

## The Position of Religion in Development

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### Abstract

*This study examines the position of religion in development through a descriptive-qualitative approach using literature review. Religion is not only understood as a spiritual belief system but also as a source of ethics, social guidance, and cultural power that shapes public policy and the direction of national development. In the Indonesian context, religion is closely linked to Pancasila and national identity, meaning that development is not entirely secular but grounded in divine values, social justice, and humanity. The findings indicate that religion contributes significantly to education, economy, socio-cultural life, politics, and environmental sustainability through institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), zakat and waqf systems, religious philanthropy, interfaith moderation, and eco-theology. However, religion also faces challenges including secularization, politicization of faith, radicalism, commercialization of religion, and moral decline. Therefore, a constructive integration between religious values, scientific knowledge, and public policy is essential to achieve holistic, ethical, and sustainable development. Consequently, religion should not be seen as an obstacle to modernization but as a moral compass that guides development toward justice, dignity, and civility.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religion plays a crucial role in the dynamics of Indonesian society. It is understood not only as a spiritual belief between humans and God, but also serves as a value system, a source of ethics, and a moral foundation that regulates individual and social behavior. In the context of the nation, this is emphasized through the first principle of Pancasila, "Belief in the One and Only God," which places religion as the philosophical foundation of national and state life (the 1945 Constitution). Therefore, discussing national development without incorporating religious elements is tantamount to ignoring a cultural and moral force deeply rooted in society.

In general, development is often associated with economic growth, increased gross domestic product (GDP), industrialization, and progress in infrastructure. However, this understanding is considered too narrow. Contemporary thinkers such as Amartya Sen argue that development is not merely the accumulation of wealth, but rather the process of expanding substantive human freedoms, such as the freedom to live healthily, obtain a decent education, behave ethically, and live with dignity (Sen 1999). Thus, development has spiritual and moral dimensions. From this perspective, religion is believed to play a significant role because it provides a set of values, norms, and ethics that guide the direction of development so that it not only pursues material progress but also pays attention to aspects of humanity, justice, and social balance.

The relationship between religion and development has actually long been the concern of social scientists. Max Weber, in his study on the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, explains that certain religious ethics, such as hard work, discipline, rationality, and self-control, give rise to a culture of productivity and a modern economy (Weber 2002). Weber's thinking demonstrates that religion is not in conflict with development but can instead be a driving force for modernization. In the Islamic context, Kuntowijoyo emphasizes that religion must be a transformative force that drives social, economic, and cultural change toward justice and prosperity (Kuntowijoyo 2006).

Furthermore, religion also plays an important social role in development, including strengthening social solidarity, increasing moral awareness, mobilizing philanthropic actions such as zakat, infaq, and waqf, and fostering social harmony. Religious organizations in Indonesia, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have played an active role in building educational institutions, health services, and empowering the community's economy (Syamsuddin 2003). The role of religion in this kind of social development is often referred to as social *capital* (*social capital*), namely non-material resources such as trust, solidarity values, and social networks that strengthen community cohesion.

However, the relationship between religion and development is not always harmonious. In certain situations, religion can be politicized and used as a tool to legitimize power (Hasan 2006). Furthermore, the rise of radicalism, narrow-minded fanaticism, and inter-religious or intra-religious conflict can hinder the development process and threaten national unity. On the other hand, secularism, which excludes religion from the public sphere, also has the potential to create a spiritual vacuum in development (Madjid 1992). This situation raises important questions: What is the true position of religion in development? Is religion a driving force (*driver*) or even an inhibitor (*barrier*) to development?

Based on this background, this article aims to:

1. Explaining the concept of religion and development scientifically and comprehensively.
2. Describes the position of religion in national and global development.
3. Analyze the contribution of religion to spiritual, social, economic, and moral development.
4. Identifying the challenges and problems of the relationship between religion and development.

This research is expected to provide critical insights into the relevance of religion in modern development, especially in the context of Indonesia as a religious and democratic country.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a literature study method (*library* approach was chosen because the theme of “the position of religion in development” is normative, philosophical, and conceptual, so it is more appropriate to analyze it through an in-depth study of academic texts, socio-religious theories, and official state and religious documents (Zed 2008).

