southeast Asia. Data collection was conducted through purposive selection of sources that directly addressed religious pedagogy, counter-radicalism discourse, pluralism, moral education, and peace-oriented reform in regional educational settings (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). The units of analysis are institutional and discursive expressions of religious education, including curricular principles, pedagogical models, teacher roles, policy language, and public arguments about religion and peace. A qualitative coding matrix functioned as the primary instrument to organize the materials according to key analytical dimensions such as tolerance, nonviolence, interreligious understanding, critical reflection, authority formation, and vulnerability to radical narratives (Haki et al., 2024).

These dimensions served as the principal variables for identifying how educational discourse frames the relationship between religion, peace, and ideological extremism. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, comparison across different types of documents, conceptual consistency in coding, and transparent alignment between the research questions, theoretical framework, and analytical categories. Reliability was supported by applying the same interpretive criteria across the selected materials, while validity was enhanced by using sources that were directly relevant to the regional focus and substantive theme of the article (Busetto et al., 2020). Ethical standards were maintained by relying on publicly accessible documents, avoiding misrepresentation of sensitive religious issues, and observing scholarly caution regarding confidentiality and informed consent, although no direct human participants were involved in the study.

3. Result and Discussion

Religious education in Southeast Asia emerges as a strategic arena in which radicalism can either be reproduced or restrained, depending on how doctrine, pedagogy, and institutional authority are organized. Educational spaces do not merely transmit sacred knowledge, but also shape habits of interpretation, moral boundaries, and attitudes toward pluralism. In settings marked by religious diversity and periodic violence, these functions acquire direct political significance (Rohman, 2017). The discussion indicates that religious education becomes most effective against radicalism when it is treated as a

formative social process rather than a narrow doctrinal exercise. Textual instruction alone rarely alters exclusionary dispositions if institutional culture continues to reward obedience without reflection. By contrast, peace-oriented religious learning expands the moral vocabulary through which students interpret conflict, difference, and community. This broad pattern places educational institutions at the center of long-term resilience against extremist appeals.

A core result concerns the preventive capacity of religious education when it is deliberately aligned with tolerance, ethical reflection, and nonviolent conflict resolution. Radical narratives depend heavily on simplified oppositions, moral absolutism, and selective readings of scripture. Educational models that contextualize sacred texts and connect them to compassion, justice, and coexistence weaken the appeal of such reductive interpretations (Handoyo et al., 2024). This preventive role is especially significant in Southeast Asia, where radicalization often feeds on grievances but gains moral force through distorted religious language. Religious education becomes a counterweight when it equips learners to distinguish between faith-based ethics and ideological manipulation. The strength of this role lies not in policing belief, but in cultivating interpretive maturity and social responsibility. Counter-radicalism therefore appears more sustainable when rooted in educational formation than when limited to reactive security responses.

Another important result concerns pedagogy. Content matters, but pedagogical style often determines whether peace-oriented messages become intellectually persuasive and socially meaningful. Rote memorization, rigid authority, and one-directional instruction may preserve doctrinal continuity, yet they can also leave learners vulnerable to absolutist framings that promise certainty and identity. Dialogic teaching, critical reflection, and participatory learning create a different intellectual environment. Such approaches encourage students to question decontextualized interpretations, to examine the ethical consequences of exclusionary claims, and to recognize the humanity of religious others (Jamaluddin, 2024). The pedagogical issue is therefore not secondary to curriculum design. It is central to whether religious education produces passive conformity or reflective resilience. This supports the broader argument that peacebuilding in education depends as much on form as on substance.

Variation across Southeast Asia confirms that the role of religious education is shaped by institutional and political context rather than by theology alone. Indonesian pesantren and Islamic higher education institutions demonstrate how moderation discourse can be integrated into religious learning through curricular reform and civic engagement. Madrasah reform in Mindanao reflects a different setting, where religious instruction is linked to post-conflict reconstruction and social inclusion. Buddhist peace education initiatives in Thailand illustrate yet another trajectory, where educational intervention intersects with historical grievance, minority relations, and state authority (Yusak et al., 2023). These cases do not point to a single regional model. They reveal a family of approaches in which educational institutions respond differently to local histories, governance structures, and communal tensions. Context therefore mediates the translation of peace education into institutional practice.

