



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ISLAMICATE SOCIAL STUDIES

Editorial Office: IJISS - Nursyam Centre, Lotus Regency [E8], Surabaya, East Java (60231), Indonesia.

Phone: +6289678245946

E-mail: ijiss.nsc@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62039/ijiss.v4i1.118>

Article Information			
Received:	02 Feb 2026	Accepted	30 April 2026
Revised:	5 May 2026	Published	25 May 2026
Volume & Pages:	4(1) & 1-26		

Rethinking Government Funding for Religious Schools and Education in Sociocultural Democratic Societies: Philosophical Perspectives

Fauzanah Fauzan El Muhammady 
Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia

Mevy Eka Nurhalizah 
UIN Sunan Ampel, Surabaya

^aEmail: : fauzanahfem@unp.ac.id**

^bEmail: mevy.nurhalizah@uinsa.ac.id

** Corresponding Author

Copyright © 2026. The authors. IJISS is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Abstract

This study aims to examine whether Government funding for religious schools is compatible with the fundamental aims of education in socio-cultural and democratic societies. Religious schools and religious education hold an important position in societies marked by cultural diversity, pluralism, and freedom of belief. However, Government funding for religious schools remains a contested issue because it involves questions about educational aims, public responsibility, religious freedom, and civic formation. Using a philosophical literature review, through a qualitative research design combining a literature review approaches, this study analyzes major perspectives on state funding for religious schools, compares policy models of religious schools and religious education in different contexts, and evaluates the justification for public support in specific social and political settings. The findings show that Government funding for religious schools can be compatible with the aims of education when it supports tolerance, mutual respect, civic responsibility, and recognition of diversity. In the Indonesian context, such funding strengthens the role of religious schools as social institutions that contribute to civic education while preserving religious identity. The study also finds that challenges remain, particularly in balancing institutional

autonomy, public accountability, and curriculum integration. This research contributes to Islamic studies and educational policy by offering a philosophical basis for understanding religious education as part of democratic citizenship and social cohesion.

Keywords: Democratic Society, Government Funding, Religious Schools, Sociocultural.

INTRODUCTION

Religious schools and religious education play a pivotal role in sociocultural and democratic societies because they operate at the intersection of religious identity, moral formation, cultural transmission, and civic development. In environments characterized by diversity, religion acts as both a belief system and a sociocultural force shaping identity, ethical values, and community belonging. Democratic societies, meanwhile, value individual rights and equality. This creates a central question: how can religious schools preserve religious traditions while actively supporting democratic values? The issue intensifies when government funding is involved, as this raises critical concerns about neutrality, equality, autonomy, and compatibility with democratic education's broader aims.

From a broader educational perspective, schools are social institutions central to individual and societal development. They serve as spaces for formal instruction, socialization, cultural transmission, moral formation, and economic opportunity. As Garba et al. (2025) argue, schools shape social norms, values, and behaviors that influence students beyond their formal years. Thus, schools actively shape how students understand themselves, others, and society. In religious schools, this role becomes more specific, as they transmit religious knowledge, moral discipline, communal identity, and cultural continuity across generations.

The sociocultural function of religious schools can be understood using sociocultural theory. Scholars like Lev S. Vygotsky, James Wertsch, Barbara Rogoff, and Michael Cole see education not simply as the transfer of knowledge. Rather, it is a process shaped by cultural context, history, and social interaction (Dewi & Oktapiani, 2024). Learning unfolds through engagement with others, cultural tools, language, and interactions within a community. Vygotsky (1978) notes that learning is socially facilitated within shared cultural practices. Shabani (2016) also points out that knowledge emerges through active participation in culturally meaningful activities. Thus, religious schools function as sociocultural settings where religious knowledge, moral values, and a sense of collective identity are continually formed and maintained.

However, schools are not neutral spaces. They also reproduce certain norms, values, symbolic meanings, and power relations. Bourdieu (2018) argues that educational institutions can reproduce cultural norms and social hierarchies through the transmission of cultural capital. This is important because religious schools may strengthen moral discipline and social responsibility, or, if not managed inclusively, can perpetuate exclusivist attitudes or weaken democratic autonomy.

In democratic societies, schools, as educational institutions, have promoted democratic values that aim to integrate freedom of expression, deliberation, equality, and social responsibility into educational experiences (Nurjali et al., 2023). As Gutmann (1999) notes, the primary purpose of democratic education is to develop "deliberative" or "democratic" character. Nurturing democratic character involves two crucial components: a) schools must teach moral reasoning, and b) schools must train moral character (Mark, 1988, p. 1143).

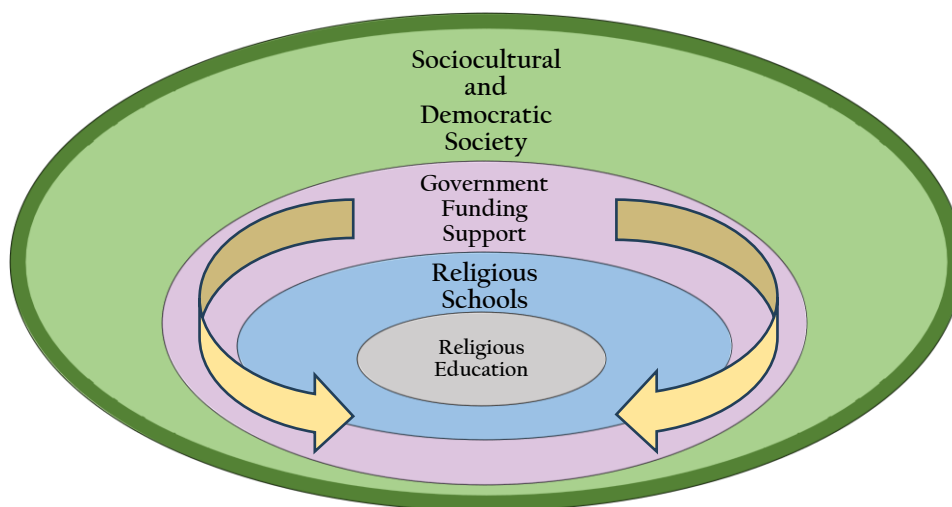


Figure 1. Government Funding Support to Religious Schools and Religious Education in Sociocultural and Democratic Society