### A. Types and Approaches of Research

This research is descriptive qualitative research, which aims to scientifically describe and understand social reality based on non-statistical data. Moleong explains that qualitative research focuses on meaning, understanding, and processes captured

through narrative description (Moleong 2019). Meanwhile, Bogdan and Taylor state that a qualitative approach seeks to understand phenomena holistically through the interaction between context, narrative, and the researcher's interpretation of the data (Bogdan and Taylor 1992).

## B. Data source

The data sources for this research consist of:

### a. Primary Sources:

- Al-Qur'an dan Hadis;
- The 1945 Constitution and Pancasila;
- The work of thinkers such as Kuntowijoyo in *Islamic Paradigm and Development*, Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Robert N. Bellah in *Civil Religion*, and Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom*.

### b. Secondary Sources:

- Academic book: Tilaar (*Social Change and Education*), Clifford Geertz (*The Religion of Java*), and M. Dawam Rahardjo (*Religion and Development*).
- Scientific journals: *Islamic Studies*, *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, and *Journal of Religion and Development*.
- Government documents: Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, RPJMN 2020–2024, and RPJPN 2005–2025.

## C. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through literature and documentation studies of books, scientific journals, official state documents, and classic religious literature. The data was then recorded in the form of direct and indirect quotations using a scientific citation format. The next step was to verify each source to ensure authenticity, author credibility, and publisher reputation.

## D. Data Analysis Techniques

The data was analyzed using the content analysis method (*content analysis*) with the following steps; (1) Data reduction, namely filtering relevant information regarding the relationship between religion and development, (2) Categorization, namely grouping data based on themes such as religion as a development ethic, social capital, public policy, human development, and religious moderation, (3) Interpretation, namely interpreting data using socio-religious theory and modern development concepts, (4) Concluding, namely compiling a final synthesis as an answer to the formulation of the problem and research objectives.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Religion as a Spiritual and Moral Foundation in Development

Religion has historically been a major force in shaping human civilization. It is not only understood as a system of beliefs (*belief system*), but also as a source of moral values, ethical guidelines, and spiritual energy that motivates social action. Émile Durkheim called religion a “collective representation” that builds social solidarity and gives meaning to shared life (Durkheim 1915). Thus, religion is not a passive entity, but a fundamental foundation of social development.

In Islam, development is understood as part of *'imārat al-ardh* (prospering the earth) as stated in QS Hud: 61, which states that humans are commanded to prosper the earth (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia 2019). Humans as caliphs are required to build a civilization based on monotheism, justice, and balance, not just on economic orientation.

Kuntowijoyo calls the role of religion in development "social transcendence," the process of translating divine values into a just and humanistic social system (Kuntowijoyo 1991). Religion should not be confined to the private or ritual realm, but should incorporate ethical values such as trustworthiness, justice, and mercy into public life and state policy. Without spiritual values, development will lose its direction, become materialistic, and give rise to a moral crisis.

In the West, Max Weber showed that religion could be a driving force for modernization. In the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber asserted that the Protestant-Calvinist tradition's ethic of hard work, rationality, and discipline formed the foundation of the work ethic of modern capitalism (Weber 2002). This means that religion is not an obstacle to modernity, but can instead be a driver of development.

In Indonesia, the position of religion in development is stated in the Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. The first principle, "Belief in the One and Only God," emphasizes that national development is not totally secular, but is based on religious values (Notonagoro 1984). This is what is referred to as religious *nationalism*, namely nationalism based on religious morals without becoming a theocratic state.

Religion also plays a role as a source of psychological resilience in development. Viktor Frankl, in his theory of *logo therapy* states that humans need meaning to survive suffering (Frankl 2006). Religion provides life orientation, hope, and meaning to suffering so that society has spiritual resilience in facing crises, social change, and disasters.

Thus, religion has a strategic position in development because: (1) it provides a moral foundation; (2) it builds social ethics; (3) it strengthens national identity; (4) it builds personality and spiritual resilience; (5) it directs development so that it does not stop at materialism, but towards true well-being (*al-falāh*). Development without religion is like a body without a soul; it moves but loses its direction.

## **B. Religion as Social Capital (*Social Capital*) in Development**

Religion is not only a spiritual belief, but also creates social networks, norms, and collective beliefs known as social capital (*social capital*). This concept is explained by Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam as non-material resources in the form of trust, networks, and social norms that enable cooperation (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 1993).