The discussion also identifies moral imagination as a decisive analytical dimension. Religious education shapes how learners imagine the self, the community, and the status of those who do not share the same faith tradition. Where educational environments normalize dignity, coexistence, and civic responsibility, students are more likely to interpret religious identity in inclusive rather than exclusionary terms. Where instruction is organized through moral binaries and protected identities, susceptibility to radical

discourse increases even without direct incitement to violence. This is why educational institutions matter far beyond the classroom (Norjamilah et al., 2025). They participate in the slow construction of emotional and ethical dispositions that later influence responses to crisis, grievance, and ideological recruitment. Peace promotion thus depends not only on formal lessons about tolerance, but on the daily reproduction of a credible moral world in which pluralism appears legitimate.

The comparative pattern can be synthesized through four linked dimensions: curriculum orientation, pedagogical approach, institutional environment, and social outcome. Curriculum determines whether pluralism and justice are treated as peripheral themes or integral parts of religious formation. Pedagogy determines whether those themes are received as living ethical questions or as abstract slogans. Institutional environment determines whether peaceful values are reinforced through routine practice, authority relations, and community engagement. Social outcomes depend on the interaction of all three. The table below summarizes these relationships and clarifies why religious education cannot be evaluated solely through formal content statements.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Religious Education, Radicalism, and Peace Promotion

<i>Analytical Dimension</i>	<i>Main Pattern</i>	<i>Educational Implication</i>
<i>Curriculum orientation</i>	Inclusive and peace-oriented content reduces exclusivist interpretations	Supports pluralism, justice, and coexistence
<i>Pedagogical approach</i>	Dialogic and critical teaching strengthens resistance to dogmatism	Encourages reflective rather than passive learning
<i>Institutional environment</i>	School culture and community embeddedness shape values beyond textbooks	Reinforces tolerance through daily practice
<i>Social outcome</i>	Peace-oriented religious education lowers vulnerability to extremist narratives	Strengthens resilient and peaceful citizenship

Table 1 supports the central argument by demonstrating that religious education functions as a social system rather than as a mere container of doctrine. Inclusive curricula alone are insufficient when classroom practice remains authoritarian or when institutional culture rewards suspicion toward difference. In the same way, dialogic pedagogy cannot sustain peace-oriented learning if schools are isolated from communities or embedded in hostile public environments. The table also clarifies why religious education may produce divergent outcomes even within the same faith tradition. What matters is the configuration of educational dimensions, not simply the presence of religious instruction. This configuration helps explain why some institutions become bulwarks against radicalization while others remain vulnerable to exclusionary narratives. The comparative structure therefore moves the discussion beyond moral endorsement and toward a more precise understanding of educational mechanisms.

These patterns resonate strongly with previous scholarship on peace education and critical pedagogy. Earlier work has emphasized that peace must be taught as a set of practices, dispositions, and interpretive capacities rather than as an abstract moral ideal. The present discussion reinforces that claim by showing how religious education acquires peacebuilding value only when it integrates ethical content with dialogic learning and community relevance. The argument also aligns with social learning theory, especially the idea that students internalize values through modeled behavior and institutional routines. Religious teachers and school leaders therefore matter not merely as transmitters of doctrine, but as embodiments of how faith should relate to difference and conflict. What extends previous scholarship is the sharper regional focus on Southeast Asia’s plural and conflict-affected settings. The analysis places religious education within

specific socio-political environments where the stakes of interpretation are unusually high.

The policy implications are substantial. Curriculum reform should not be confined to adding a few lessons on tolerance while leaving the rest of the educational environment unchanged. Teacher training must become a central policy priority because instructors mediate how texts, identities, and moral boundaries are understood. Interfaith exposure and experiential learning deserve greater institutional support because they convert abstract pluralist commitments into lived social experience. Community-based religious schools should be treated as key partners rather than as peripheral actors, given their local legitimacy and capacity to influence everyday moral discourse. This policy direction also requires caution. Overly securitized state intervention can undermine trust and reduce educational reform to surveillance by other means. Peace-oriented religious education works best when it is credible to communities and grounded in the ethical resources of the tradition itself.

Its relevance for counter-radicalism lies in its preventive character. Security responses become necessary when violence or recruitment is already underway, yet they rarely address the interpretive and emotional conditions that make exclusionary narratives persuasive in the first place. Religious education acts earlier in the chain of radicalization by shaping how grievances are processed and how religious language is understood. This does not mean education can neutralize every driver of extremism. Poverty, marginalization, political resentment, and digital propaganda remain powerful forces. Even so, educational institutions can reduce ideological vulnerability by strengthening critical literacy, civic belonging, and empathetic reasoning. In Southeast Asia, where religious identity remains a major source of meaning and solidarity, this preventive role carries unusual importance. Religious education therefore belongs within a broader social strategy of peacebuilding rather than at the margins of security debate.