Therefore, the sociocultural role of religious schools must be considered from both religious preservation and democratic education perspectives. Institutions have an important role in promoting democratic values within society. This view is consistent with Gutmann's (1999) concept of democratic education, which emphasizes the formation of deliberative or democratic character. Democratic character requires students to develop the capacity for moral

reasoning, respect for difference, and responsible participation in public life. Mark (1988) further explains that nurturing democratic character involves two crucial components: schools must teach moral reasoning and train moral character. This argument is particularly relevant to religious schools because religious education is closely related to moral formation, yet it must also engage with pluralism, civic equality, and democratic responsibility.

The relationship between religious schools and democratic education is sharply contested, especially regarding government funding. Critics argue that state funding of religious schools' conflicts with democratic education because these schools may impose strict norms, limit autonomy, and restrict exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby undermining openness, equality, and independent moral reasoning. Conversely, supporters contend that religious schools can further democratically values when they provide effective curricula, cultivate moral responsibility, support future autonomy, and promote civic values. Thus, the core issue is not whether religious schools should be funded, but under what conditions such funding aligns with both religious and democratic aims.

This debate highlights that the central question is whether religious schools can be institutionally designed to both support religious identity and advance democratic values such as tolerance, civic responsibility, and mutual respect. Government funding, accordingly, is best understood as a tool for improving curricula, teacher development, infrastructure, and inclusion. If funding ensures inclusive admissions, civic education, and openness, religious schools can support the democratic fabric of diverse societies.

The Indonesian context offers a relevant case for examining this issue. Indonesia is a multicultural and multi-religious society where religious education has long been part of the national education system. The principle of Pancasila provides a foundation for balancing religious commitment, tolerance, respect, deliberative democracy, and social justice. In this context, religious schools transmit religious knowledge and act as spaces for cultivating civic values and national identity. Therefore, the Indonesian case helps to understand how government funding for religious schools can support the broader aims of Islamic education, multiculturalism, Islamic thought, and democratic citizenship.

Despite the significance of this issue, discussions often remain polarized between viewing religious schools as problematic for democracy or defending them as vital for cultural and moral continuity. However, there is insufficient analysis of the precise conditions that allow government funding to enhance the democratic potential of religious schools. This

reveals a research gap: there is a need for a balanced analysis that assesses funding as a sociocultural and democratic mechanism supporting both religious and civic goals.

The novelty of this study is its argument for a conditional approach: government funding is justified if religious schools' foster tolerance, civic education, and democratic responsibility. This directly addresses debates over the relationship between religious education, democracy, and state responsibility, situating Islamic education within contemporary discussions of diversity, ethics, and democratic citizenship.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine whether government funding for religious schools is compatible with the fundamental aims of education in sociocultural and democratic societies. More specifically, this study analyzes how religious schools can function as spaces for cultivating tolerance, mutual respect, recognition, and civic education through effective programs and policies. The study is expected to contribute theoretically to the discourse on Islamic education, democratic education, and multicultural citizenship. Practically, it offers a policy-oriented perspective by arguing that government funding for religious schools should be directed not only toward operational support, but also toward strengthening educational quality, democratic accountability, and inclusive religious formation. Thus, religious schools can contribute not only to the preservation of religious identity but also to the development of social cohesion and democratic citizenship in plural societies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a qualitative research design combining a literature review with conceptual-normative and comparative document analysis. This approach was chosen to explore how government funding supports religious schools and religious education in sociocultural and democratic societies. Instead of testing statistical relationships, the study interpreted theories, philosophies, policies, and findings about religious schooling, democratic education, civic development, and multicultural living. A qualitative literature review helps researchers combine existing knowledge, clarify debates, and build an informed argument based on reliable sources (Snyder, 2019).

The study used academic articles, books, policy documents, legal regulations, and credible online resources about religious schools, religious education, government funding, democratic education, Islamic education, and multicultural citizenship. Literature was chosen

for its relevance to three analytical concerns: reviewing debates on state funding for religious schools and their alignment with democratic education, examining the structure and roles of religious schools in countries including Indonesia, the UK, the US, Canada, and the Netherlands, and focusing on the Indonesian context to analyze why state funding for religious schools may be justified based on Pancasila, tolerance, mutual respect, recognition, and civic education.

The data collection technique was document-based, drawing on academic databases, institutional repositories, official government websites, and scholarly search engines. The process prioritized recent and credible references, especially peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last ten years, along with key classical theoretical works important for understanding education, democracy, autonomy, and sociocultural learning. Inclusion was based on relevance to the research focus, credibility of the publication, clarity of the theoretical argument, and contribution to the discussion of religious schools, public funding, and democratic education. Works lacking credibility, clear authorship, or relevance to religious education and democratic society were excluded.

The literature was analyzed using thematic and critical interpretive analysis. Thematic analysis identified repeated themes like government funding, school autonomy, democratic education, children's rights, civic education, tolerance, mutual respect, recognition, multiculturalism, and Pancasila-based education. The process included reading and organizing literature, spotting key ideas, grouping data into themes, comparing perspectives, and summarizing findings into an argument. Critical interpretive analysis examined how scholars argue about whether government funding for religious schools fits with democratic values. This lets the study move beyond summary and suggests when government funding can support the democratic or civic role of religious schools.

To ensure reliability, the study compared different sources, such as philosophical works, theory papers, research, legal documents, and policy sources. It compared arguments from several countries to avoid a limited view. Validity was maintained by supporting each claim with academic sources and sticking to original arguments. The analysis looked at both for and against positions on funding religious schools to keep the discussion balanced. The goal was to show not only why state funding might be needed, but also when it could be a problem.