In religious societies like Indonesia, mosques, churches, Islamic boarding schools, monasteries, or parishes serve as centers of social capital. Islam teaches the principle of *ta'āwun 'alā al-birr wa al-taqwā* (helping each other in goodness and piety) as stated in QS al-Mā'idah: 2 (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2019). This value is evident in the practices of zakat, infaq, sedekah, and waqf, which play a role in reducing poverty. In 2023, BAZNAS reported collecting over IDR 24 trillion in zakat, which was distributed to the productive economy, education, and health (BAZNAS 2024).

Robert Putnam in *Making Democracy Work* shows that societies with high levels of social trust have better governance (Putnam 1993). In Indonesia, this is evident in Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, which have established schools, hospitals, cooperatives, and social institutions. Hilman Latief's research shows that Islamic philanthropy has now developed into a social development movement (Latief 2017).

However, religious social capital is ambivalent. Pierre Bourdieu warned that social capital can create exclusivity and domination of certain groups (Bourdieu 1977). In the religious context, this is seen in intolerance, identity politics, or inter-religious conflict. The phenomenon of bonding *social capital* strengthens internal group solidarity but weakens openness to other groups.

Globally, religious community networks like the Gülen Movement in Turkey have established schools in over 100 countries. In Malaysia, institutions like Tabung Haji and JAKIM demonstrate how religion is institutionally managed in development. Robert Bellah also mentioned the concept of *civil religion*, namely religious values that live in public morals even though religious institutions are weakening (Bellah 1967).

Thus, religion as social capital has significant implications for development: strengthening institutions, building public trust, and mobilizing community participation. The challenge is how to optimize this potential without falling into exclusivism or politicization.

### C. Religion and Economic Ethics in Development

Religion provides a strong moral and ethical framework in economic activities, so that development does not only pursue growth (*growth*), but also social justice (*justice*) and blessings (*blessing*). In Islam, the goal of economics is not merely the accumulation of capital, but achieving *al-falāḥ* (worldly and afterlife welfare) (Chapra 1992, 15). Economics is seen as part of social worship and a humanitarian mandate, not merely a materialistic activity. Therefore, religious ethics reject exploitative practices such as usury, monopoly (*faith*), hoarding of wealth, and unfair distribution.

#### 1. Work Ethic and Spirit of Productivity

Max Weber in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* explains that Protestant ethics—especially the concept of calling/*career*—gives birth to the spirit of modern capitalism through work discipline, rationality, and moral responsibility (Weber 2002, 35). A similar concept also exists in Islam, namely *al-‘amal ṣāliḥ* (good job) and *andiqān al-‘amal* (professionalism). Prophet Muhammad said: "*Indeed, Allah loves someone who, when he works, does it with itqān*" (Al-Bayhaqi, *Syu‘ab al-‘Imān*, no. 5313). This work ethic forms a productive mentality, rejects laziness, consumerism, or fatalism, and is relevant in increasing the nation's economic competitiveness.

#### 2. Zakat and Welfare Redistribution

Zakat is a mandatory and systematic instrument for wealth distribution in Islam. The Qur'an states that the purpose of zakat is to ensure that "wealth does not circulate only among the rich," *as lā yakkun dūlatan bayna al-agniyā' minkum*, QS. al-Hasyr 59:7). In Indonesia, the potential for zakat reaches approximately IDR 327 trillion per year, but only about 15 percent is realized (BAZNAS 2024). If managed productively—such as through micro-enterprise financing, scholarships, and free healthcare—zakat can be a driving force for inclusive and equitable economic growth.

#### 3. Endowments and Sustainable Social Investment

Waqf is a long-term philanthropy that produces sustainable benefits (*problem*). In Islamic history, waqf was used to build madrasas, hospitals (*from Bhima*), libraries, and public infrastructure (Kahf 2003, 22). In the modern era, the concept of cash waqf has become a social investment instrument. In Indonesia, the Indonesian Waqf Board (BWI) develops waqf assets in the form of property, plantations, hospitals, and educational institutions. This scheme supports development without burdening the state budget and strengthens the independence of the community.

#### 4. Sharia Economics and National Development

The Islamic economy is now a vital part of national development. Financial Services Authority (OJK) data indicates that Indonesia's Islamic financial industry assets will reach over IDR 2,600 trillion in 2023 (OJK 2024). Instruments such as

murabahah, *musharakah*, *sukuk*, and *waqf-linked sukuk* are used to finance infrastructure, MSMEs, and poverty alleviation. The government, through the *Sharia Economic Masterplan 2019–2024*, emphasized that a religion-based economy is one of the pillars of sustainable national development.

