INTEGRATING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION INTO PUBLIC POLICY FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INDONESIA, CANADA, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Kata Kunci:	**ABSTRAK**
Inklusi Sosial; Kebijakan Publik; Kohesi Sosial; Pendidikan Agama; Pluralisme	**Latar belakang**: Pendidikan agama berperan penting dalam membentuk nilai moral dan etika masyarakat. Integrasinya dalam kebijakan publik dapat menjadi sarana strategis untuk memperkuat inklusi sosial, mengurangi diskriminasi, dan meningkatkan kohesi sosial. **Tujuan Penelitian**: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana pendidikan agama berkontribusi terhadap kebijakan publik dalam mendorong masyarakat yang inklusif, dengan membandingkan praktik di Indonesia, Kanada, dan Britania Raya. **Metode**: Studi kasus komparatif kualitatif dilakukan melalui analisis literatur, telaah dokumen, dan evaluasi kebijakan. Sumber data mencakup konstitusi nasional, kerangka kurikulum, laporan resmi, dan publikasi ilmiah. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk membandingkan bagaimana pendidikan agama dilembagakan serta dampaknya terhadap inklusivitas. **Hasil**: Kanada dan Britania Raya menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan agama yang inklusif dan non-doktrinal—didukung oleh kurikulum yang pluralistik dan tata kelola yang kuat—secara efektif mendorong toleransi, dialog antaragama, dan kohesi sosial. Indonesia masih menghadapi sistem yang terfragmentasi dan kurikulum eksklusif, meskipun inisiatif seperti kurikulum berorientasi pluralisme, program lintas iman, dan pendidikan karakter berbasis Pancasila menunjukkan perkembangan positif. **Kesimpulan**: Integrasi pendidikan agama ke dalam kebijakan publik dapat memperkuat inklusi ketika didukung oleh reformasi kurikulum yang terarah, peningkatan kapasitas guru, dan mekanisme akuntabilitas yang jelas. Studi ini merekomendasikan pengembangan modul lintas agama, pembentukan dewan penasihat multiagama, dan penerapan pedagogi inklusif untuk mengoptimalkan peran pendidikan agama dalam membangun masyarakat yang kohesif dan demokratis.

Keywords:	ABSTRACTS
Religious education, public policy, social inclusion, interfaith dialogue, pluralism	**Background**: Religious education plays an essential role in shaping moral and ethical values in society. Its integration into public policy can serve as a strategic means to strengthen social inclusion, reduce discrimination, and enhance social cohesion. **Purpose of the Study**: This study examines how religious education contributes to public policy in fostering inclusive societies by comparing practices in Indonesia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. **Methods**: A qualitative comparative case study was conducted using literature A qualitative comparative case study was conducted through literature analysis, document review, and policy evaluation, drawing on constitutional mandates, curriculum frameworks, official reports, and scholarly research. Thematic analysis was used to compare how RE is institutionalized and its implications for inclusivity. **Results**: Canada and the UK demonstrate that inclusive and non-doctrinal RE—supported by pluralistic curricula and strong governance—effectively promotes tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and social cohesion. Indonesia continues to face fragmented systems and exclusive curricula, although initiatives such as pluralism-oriented curricula, interfaith programs, and Pancasila-based character education indicate emerging progress. **Conclusions**: Integrating RE into public policy can enhance inclusion when supported by targeted curriculum reform, teacher capacity-building, and accountability mechanisms. The study recommends cross-religious modules, multi-faith advisory councils, and inclusive pedagogies to strengthen the role of RE in building cohesive and democratic societies.

A. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and multicultural development, the issue of social inclusion has become a central concern in public policy. Social inclusion aims to create a just and equal society in which all individuals, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or social status, can participate fully (Cheung, 2013; Brik & Brown, 2024). This challenge is becoming increasingly pressing with the emergence of identity-based tensions and exclusive religious discourses that encompass social cohesion in various multicultural countries (Nafisah et al., 2024). One significant element supporting this agenda is the integration of religious education (RE) into public policy. Religious education is not only about transmitting faith-based knowledge but also functions as a medium for tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and social justice (Hannam & May, 2022; Hasan & Juhannis, 2024). Studies show that inclusive RE frameworks can strengthen social cohesion by fostering mutual respect across religious boundaries (Kruja, 2022; Rizwan, 2024). Furthermore, linking RE to policy ensures systemic support for pluralism and sustainable harmony in diverse societies (Septiadi, 2023; Sambo, 2023; Ghosh, 2021). Global trends also show a shift towards a dialogical and multi-faith PA model, which also influences the direction of national policies in responding to diversity (Jackson, 2018). Thus, this paper investigates the integration of RE into public policy as a pathway to social inclusion across multiple national contexts.