Since this study did not involve people, interviews, surveys, or personal data, no formal consent was needed. Still, ethical standards were followed by using credible sources, giving proper credit, not making up data, and presenting arguments fairly. These steps helped ensure

academic honesty, clarity, and reliability in the study of government funding for religious schools and education in sociocultural and democratic contexts.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The State Funding of Religious Schools from Different Perspectives

The question of whether government funding for religious schools is compatible with the fundamental aims of education in a democratic society has generated a significant philosophical and educational debate. This debate is not merely concerned with financial support, but with deeper issues related to personal autonomy, civic formation, religious freedom, parental rights, pluralism, and social cohesion. In democratic societies, education is expected to prepare children to become autonomous individuals and responsible citizens. At the same time, religious schools are often established to preserve religious identity, transmit moral values, and provide faith-based educational environments. The main analytical issue, therefore, is not simply whether the state should fund religious schools, but under what conditions such funding can be justified without weakening the democratic purposes of education.

Harry Brighouse (2006) provides one of the most influential liberal critiques of religious schooling. For Brighouse, the primary aim of education is to enable students to flourish as autonomous individuals. This means that schools should equip students with the ability to think critically, make independent judgments, and consider alternative ways of life. From this perspective, education must not merely reproduce inherited beliefs, but should provide children with sufficient intellectual and moral resources to evaluate their future choices. Brighouse argues that religious schools may become problematic when they limit students' exposure to plural worldviews or impose strict religious norms that restrict personal autonomy. In on education, he identifies three central concerns: religious schools may undermine personal autonomy, foster social division, and fail to produce democratic citizens (Brighouse, 2006). His argument shows that the democratic evaluation of religious schools depends largely on whether such schools cultivate or constrain students' capacity for autonomous judgment.

However, Brighouse's position (2006) should not be interpreted as a total rejection of state funding for religious schools. His critique is conditional rather than absolute. He allows the possibility of government support when religious schools meet specific democratic

requirements. First, religious schools should adopt admission policies that are open to students from diverse backgrounds. Second, they should provide a curriculum that introduces students to various forms of knowledge, including different religious and non-religious perspectives, as well as the value of personal autonomy. Third, the curriculum should cultivate tolerance, mutual respect, and the ability to interact constructively within culturally and religiously diverse societies. This conditional position is important because it shifts the debate from a rigid opposition between religion and democracy toward a more nuanced question of institutional design. In other words, religious schools are not inherently incompatible with democratic education; their compatibility depends on whether they are organized in ways that protect autonomy, pluralism, and civic responsibility.

A different but related perspective is offered by Kroeker and Norris. They challenge the assumption that religious schools necessarily undermine children's personal autonomy. According to Kroeker and Norris (2007), many religious parents and religious schools are genuinely concerned with children's self-development and future autonomy. They argue that religious schooling can provide a meaningful educational environment that supports children's moral formation without necessarily contradicting the goals of civic education in liberal democracies. In their view, the fear that religious schools automatically indoctrinate children is often overstated. Some religious schools may, in fact, support autonomy by giving students a strong moral foundation, a coherent sense of identity, and the capacity to engage responsibly with wider society. This argument complicates the liberal critique because it shows that autonomy should not always be understood as separation from religious tradition. Rather, autonomy can also develop within a religious framework, provided that students are not isolated from alternative perspectives and are encouraged to exercise moral reasoning.

Michael S. Merry (2007) further strengthens the argument in favor of state funding by connecting religious schooling with pluralism, parental choice, and educational justice. In "Should the State Fund Religious Schools?", Merry argues that public funding for religious schools can be justified because it accommodates parents' prerogative to choose educational environments that align with their children's interests and family values. He also notes that several empirical studies have shown that some religious schools produce strong academic achievement and civic preparedness compared with certain public schools (Merry, 2007). Merry's argument is significant because it frames state funding not merely as support for religious institutions, but as part of a broader democratic commitment to pluralism. If a democratic state recognizes diversity among citizens, then it should also consider the

educational preferences of different religious communities, as long as those preferences do not violate children's rights or undermine civic equality.

Robert Jackson (2003) offers another important contribution by situating the debate within the context of faith-based schools in England. In his review of arguments on whether the state should fund faith-based schools, Jackson (2003) explains that government support can play a constructive role in democratic societies when it is directed toward promoting justice, fairness, educational quality, social cohesion, and the integration of minority communities into public life. He identifies several reasons for supporting religious schools, including responding positively to racism, promoting fairness for children and parents, providing high-quality education, and supporting the integration of minority religious communities into democratic life (Jackson, 2003). Jackson's argument is particularly relevant because it highlights the social function of religious schools in multicultural societies. Religious schools may become spaces where minority communities are recognized rather than marginalized, provided that they remain connected to democratic values and public accountability.

When these perspectives are compared, it becomes clear that the scholarly debate is not divided simply between those who support and those who reject government funding for religious schools. Rather, the debate revolves around different assumptions about autonomy, pluralism, and the role of the state. Brighthouse emphasizes the risks of religious schooling when it restricts children's autonomy and civic formation. Kroeker and Norris respond by arguing that religious education can support autonomy when it encourages moral development and responsible participation in society. Merry (2007) emphasizes pluralism and parental choice, while Jackson highlights social cohesion, justice, and minority integration. These arguments suggest that the democratic legitimacy of government funding depends not only on the religious identity of the school but also on its educational practices, curriculum structure, admission policy, civic orientation, and accountability to public values.

This debate is highly relevant to the Indonesian context, where religious education and religious schools have long been part of the national education system. Indonesia is neither a secular state in the strict sense nor a theocratic state. Instead, its constitutional and philosophical foundation through Pancasila recognizes belief in God while also affirming humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice. In this context, government funding for religious schools can be understood as part of the state's responsibility to support education for all citizens, including those educated within religious institutions.

However, such funding should not be viewed as unconditional support. It must be connected to the broader aims of national education, including the cultivation of tolerance, mutual respect, civic responsibility, and social cohesion in a multicultural and multi-religious society.