### 5. Case Study: Indonesia and the World

- a. Indonesia – The Micro Waqf Bank (BWM) program in Islamic boarding schools helps more than 125,000 small business owners without collateral and usury, as a model of economic empowerment based on religious values.
- b. Türkiye – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan integrates religion and economy through a model of *Islamic Capitalism*serta lembaga the Türkiye Diyanet Foundation.
- c. Malaysia –*Hajj Savings* is a successful example of Islamic pilgrimage management and investment; Hajj pilgrims' funds are invested in property, plantations, and the halal industry.
- d. Europe – Conceptual ethical *banking* and *socially responsible investment (SRI)* is developing in England, Germany, and Switzerland; although not based on a particular religion, it has a spirit of morality, transparency, and justice that aligns with religious values.

## D. Religion and Socio-Cultural Development

Religion plays a significant role in shaping social identity, strengthening societal institutions, and preserving local cultural values amidst the tides of modernization and globalization. In development, religion serves not only as a moral instrument but also as a means of social transformation, education, and sustainable cultural reconstruction. *sustainable cultural development*.

### 1. Religion as a Shaper of Identity and Social Solidarity

Émile Durkheim viewed religion as a “system of moral solidarity” that unites individuals into communities (Durkheim 1995). In the Indonesian context, religion is an important element in the formation of national identity, as stated in the first principle of Pancasila: Belief in the One and Only God. Clifford Geertz in *Religion of Java* shows that religion in Indonesia is not only a theological ritual, but also a socio-cultural institution that shapes people's mindsets and behavior (Geertz 1960). For example, the slametan tradition in Java or the maulid in Banten strengthen social ties between residents.

### 2. Islamic Boarding Schools and Religious Educational Institutions as Agents of Social Development

Islamic boarding schools function as educational, preaching, and community empowerment institutions. According to Zamakhsyari Dhofier, Islamic boarding schools are the oldest Islamic institutions in Indonesia that have successfully produced scholars and social figures since the 18th century (Dhofier 2011). Today, Islamic boarding schools have developed into centers of community development economic, health, sanitation, and digital technology programs, Sidogiri Islamic Boarding School established a large-capital Islamic Boarding School Cooperative, while Daarut Tauhid Islamic Boarding School developed productive waqf, retail businesses, and spiritual-based entrepreneurship training (*spiritualpreneurship*).

### 3. Religion and Character Building

In national education, religion serves as an instrument for character formation and public ethics. Ki Hajar Dewantara stated that education must foster morals (ethics), creativity (reason), and will (will) (Dewantara 1977). This concept aligns with the values of *akhlāq al-karīmah*In Islam, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus

Dur) emphasized the importance of indigenizing Islam, namely presenting Islam in local culture without losing its substance (Wahid 2006).

#### 4. Religion and Social Tolerance

Religion plays a major role in creating tolerance or can even trigger conflict between groups. Hans Küng in *Global Responsibility* affirmed that there is no world peace without religious peace, and no religious peace without interfaith dialogue (Küng 1991). In Indonesia, religious moderation has become a national policy to encourage tolerance, anti-radicalism, and respect for diversity. A Wahid Foundation study shows that the majority of Indonesian Muslims support interfaith tolerance.

#### 5. Religion as a Preserver of Local Culture (Local Wisdom)

Religion in Indonesia is often accepted through a process of inculturation, the adaptation of religious teachings to local culture. Examples include the art of hadrah, wayang santri, qasidah, Malay samrah, and the Tabuik tradition in West Sumatra. This demonstrates that religion does not erase local culture, but rather refines and purifies it (Azra 2004). In Bali, Hinduism blends local culture with Hindu teachings. *Tri Hita Karana*—harmony between humans, God, and nature—which is used as the philosophy of sustainable tourism development.

### E. Religion in Political Development: Democracy, Ethics of Power, and Good Governance

Religion has a strategic role in the formation of political systems, ethics of power, and governance practices (*good governance*). In modern history, religion cannot be separated from political dynamics, whether as a legitimation of power, moral criticism of government, or the power of *civil society*.