These global changes are also driven by social transformations increasingly mediated by digital technology. Technological and social media developments have shaped how individuals understand and express religious identity, requiring religious education to respond critically and inclusively to these new dynamics (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). However, research shows it also serves as a powerful medium to cultivate tolerance, mutual understanding, and interfaith harmony (Muhaemin et al., 2023; Rahmat & Yahya, 2022). When embedded within inclusive policy frameworks, religious

education has been proven to reduce segregation and foster interfaith dialogue, particularly in diverse societies (Khalid & Lopez, 2023). Pluralistic approaches to Islamic religious education, as suggested by Mu'Ti (2023), emphasize the importance of respecting diversity and preventing intolerance. Similarly, studies highlight that religious education can strengthen social cohesion when implemented with principles of pluralism and inclusivity, as seen in various international contexts such as England, Japan, and Italy (Lapis, 2025). Policy frameworks also play a critical role in institutionalizing these values, ensuring that religious education becomes an instrument for peace and harmony (Inniger et al., 2024).

Public policy plays a crucial role in institutionalizing the inclusive potential of religious education, particularly in multicultural societies. When integrated into the national education framework, religious education can help students from diverse backgrounds to value diversity, respect differences, and resist intolerance. Syafi'i et al. (2024) emphasize that educational policy shaped by religious considerations is essential for accommodating pluralism, while Farrell (2023) argues that embedding multicultural and religious values into policy strengthens civic responsibility and social cohesion. Similarly, Wargo et al. (2024) highlight how religious pluralism in education provides opportunities to foster tolerance and interfaith understanding in diverse contexts. In Indonesia, Zulaikha (2023) points out that inclusive education can serve as a tool to deradicalize religion and promote peace. In contrast, Amin and Suradi (2024) stress the importance of aligning religious curricula with national education laws to institutionalize inclusivity. Embedding such values into policy creates systemic support for inclusive practices, ensuring sustainable social cohesion.

This study employs a comparative case study approach focusing on Indonesia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, because these three countries represent a variety of religious education models and policy approaches to responding to diversity, this selection allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how religious education is integrated into public policy to support social inclusion. In Indonesia, structural challenges persist in reconciling religious diversity within public education, particularly in balancing traditional institutions such as pesantren with state schools (Hasan, 2025) and addressing gaps in inclusivity at the higher education level (Zakiyah et al., 2025). In contrast, Canada has emphasized equity and multicultural values through curriculum reforms, though tensions remain in accommodating religious identities in public schools (Cassidy, 2021; Memon & Chanicka, 2024). Similarly, the UK highlights interfaith dialogue and teacher capacity-building as central to fostering inclusive classrooms (Orchard & Bowen, 2024; Hendek, 2018). The cross-country comparison thus reveals not only best practices in embedding religious education for tolerance and cohesion but also ongoing challenges in bridging policy and practice across diverse national contexts.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to address the following research questions:
1. How is religious education integrated into public policy frameworks in Indonesia, Canada, and the UK?
2. What impacts does religious education have on social inclusion and interfaith dialogue in these contexts?
3. What challenges and opportunities arise in embedding religious education within public policy?
4. How can lessons from comparative case studies inform policy reforms in Indonesia?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the debate on the role of education in fostering inclusive societies. Unlike previous research that often emphasizes pedagogical or curricular aspects, this paper links religious education directly to policy frameworks and social outcomes. Previous studies highlight that inclusive and culturally responsive education policies can serve as a foundation for promoting tolerance and unity in diverse societies (Asrulla et al., 2025; Lestiani et al., 2025). Religious education, when framed inclusively, has been recognized as a key factor in nurturing interfaith understanding and reducing the potential for conflict (Rumahuru & Talupun, 2021; Gaus, 2021). Empirical findings in Indonesia also demonstrate how interreligious interaction within schools can foster harmony and prevent segregation (Faidhoh et al., 2024; Rohman et al., 2024). By combining policy analysis with case studies, this study offers a conceptual model for integrating religious education into public policy that can be adapted to Indonesia's multicultural context.

In this study, social inclusion is understood as the principle of providing equal access, participation, and protection for all religious groups within educational spaces, while pluralism refers to the recognition of diverse beliefs as reflected in regulations, curricula, and nondiscriminatory pedagogical practices. In the Indonesian context, the implementation of social inclusion in religious education is evident in the provision of cross-religious learning services, the alignment of curricula with principles of equity, and the strengthening of interfaith interaction as an integral component of educational practice. The analysis draws on a theoretical framework of multicultural education, which emphasizes fair representation for all cultural groups (Banks, 2016); intergroup contact theory, which highlights the importance of interaction among members of different groups in reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006); and Dewey's experiential approach, which positions dialogue and direct engagement as the foundation for developing cross-faith understanding. Consistent with its comparative nature, this study develops a conceptual framework through three main dimensions—curricular orientation, pedagogical approaches, and public policy directions—to examine variations in the design and implementation of religious education across countries. Accordingly, this study provides an explicit theoretical account of the interaction between religious education and public policy and offers an analytical basis for understanding how education policy can strengthen the role of religious education in building a more inclusive society.