Therefore, the most convincing position is a conditional-compatibility argument. Government funding for religious schools can be compatible with the fundamental aims of education in a democratic society if it is accompanied by clear educational and civic requirements. These requirements include inclusive admission policies, curriculum openness, exposure to religious and cultural diversity, protection of children's autonomy, teacher competence, institutional accountability, and the integration of civic education into religious schooling. Under these conditions, religious schools can function not only as institutions for transmitting religious knowledge, but also as spaces for cultivating democratic character, moral reasoning, tolerance, and recognition. Conversely, if religious schools use public funding while rejecting pluralism, isolating students from alternative perspectives, or weakening civic equality, then such funding becomes difficult to justify within a democratic framework.

Based on this analysis, the state should not fund religious schools merely because they are religious, nor should it reject them merely because they are faith-based. The proper democratic question is whether public funding helps religious schools contribute to educational quality, personal development, civic education, and social cohesion. In Indonesia, this argument becomes especially important because religious schools have the potential to support Pancasila-based multicultural citizenship. Government funding can strengthen this role when it is used to improve curriculum quality, professionalize teachers, expand access, provide adequate facilities, and ensure that religious education remains compatible with democratic values. Thus, religious schools deserve public support only insofar as they contribute to both religious formation and democratic citizenship.

Religious Schools and Religious Education in Different Contexts

The development of religious schools and religious education across different countries shows that the relationship between the state, religion, and education is shaped by distinct historical, political, and constitutional arrangements (Table 1). In democratic societies, government involvement in religious education does not follow a single model. Some countries provide direct public funding for religious schools, while others support religious education through curriculum regulation, voucher schemes, or legal recognition of faith-based

educational institutions. These variations indicate that the central issue is not merely whether the state funds religious schools, but how such funding is regulated, justified, and connected to broader democratic aims such as autonomy, equality, civic education, social cohesion, and recognition of religious diversity.

In the United Kingdom, religious schools have historically been recognized as part of the national education landscape. Brighouse (2006) explains that religious schools became increasingly visible through government policy, particularly after the 2002 Education Act, which provided support for religious schools in both public and private forms. In this context, religious schools are legally recognized and operate through a collaborative relationship between the state and religious organizations. State-funded religious schools, including Church, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim schools, are required to follow the national curriculum while maintaining their religious character. This arrangement reflects an attempt to accommodate religious diversity within a public education system. However, Brighouse also warns that religious schools may raise democratic concerns when they undermine personal autonomy, foster social division, or fail to cultivate democratic citizenship. Thus, the UK case shows that state funding can support religious diversity, but it also creates a need for strong curriculum regulation and public accountability.

The United States presents a different model because the relationship between state funding and religious schooling is strongly influenced by constitutional concerns regarding religious freedom and the separation of church and state. In some contexts, government support has been directed through mechanisms that allow low-income children to attend religious schools, while religious schools remain free to teach religious doctrine and maintain their institutional identity. Brighouse (2006) notes that critics of such arrangements argue that publicly supported religious schooling may risk indoctrination, weaken children's autonomy, and reduce the capacity of schools to produce democratic citizens. The American case, therefore, illustrates a more contested form of government involvement, where the state must balance parental choice, religious liberty, educational opportunity, and the protection of children's future autonomy.

In Canada, the debate is more closely related to curriculum design and the role of religious knowledge within compulsory education. Morris (2011) explains that the Quebec government introduced the Ethics and Religious Culture Program in 2008 for both public and private schools. The program was designed to help students understand cultural, social, and religious diversity and to prepare them to interact within a pluralistic democratic society. This

case is significant because government involvement does not primarily appear as direct institutional funding for religious schools, but as curricular intervention aimed at managing religious diversity through education. However, the program also generated criticism because some scholars argued that combining religion and ethics within a compulsory curriculum may reduce the moral and rational status of religion. The Canadian case, therefore, demonstrates that even when the state does not directly promote a particular religion, public regulation of religious education may still generate debate about autonomy, moral formation, and the proper place of religion in democratic schooling.

The experience of England and the Netherlands further illustrates the ambivalent consequences of state funding. Walford (2001), in his study "Funding for Religious Schools in England and the Netherlands: Can the Piper Call the Tune?", explains that state funding gives governments stronger influence over curriculum, staffing, admission criteria, inspection, and school governance. On the one hand, this support enables religious schools to maintain institutional stability, improve educational provision, and participate in the national education system. On the other hand, state funding may reduce the autonomy of religious schools because public money is usually accompanied by public regulation. Walford (2001, p. 359) argues that the benefits of state funding may be outweighed by the decline in institutional autonomy experienced by religious schools. This argument is important because it shows that public funding creates a reciprocal relationship: when religious schools receive state resources, they are also expected to comply with public standards.

Indonesia provides a distinct context because religious education and religious schools are embedded within a national ideology that recognizes religion while also emphasizing unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice. Unlike countries that operate through stricter secular frameworks, Indonesia accommodates religious education through both general schools and religious schools. Religious education is included in the curriculum of general schools, while religious schools combine general and religious curricula in more balanced proportions. In this system, government support is provided through relevant state institutions, including the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has supported public and private religious schools, including Islamic, Christian, and other religious schools. This arrangement reflects the state's recognition that religious education is part of the national education project, not merely a private communal matter.

Nevertheless, the Indonesian model also faces serious challenges. Zuhdi (2005) argues that religion in a multi-religious society remains one of the most debated issues in Indonesian public education. The debate is not only about whether religious education should be taught in public schools, but also about how it should be delivered in multicultural classrooms (Zuhdi, 2005). This issue is especially important because general schools often accept students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, while religious education may still be delivered in ways that do not fully accommodate such diversity. Therefore, the Indonesian case shows that government support for religious education must be accompanied by pedagogical sensitivity, inclusive curriculum design, and institutional mechanisms that protect the rights of students from different backgrounds.