#### 1. Legitimacy of Power and Political Ethics in Religious Tradition

In Islamic teachings, the concept of power is closely related to trust (*amanah*). and justice (*al-'adl*). Al-Māwardī said that the duty of the leader is to safeguard religion and regulate worldly affairs (*ḥirāsah al-dīn wa siyāsah al-dunyā*) (Al-Māwardī 1996). Al-Ghazali emphasized that religion and state are like “two twin brothers” (*al-dīn wa al-dawlah taw'amān*) (Al-Ghazālī 2004). This ethic rejects authoritarian, corrupt, and unjust power. In the Western tradition, John Locke stated that power comes from the social contract and natural human rights: *life, liberty, and property* (Locke 1988). The Protestant ethic also provides the basis that power must be accountable to God and the people.

#### 2. Religion and Democracy

Robert Bellah introduces the concept of civil *religion* to show how religious values can support democracy without making the state theocratic (Bellah 1967). In Indonesia, religious democracy is translated as a democracy based on God and humanity, not a religious state. The concepts of “Islam Nusantara” (NU) and “Progressive Islam” (Muhammadiyah) become models of the integration of religious values and democracy.

However, religion can also be a tool for mobilizing identity politics, as in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Saiful Mujani's research showed that 23% of voters chose based on the candidate's religion, rather than their policy vision (Mujani 2021). Nevertheless, religious morality remains essential to prevent democracy from becoming mired in anarchy and the pragmatism of power.

#### 3. Religion and Good Governance

*Good governance* includes transparency, accountability, participation, and the rule of law. This principle aligns with religious values such *asal-shūrā*

(deliberation), *mas'ūliyyah* (accountability), and independence (openness). The Qur'an praises those who resolve matters through consultation (QS. Al-Syūrā [42]: 38).

In Indonesia, religious institutions play a role in social control over the state. Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) are active in anti-corruption fatwas, public advocacy, and ethical political education. The MUI even issued Fatwa No. 1 of 2004 on the prohibition of corruption, which the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) reinforced in its national campaign.

#### 4. Global Case Studies: Türkiye, Iran, and Europe

- a. Türkiye: Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, religion has been used as a moral and political force. The Diyanet institution has strengthened religious education, but its policies have also been criticized for strengthening authoritarianism (White 2013).
- b. Iran: Model *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* Making the ulama the holders of supreme power. This model provides ideological stability but diminishes democracy.
- c. Europe: Countries like Germany and Norway are implementing the concept of post-secular *society* (Habermas 2006), where religion remains present in the public sphere as a source of ethics without dominating the state.

#### 5. Challenges: Politicization of Religion and Radicalism

Jürgen Habermas mentioned the risk of instrumentalization of religion, namely when religion is used as a tool of power (Habermas 2006). This phenomenon is evident in money politics disguised as religion, radicalism in the name of sharia, and digital propaganda. In Indonesia, the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) recorded that 12% of university students will be exposed to extreme ideologies by 2023 if they are not guided through moderate religious education.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the theoretical explanation and discussion above, it can be concluded that religion holds a fundamental position in development, not merely as a spiritual and ritual realm, but as an ethical, social, and transformative force that directs development toward true well-being. Religion provides a moral foundation that guides individual behavior and social systems so that development does not become trapped in a purely materialistic orientation, but is based on the values of justice, humanity, and balance. In the Indonesian context, religious values have been integrated into the foundation of the state through Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, so that national development is not absolutely secular, but rests on the principle of the One Almighty God.

In practice, religion serves as social capital that strengthens solidarity, trust, social networks, and philanthropy, such as zakat (alms), infaq (donations), sedekah (charity), and waqf (endowments), which directly contribute to poverty alleviation and community empowerment. In the economic sphere, religion promotes business ethics, honesty, and equitable wealth distribution through zakat, waqf, and Islamic economic instruments, enabling development to proceed in an inclusive and civilized manner. Meanwhile, in the socio-cultural aspect, religion strengthens collective identity, preserves local cultural values, fosters character education, and encourages the emergence of institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), Islamic mass organizations, and philanthropic movements that play a significant role in education, health, and economic development.

However, religion also holds problematic potential when reduced to a political tool, abused for the sake of power, or understood narrowly, giving rise to radicalism, intolerance, and social conflict. Therefore, a moderate, rational, and contextual understanding of religion is necessary to maintain its relevance to modern dynamics without losing its divine values. In this way, religion can continue to be a driving force for development, not only producing material progress but also establishing a moral, just, harmonious, and dignified society.

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