B. METHOD

We used a qualitative comparative policy analysis with multiple case studies in Indonesia, Canada, and the UK. This design is particularly suited to explain how religious education (RE) is institutionalized in public policy and how it relates to social inclusion and social cohesion across distinct national contexts. As highlighted by Hanckel et al. (2021), qualitative comparative approaches are practical for addressing causality in complex systems, especially in analyzing how policy interventions operate in diverse social environments. Mello (2021) further emphasizes that qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) provides a robust research design to explore how different contextual factors shape policy outcomes, making it relevant for cross-national studies of RE. In addition, insights from multiple case study research demonstrate the value of analyzing varied settings to capture nuanced practices and integrative frameworks

(Bouw et al., 2021). Together, these methodological perspectives support the appropriateness of a comparative policy analysis for this study.

The countries in this study were purposefully selected to capture significant policy variation in the integration of religious education. Indonesia was chosen because, as the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, it faces complex challenges in balancing high religious diversity with a fragmented delivery system that includes public schools, madrasah, and pesantren. These conditions highlight the ongoing policy difficulties in fostering inclusivity within religious education. Canada, by contrast, provides a valuable model due to its long-standing multiculturalism policy and well-documented inclusive curriculum approaches that emphasize respect for diversity and interfaith dialogue. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom represents a statutory model where religious education is compulsory for all pupils, delivered through a non-doctrinal and multi-tradition framework. Its governance system, particularly through the Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACRE), allows local adaptation of curricula to reflect regional religious diversity. Together, these three cases provide contrasting yet complementary perspectives for comparative analysis.

The data for this study were primarily collected through desk-based research using a variety of sources. Legal and policy texts formed the foundation, including constitutions, national and provincial regulations, curriculum frameworks, and implementation guidelines, which provided formal insights into how religious education is positioned within public policy. These were complemented by official reports such as ministry or agency white papers, evaluation documents, inspectorate notes, and national surveys on inclusion and tolerance, offering empirical evidence of policy implementation and outcomes. To strengthen the academic grounding, scholarly literature consisting of peer-reviewed articles and books on religious education, inclusion, pluralism, and multicultural education was also analyzed. In addition, credible grey literature such as reports from NGOs, think-tanks, and international organizations provided contextual perspectives on interfaith relations and tolerance indexes. Sources were included if they addressed policy relevance to religious education and social inclusion, had national or provincial scope, and were published between 2000 and 2025 in either English or Indonesian. Works of a purely theological nature or classroom-level micro-studies without clear policy linkage were excluded.

Systematic searches were conducted in government portals and academic databases (e.g., terms combining *religious education, policy, social inclusion, multicultural*). Documents were catalogued with metadata (jurisdiction, year, type, focal policy, education level) to enable cross-case comparison. We applied thematic content analysis with an a priori codebook derived from the research questions (e.g., *policy aims, curricular scope, neutrality/non-doctrinal approach, diversity recognition, interfaith dialogue, implementation mechanisms, monitoring & accountability, social cohesion outcomes*).

Within-case analysis was conducted to map the policy logic, regulatory instruments, and implementation frameworks employed in each country. All cases were examined in parallel using a uniform set of codes, categories, and evaluative criteria. This approach was intended to ensure that structural differences across countries did not influence the identification of thematic patterns emerging from the data. Parallel analysis also enabled the researcher to assess how each country constructs the

relationship between policy frameworks, educational practices, and the social goals they seek to achieve.

Cross-case synthesis was then undertaken to compare points of convergence and divergence across contexts and to identify integrative patterns that could inform the development of a more comprehensive conceptual model. The synthesis proceeded through several stages, beginning with horizontal comparisons at the coding level, followed by mapping the alignment of policy logics across the three countries. This process made it possible to integrate findings systematically based on core policy dimensions, including policy framework structures, inclusive orientations, approaches to interfaith dialogue, and the implementation challenges encountered.

Data validity was ensured through several strategies, including source triangulation (laws, education policies, curricula, institutional reports, and academic publications), an audit trail documenting all coding decisions, and peer debriefing to examine the consistency of code boundaries and the interpretation of findings. In cases where source documents contained statistical information—such as national surveys on inclusion or tolerance reports—these data were used descriptively to contextualize each country's social and policy landscape, without further quantitative analysis. Additionally, cross-reading among researchers and verification of interpretations with independent sources were applied to minimize comparative bias when analyzing three education systems with differing structures and policy characteristics.