Comparing these contexts reveals at least three important patterns. First, government funding for religious schools is generally justified through arguments about educational access, parental choice, religious freedom, minority recognition, and social cohesion. Second, public funding also creates democratic risks, especially when religious schools limit children's autonomy, restrict exposure to diversity, or resist public accountability. Third, the effect of government funding depends on the institutional conditions attached to it. In England and the Netherlands, funding increases state regulation. In Canada, state involvement appears through curriculum design. In the United States, the debate is shaped by constitutional concerns and educational choice. In Indonesia, the issue is closely connected to Pancasila, multicultural citizenship, and the state's responsibility to support religious education while maintaining social harmony.

Based on this comparison, government involvement in religious schools should not be evaluated in absolute terms. It is neither automatically compatible nor inherently incompatible with democratic education. Its compatibility depends on whether the funding strengthens educational quality, protects personal autonomy, promotes tolerance, and supports civic formation. In Indonesia, government funding remains important because religious schools play a central role in transmitting religious values, developing moral character, and strengthening community identity. However, such funding should be directed toward broader democratic goals, including mutual respect, recognition, social cohesion, and civic education. Therefore, the Indonesian government's support for religious schools can be justified only when it helps these institutions contribute not merely to religious preservation, but also to the development of democratic citizenship in a multicultural society.

Table 1. The Comparison of Government Funding to Religious Schools and Religious Education from Different Scholars' Perspectives and Contexts.

Theorists Perspectives	Harry Brighthouse	Harry Brighthouse	Ronald W. Morris	Geoffrey Walford	Muhammad Zuhdi
Contexts	United Kingdom (UK)	United States (US)	Canada	England-Netherland	Indonesia
Religious Schools - Government Relations Issues	Religious schools are legal and are a form of collaborative effort of the government and religious organizations.	The reaction to both governments running religious schools is that they tend to undermine autonomy and foster social division through indoctrination, and it can impede the production of democratic citizens.	Government support to provide secular or religious education as options of compulsory education. The reaction to this program is that the combination of religion and ethics can undermine rational status and morality and can also reduce the moral function.	State funding has led to the reaction that state-funded religious schools are under the control of the government, and it has reduced their autonomy.	The issue of religion in a multi-religious society remains one of the highly debated problems of public education in Indonesia. The implementation of religious education in the general curriculum is still not fully accommodating the diverse students.
Policies of Government Funding	The government has provided state funding to primary and secondary religious schools, such as church, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim schools, which apply the national curriculum.	- The government supports religious schools that are free to teach religious doctrine. - The government allows schools to promote autonomous values as well as secular schools. - The government provided funds for low-income children to attend religious schools.	The Quebec government created the Ethics and Religious Culture Program (ERC) to support the curriculum of compulsory education in both public and private schools. It aims to promote cultural, social, and religious values to enable students with the ability to interact with a pluralistic-democratic society and to understand religious phenomena.	Governments provided state funding to control regulations on the aspects of curriculum, staffing, admission criteria, inspection, and government.	- Government-supported religious schools and religious education through the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA). - MoRA provided an annual national budget to support both public and private religious schools, such as Islamic schools, Christian schools, and other religious schools.
Similarities	The government provided funding support to religious schools and religious education through policies.				
Differences in Issues	Legal Collaborative Efforts	Religious schools tend to undermine autonomy and foster social division through indoctrination.	A combination of religion and ethics can undermine rational status and morality and reduce the moral function.	State-funded religious schools are controlled by the government and have reduced their autonomy.	Religious education in the general curriculum is still not fully accommodating the diverse students.

Why the State Should Fund Religious Schools: An Exploration of the Indonesian Context

Indonesia provides a distinctive context for examining why the state should fund religious schools because the relationship between religion, democracy, and education is shaped by the philosophical foundation of Pancasila. Indonesia is often described as one of the world's largest democracies, while at the same time it is neither a secular state in the strict

sense nor an Islamic state. This position creates a specific model of state-religion relations in which religion is publicly recognized, but the state is also expected to maintain unity, justice, and equal citizenship in a plural society. Therefore, the question of government funding for religious schools in Indonesia should not be understood merely as a financial issue, but as part of the state's responsibility to regulate, support, and guide religious education so that it contributes to both moral formation and democratic citizenship.

The normative foundation of this responsibility can be traced to Pancasila, particularly the first principle, Belief in the Almighty God, which places religious life within the moral foundation of the Indonesian state. However, Pancasila does not establish Indonesia as a theocratic state. Rather, it provides a framework for recognizing religious life while maintaining social unity, deliberative democracy, and justice for all citizens. Within this framework, religious education becomes important because it is expected to form individuals who possess spiritual awareness, moral responsibility, and respect for social diversity. This is why religious education in Indonesia is not treated as a purely private matter, but as part of the national education system.

The legal basis for religious education further strengthens this argument. Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System states that every student in every educational unit has the right to receive religious education according to his or her own religion and to be taught by an educator of the same religion. This provision shows that the state has an obligation not only to allow religious education but also to ensure that students' religious rights are institutionally accommodated within schools. In addition, Government Regulation No. 55 of 2007 on Religious Education and Religious-Based Education explains that religious-based education aims to form students who understand and practice the values of their religious teachings and may become experts in religious knowledge. These legal provisions indicate that government support for religious education is not incidental; it is embedded in Indonesia's education policy and constitutional-philosophical orientation.

In this context, state funding for religious schools can be justified for at least three interconnected reasons. First, funding is necessary to ensure equal educational access and reduce disparities between general schools and religious schools. Religious schools, particularly those serving lower-income communities, often require public support to improve infrastructure, teacher quality, curriculum development, and learning resources. Without state funding, religious schools may remain structurally disadvantaged, even though they serve a significant educational function in society. Second, funding allows the state to strengthen

educational quality and public accountability. When religious schools receive public resources, the government has a stronger basis to ensure that these institutions meet national education standards, implement appropriate curricula, and promote civic values. Third, funding can support the integration of religious education with tolerance, mutual respect, and social cohesion, which are essential in a multicultural society.