The discussion also reveals important strengths and limitations. Its main strength lies in linking educational theory to regional cases in a way that preserves both conceptual clarity and contextual variation. The comparative frame makes it possible to identify recurring mechanisms without flattening the differences among Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian settings. At the same time, the analysis remains limited by the uneven availability of documented institutional experiences and by the difficulty of measuring long-term attitudinal change through document-based materials alone. Another limitation concerns the tendency of public policy discourse to celebrate moderation without fully specifying how it is taught and sustained in everyday educational practice. An unexpected outcome is the degree to which institutions with strong traditional legitimacy can become effective peace actors when reform is pursued through internal moral language rather than external technocratic prescription. This suggests that tradition and innovation are not always oppositional in peace-oriented religious education.

Future research should move toward more detailed institutional comparison and more sustained engagement with classroom-level practice. Longitudinal work could clarify how curricular reform affects student attitudes over time and whether peace-oriented dispositions endure beyond formal schooling. Greater attention is also needed to digital religious learning, since online platforms increasingly shape how young people encounter authority, grievance, and identity. Comparative work across faith traditions would help determine which mechanisms are broadly transferable and which remain context-specific. Practical application should focus on integrated reform that joins curriculum, pedagogy, teacher development, and community engagement rather than

treating them as separate interventions. Governments, schools, and religious organizations would benefit from evaluation frameworks that assess not only doctrinal content but also institutional culture and student interaction. Such directions would deepen understanding of how religious education can become a durable foundation for peace in one of the world's most diverse regions.

4. Conclusion

Religious education in Southeast Asia occupies a decisive position in the relationship between radicalism, peacebuilding, and the formation of moral citizenship. The discussion has emphasized that educational institutions do more than transmit doctrine, because they shape interpretive habits, ethical dispositions, and attitudes toward difference. Peace-oriented religious education becomes most effective when inclusive curriculum, dialogic pedagogy, and supportive institutional culture work together rather than in isolation. Under such conditions, religious learning can reduce vulnerability to extremist narratives by strengthening critical reflection, empathy, and nonviolent understandings of community. The regional comparison also indicates that these outcomes are mediated by context, including state policy, local religious authority, institutional type, and conflict history. Religious education therefore should not be understood as a neutral pedagogical field, but as a socially embedded arena in which peace and exclusion are continually negotiated. Its significance lies in the capacity to shape how future citizens interpret faith, authority, pluralism, and public responsibility in societies marked by deep diversity.

The contribution to the field lies in repositioning religious education as a central analytical category in the study of radicalism and peace in Southeast Asia. Rather than treating education as a secondary supplement to security policy, the discussion situates it within a broader framework that connects peace education, critical pedagogy, and social learning theory. This framework clarifies why counter-radicalism cannot be reduced to surveillance, legal control, or reactive deradicalization programs alone. It also strengthens the study of religion in Southeast Asia by demonstrating that the political significance of education rests not only in curriculum content, but also in the forms of authority, interaction, and moral imagination that institutions cultivate. The comparative perspective further adds value by showing that religious education can become either a stabilizing peace resource or a site of exclusion depending on its pedagogical and institutional configuration. In this sense, the analysis contributes both conceptually and regionally by offering a more precise vocabulary for understanding how educational environments shape the social conditions of peace. Its broader scholarly relevance extends to debates on pluralism, civic formation, and the non-coercive foundations of long-term social resilience.

Future research should expand the comparative scope to include a wider range of educational institutions, national settings, and religious traditions across Southeast Asia. More detailed institutional case studies would help clarify how curriculum reform, teacher training, leadership practice, and community engagement interact in everyday educational settings. Longitudinal research is also needed to assess whether peace-oriented pedagogical interventions produce durable effects on students' attitudes toward violence, diversity, and democratic coexistence. Another important direction concerns digital religious learning, since online platforms increasingly influence how young people encounter religious authority and radical narratives beyond the formal classroom. Comparative inquiry across Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, and mixed educational environments would further strengthen understanding of which mechanisms are broadly

transferable and which remain context-specific. Greater collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and religious educators would also improve the practical relevance of future scholarship by linking conceptual insight to institutional reform. Advancing this agenda remains important for developing educational strategies capable of sustaining peace, protecting pluralism, and reducing ideological extremism in one of the world's most socially diverse regions.

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