The Indonesian government's concern with religious harmony is also reflected in the concept commonly known as *Tri Kerukunan Umat Beragama*, or the three dimensions of religious harmony. This concept refers to harmony within religious communities, harmony among different religious communities, and harmony between religious communities and the government. Sources from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and related institutional materials describe this framework as an effort to create peaceful relations among religious groups in a diverse society. In educational terms, this concept is relevant because religious schools should not only transmit doctrinal knowledge, but also cultivate ethical dispositions that enable students to live peacefully with others. Therefore, government funding should be linked to programs that promote interreligious understanding, civic responsibility, and respect for diversity.

Nevertheless, the argument for state funding must be framed conditionally. Government funding for religious schools is democratically defensible only when it supports the broader aims of national education and does not produce exclusivism, segregation, or intolerance. In a plural society such as Indonesia, religious schools need to preserve religious identity while also preparing students to participate in public life with respect for difference. This means that state support should be accompanied by curriculum supervision, teacher development, inclusive educational policy, and mechanisms of accountability. Funding should not simply preserve religious institutions as closed communities, but should help them become educational spaces that strengthen morality, citizenship, and social cohesion.

Therefore, the Indonesian context shows that the state should fund religious schools not merely because religion occupies an important place in society, but because religious schools are part of the national educational ecosystem. When properly regulated, state funding can help religious schools cultivate students' spiritual foundations, strengthen moral character, improve educational quality, and promote tolerance in a diverse democratic society. In this sense, government funding becomes compatible with the fundamental aims of education when it is directed toward both religious formation and democratic citizenship. The role of the state is not to replace religious communities, but to ensure that religious education contributes to

the public good, supports equal access, and remains aligned with the values of Pancasila, pluralism, and civic responsibility.

Religious Schools as Spaces for Cultivating Tolerance, Mutual Respect, and Recognition

Religious schools can be understood as important educational spaces for cultivating tolerance, mutual respect, and recognition, particularly when religious values are taught in ways that are compatible with democratic citizenship and multicultural coexistence. In the Indonesian context, Islamic schools provide a relevant example because Muslims constitute the majority of the population, and Islamic education has long played a significant role in shaping religious identity, moral character, and social responsibility. However, the role of Islamic schools should not be understood merely as the transmission of religious doctrine. More importantly, Islamic schools can function as sociocultural institutions where students learn how to relate their religious commitments to the ethical demands of living with others in a diverse society.

In Islamic education, tolerance is not simply a pragmatic attitude toward difference, but is rooted in normative religious teachings concerning human diversity, dignity, and freedom of belief. The Qur'an states that human beings were created into different nations and tribes so that they may know one another, not so that they may dominate or deny each other's existence (Qur'an 49:13). This verse provides an important foundation for the concept of recognition because diversity is presented as part of the divine order of human life. In this sense, Islamic education can introduce students to the idea that social difference is not a threat to religious identity, but a condition through which ethical interaction and mutual understanding can be developed.

The principle of freedom in matters of faith also provides a strong basis for tolerance and respect for religious diversity. The Qur'an explicitly states that there is no compulsion in religion (Qur'an 2:256). This principle is important for religious education because it shows that faith cannot be formed through coercion, but through conviction, understanding, and moral awareness. When this principle is integrated into the educational practices of Islamic schools, students can be encouraged to respect the religious choices of others while maintaining commitment to their own faith. Therefore, Islamic schools have the potential to cultivate personal autonomy, not by detaching students from religion, but by helping them

understand that authentic religiosity requires moral responsibility and respect for human freedom.

Mutual respect is also central to Islamic moral education. In a plural society, respect cannot be limited to passive acceptance of difference. It must involve ethical recognition that other religious communities possess dignity and the right to live according to their beliefs. Islamic teachings provide resources for such an orientation, including the principle that Muslims are allowed to act justly and kindly toward those who do not fight or expel them because of religion (Qur'an 60:8). This principle can be educationally significant because it encourages students to distinguish between religious conviction and social hostility. A student may hold a firm religious identity while still respecting, cooperating with, and acting justly toward people of different faiths.

From this perspective, Islamic schools can contribute to democratic education when they translate religious values into pedagogical practices that support coexistence. The values of tolerance, mutual respect, and recognition should not remain abstract moral ideals; they need to be embodied in classroom interaction, curriculum design, school culture, teacher conduct, and extracurricular programs. For example, Islamic schools can introduce students to the diversity of religious communities in Indonesia, teach civic responsibility, promote dialogue, and encourage social service activities that involve broader communities. Through these practices, religious education can strengthen students' moral character while also preparing them to participate responsibly in a multicultural democratic society.

This argument also explains why government funding for religious schools can be justified in the Indonesian context. State support can help Islamic schools improve teacher quality, curriculum development, learning facilities, and civic education programs. However, such funding should be linked to public educational goals. The government should not fund religious schools merely to preserve religious identity, but to ensure that religious education contributes to national cohesion, social justice, tolerance, and democratic citizenship. In this sense, funding becomes a policy instrument through which the state can strengthen the positive role of religious schools while maintaining accountability to the broader aims of national education.

Nevertheless, the contribution of Islamic schools to tolerance and recognition should not be assumed automatically. It depends on how religious teachings are interpreted, taught, and institutionalized. If Islamic schools present religious identity in exclusive and antagonistic

terms, they may weaken social cohesion. Conversely, if they teach Islamic values through an inclusive, dialogical, and civic-oriented pedagogy, they can become important spaces for forming students who are religiously committed and socially responsible. Therefore, the democratic value of religious schools depends not only on their religious foundation, but also on their educational orientation and institutional practice.

Based on this analysis, religious schools, especially Islamic schools in Indonesia, have the potential to cultivate tolerance, mutual respect, and recognition when they connect religious values with the ethical demands of a plural society. Islamic education can support democratic life by teaching students that religious commitment and respect for difference are not contradictory. Rather, both can reinforce one another when education is directed toward moral maturity, civic responsibility, and social harmony. Therefore, government funding for religious schools can be considered compatible with the fundamental aims of education in a democratic society when it strengthens these inclusive and civic functions.

Religious Schools, Religious Education, and Children's Autonomy in Indonesia

Religious schools and religious education are shaped by different historical, cultural, and political systems across developed and developing countries. In Indonesia, religious schools such as Islamic schools, Christian schools, and other faith-based educational institutions should not be understood merely as institutions that separate one religious community from another. Rather, they can be interpreted as part of the state's recognition of religious diversity and the right of religious communities to provide education in accordance with their moral and spiritual traditions. Within this framework, religious schools may function as educational spaces where students develop religious identity, moral character, and social responsibility while still being prepared to live within a plural and democratic society.

In the Indonesian context, religious education is closely related to the formation of students' personal and moral development. Religious values are expected to help students understand ethical principles, recognize cultural and religious diversity, and develop the ability to live harmoniously with others. However, this argument must be framed carefully. Religious education does not automatically produce tolerance or democratic character. Its contribution depends on how religious teachings are interpreted, taught, and institutionalized within the school environment. When religious education is delivered through inclusive pedagogy, dialogical classroom practices, and respect for diversity, it can support students' moral

development and strengthen their capacity to interact with people from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

This discussion can be connected to Brighouse's argument about the relationship between religious schooling and children's autonomy. Brighouse (2006) argues that education should help children flourish by developing their capacity for personal autonomy, critical judgment, and future decision-making. From this perspective, religious schools may become problematic when they restrict students' exposure to alternative ways of life or impose religious doctrines in ways that limit independent reasoning. However, Brighouse's position is not a complete rejection of religious schools. His argument implies that religious schools may be compatible with democratic education when they provide inclusive admission policies, expose students to diverse perspectives, and design curricula that support autonomy, tolerance, and civic responsibility.

Applying this argument to Indonesia requires careful analysis. As a multi-religious and multicultural society, Indonesia needs an education system that accommodates religious identity while also protecting the rights and autonomy of students. The government has the responsibility to ensure that religious schools and religious education do not produce exclusivism, but instead contribute to mutual understanding, civic responsibility, and social cohesion. Therefore, the issue is not simply whether religious schools should exist or receive public support, but whether their curriculum, admission policies, teacher practices, and school culture are aligned with the broader aims of democratic education.

In this regard, state funding for religious schools can be justified when it strengthens educational quality and supports the development of students' autonomy. Public funding should not be understood merely as financial assistance to religious institutions, but as an instrument for improving curriculum quality, teacher competence, institutional accountability, and inclusive civic education. If government support enables religious schools to provide students with religious knowledge, moral formation, academic competence, and exposure to social diversity, then such funding can contribute to the fundamental aims of education in a democratic society. Conversely, if public funding supports schools that isolate students from plural realities or discourage independent moral reasoning, then such funding becomes difficult to justify.

The relationship between religious values and children's personal autonomy also needs to be understood more conceptually. Autonomy should not be interpreted as unlimited

freedom without moral direction. In educational theory, autonomy refers to the capacity of individuals to make reflective, responsible, and reasoned choices. In the context of religious education, autonomy can be developed when students are guided to understand religious values critically, ethically, and responsibly. Thus, religious education may support autonomy when it does not merely demand obedience but encourages students to internalize moral values, reflect on their actions, and engage respectfully with different viewpoints.

Parents and families also play an important role in this process. In many religious communities, parents choose religious schools because they expect these institutions to support their children's moral, spiritual, and personal development. This choice should be respected in a democratic society, as long as children's rights, educational quality, and civic formation are also protected. Kroeker and Norris argue that many religious groups are concerned with children's self-development and that religious schools may provide an educational environment that supports children's future autonomy rather than undermining it. This argument is important because it challenges the assumption that religious education is always opposed to autonomy. In some contexts, religious schools may help students develop a coherent moral identity while still preparing them to participate in wider democratic life.

Therefore, the development of children's autonomy in religious schools requires cooperation among the government, parents, schools, students, and society. The government should provide regulatory guidance and public support; parents should participate responsibly in children's education; schools should design inclusive and academically sound curricula; and society should create an environment that supports interreligious respect. Through this cooperative framework, religious schools can become educational spaces that preserve religious values while also cultivating autonomy, tolerance, and democratic citizenship. In the Indonesian context, this balance is especially important because religious education is not only a matter of personal faith, but also part of the broader project of building social harmony in a plural society.

CONCLUSION

This study examined whether government funding for religious schools and religious education is compatible with the fundamental aims of education in a democratic society, particularly in the Indonesian context. The findings show that such funding cannot be simply regarded as a practice that undermines democracy. Its compatibility depends on whether

religious schools are able to promote tolerance, mutual respect, recognition, personal autonomy, civic responsibility, and social cohesion. Comparative examples from several countries indicate that state funding may create concerns about autonomy and control, but it may also strengthen educational quality, parental choice, and the public role of religious schools.

In Indonesia, government support for religious schools has a distinctive basis because the country is grounded in Pancasila and characterized by religious and cultural diversity. Religious schools can contribute to democratic education when they do not merely preserve religious identity, but also cultivate students' moral character, openness, and ability to live peacefully in a plural society. Therefore, state funding should be directed toward improving curriculum quality, teacher competence, school facilities, civic education, and inclusive religious formation.

The study contributes to Islamic education discourse by offering a conditional argument: government funding for religious schools is democratically justified only when it supports public educational aims, including autonomy, tolerance, recognition, and citizenship. However, this study is limited because it is based on a literature review and conceptual analysis, not direct empirical fieldwork. Future studies should examine how government funding affects religious school practices through interviews, surveys, or case studies. Overall, this study concludes that state funding can be compatible with democratic education when it strengthens religious schools as spaces for both moral formation and multicultural citizenship.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly to assist with language refinement, grammar checking, academic phrasing, structural coherence, and the improvement of clarity in several parts of the manuscript. The tool was used only to support technical and linguistic aspects of writing and did not replace the authors' scholarly judgment, conceptual analysis, interpretation, or argument development. After using this tool, the authors carefully reviewed, revised, and edited the manuscript as needed. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, originality, and final version of the publication.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Authorship contributions are reported following the CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) system. Each author's specific contribution to the research and writing process is described as follows:

- a. Fauzanah Fauzan El Muhammady: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing Original Draft, and Writing Review & Editing.
- b. Mevy Eka Nurhalizah: Validation, Project Administration, Resources, and Writing – Review & Editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation, or writing of this manuscript. The authors confirm that the work was conducted independently, objectively, and in accordance with academic integrity standards.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their appreciation to academic colleagues and institutional parties who provided valuable guidance, feedback, and scholarly support during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors also acknowledge the contributions of previous scholars whose works on religious education, democratic education, multiculturalism, Islamic education, and educational policy provided an important foundation for the development of this study.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Since this research is based on a literature review, conceptual-normative analysis, and comparative document analysis, the data consist of publicly accessible academic sources, policy documents, legal materials, and relevant scholarly references used in the analysis.

Funding Statement

This research was independently funded by the authors and did not receive any external financial support from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agencies.

Ethical Approval Statement

The authors confirm that this study complies with ethical research standards. This research did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, patients, clinical data, or patient-identifying information. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. The study was conducted using publicly available academic and documentary sources with proper citation, fair representation of arguments, and adherence to academic integrity.

REFERENCES

- Banks, J. A. 2008. Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher*, 37(3), 129–139. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X0831750>
- Berner, A. R. 2023. Government Funding for Religious Schools—Australia, Indonesia, Israel, the Netherlands, and Singapore. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Schools and Religion*, 53.
- Berner, A. 2016. Public funding for private schools: recent research and larger policy implications.
- Berner, A. R. 2019. The case for educational pluralism in the US. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.
- Brighouse, Harry. 2006. Should Governments Support Religious Schools? In *On Education*. Chapter 5. p. 77-94. Routledge: London and New York
- Bourdieu, P. 2018. Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In *Knowledge, education, and cultural change* (pp. 71-112). Routledge.
- Dewi, N. A., & Oktapiani, W. 2024. Sociocultural Theory Implications and Applications in Modern Pedagogy. *Allemania*, 3(1), 46-56.
- Fontdevila, C., & Vanderhoven, E. 2025. Publicly funded religious schools: for what purposes, and with what effects? Connecting normative and empirical debates. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1-19.

- Garba, A. L., AHMAD, K., & DAJO, U. 2025. Qualitative Study on The Role of Schools as a Social Institution in Nigeria. *Federal University Gusau Faculty of Education Journal*, 5(3), 230-235.
- Gutmann, A. 1999. *Democratic education* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Jackson, Robert. 2003. Should the State Fund Faith-Based Schools? A Review of the Arguments. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 25:2, p. 89-102
- Marks, J. 1988. *Democratic Education*, 86 MICH. L. REV. 1140-1147.
- Kroeker, Frances M & Norris, Stephen P. 2007. An Unwarranted Fear of Religious Schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education* 30, 1, p. 269-290.
- Merry, M. S. 2007. Should the state fund religious schools? *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 24(3), 255-270.
- Morris, R. W. 2011. Quebec's Ethics and Religious Culture Program: Controversy, Content, and Orientations. *Canadian Issues*, p.55-59.
- Morris, Ronald W. 2011. Cultivating Reflection and Understanding: Foundations and Orientations of Québec's Ethics and Religious Culture Program. *Religion & Education*, 38:3,188-211.
- Morris, Ronald W., Bouchard, Nancy, and De Silva, Anne-Marie (2011). Enthusiasm and Ambivalence: Elementary School Teacher Perspectives on the Ethics and Religious Culture Program. *Religion & Education*, 38:3, 257-265.
- Shabani, K. 2016. Applications of Vygotsky's sociocultural approach for teachers' professional development. *Cogent education*, 3(1), 1252177.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Walfrod, Geoffrey. 2000. Funding for Religious Schools in England and the Netherlands. Can the Piper Call the Tune? *Research Papers in Education* 16(4) 2001, pp. 359-380

Yoon, E. S., Malin, J. R., Sellers, K. M., & Welner, K. G. 2024. Should religious schools be publicly funded? Issues of religion, discrimination, and equity. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 99(4), 395-402.

Zuhdi, Muhammad. 2005. Religious Education in Indonesian Schools. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266604396_Religious_Education_in_Indonesian_Schools_Religious_Education_in_Indonesian_Schools

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Fauzanah Fauzan El Muhammady, S.Sos., M.Si., MS., Ph.D. is an academic and researcher in anthropology, intercultural communication, and educational studies with sociocultural and global perspectives. She serves as a lecturer and Assistant Professor in the Anthropology Study Program, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universitas Negeri Padang. Her academic background includes Anthropology at Universitas Andalas, Communication Sciences (Intercultural Communication) at Universitas Indonesia, Sociocultural and International Development Education Studies (SIDES) at Florida State University, and a Ph.D. in Educational Studies from McGill University. Her research interests include higher educational policy and leadership, institutional transformation, cultural identity, and arts- and visual-based qualitative methods. She also actively participated in international academic forums and has professional experiences in educational administration and policy development at Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Kemenag*).  Fauzanah Fauzan El Muhammady: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0191-4744>

Mevy Eka Nurhalizah, M.Sos is a lecturer in Communication and Islamic Broadcasting at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya. Born on May 14, she has a deep passion for writing and is particularly interested in the fields of sociology of da'wah, multiculturalism, gender, and new media. This love for writing has also led her to become a research editor at the website www.nursyamcentre.com, where she contributes to the development of insightful research and academic content. Correspondence can be directed to mevy.nurhalizah@uinsa.ac.id. Mevy Eka Nurhalizah  <https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0000-0001-6429-03402>