As this study used publicly available documents, it did not involve human subjects. No personal data was processed. Findings are bounded by document availability/quality and may underrepresent informal practices. The three-country scope limits generalizability; however, analytical generalization is supported by transparent case logic and cross-case explanation. Future work can add stakeholder interviews and school-level observations to enrich implementation insights.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION
1. Integration of Religious Education in Public Policy (RQ1)
a) Indonesia—Religious Education in Indonesia: Challenges and Opportunities

Indonesia, which is predominantly Muslim and rich in religious diversity, faces challenges in integrating religious education with effective social inclusion policies. Often, religious education in Indonesia is exclusive, emphasizing only one religion without providing opportunities for understanding other religions. This situation leads to a gap in understanding between religious communities that can potentially lead to intolerance. However, there are some initiatives to introduce more inclusive religious education, such as interfaith dialogue programs and curricula that emphasize the values of pluralism.

b) Canada—The Canadian Experience: Religious Education and Multiculturalism

Canada is one country that explicitly recognizes the importance of multiculturalism in public policy. Religious education in Canada is managed on the principle that all faiths should be respected and recognized. Public schools in Canada provide educational programs that cover a wide range of religious teachings, aiming to increase interfaith understanding. The policy has proven successful in strengthening

social cohesion and reducing religion-related conflicts. Canada is recognized as one of the countries that has most successfully implemented the principles of multiculturalism in its public policies. In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to adopt an official multiculturalism policy, which was later strengthened through the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. The underlying principle of this policy is that Canada's cultural and religious diversity is a national strength that needs to be safeguarded and respected. Therefore, religious education in Canada plays an important role in promoting social inclusion and maintaining unity in a diverse society. As a country of immigrants with a growing population from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, Canada has developed educational policies that focus on accepting differences and promoting intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Religious education in Canada is designed to enhance interfaith understanding and provide every citizen with the opportunity to celebrate their religious and cultural identity, while respecting the beliefs of others.

- Public Schools: In many Canadian provinces, public schools do not teach religion doctrinally, but rather focus on multicultural education and interfaith knowledge. In public schools, the goal of religious education is to expose students to the diverse religious traditions of the world, so that they can better understand the religious pluralism that exists in Canadian society. Within this framework, religious education is delivered neutrally, emphasizing the historical, cultural and philosophical aspects of various religions. This approach aims to foster an attitude of tolerance and respect for differences, while avoiding exclusive or dogmatic religious teaching.

- Religious Schools: Alongside public schools, Canada also has faith-based educational institutions funded by the government, especially in the provinces of Ontario and Alberta. Schools such as Catholic schools provide a faith-based education, but they must comply with provincial government regulations and respect human rights and diversity values. Although the main purpose of education in these schools is a particular religion, they still emphasize the importance of tolerance and respect for other faiths, coupled with the integration of multicultural aspects in the curriculum.

c) United Kingdom—Religious Education in the UK: An Inclusive Model

In the UK, all students are required to study different religions, regardless of their beliefs, as part of an inclusive religious education model. The aim of this model is to form citizens who are tolerant and have a deep understanding of religious diversity. It helps to promote interfaith dialog as well as encourage appreciation of different cultures and beliefs. The history of the relationship between religion and state in the UK is a long one, with the Church of England being the most influential official religion. However, the UK has evolved into a multicultural and multireligious society, which has impacted on the way religious education is delivered in schools. With an increasingly diverse population, the UK must face the challenge of providing inclusive religious education that reflects the various beliefs that exist in society. Religious education (RE) in the UK is a compulsory subject in schools, although it is not a religious education, it does not aim to teach a particular doctrine. Rather, in the UK, religious education aims to provide an in-depth understanding of different religions and world perspectives, as well as to promote interfaith understanding, the value of inclusivity, and to encourage constructive dialogue between different religions.

Table 1. Inclusive models of religious education in the UK

No	Model	Features
1	A Diverse Curriculum	In the UK, religious education focuses on teaching a variety of religions rather than just one. In accordance with the 1996 Education Act, all schools are required to provide religious education that reflects the 'major religious beliefs and practices' present in the UK, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism and Buddhism, as well as non-religious views such as humanism and secularism. The aim of the curriculum is to increase understanding of the diversity of religions and philosophies, while instilling respect for all faiths
2	Non-Doctrinal Education	Public schools in the UK do not teach religion in a way that requires students to choose one religion, but rather provide them with a broad understanding of different religions. Instead of teaching the teachings of a religion in depth, the curriculum focuses on knowledge that allows students to understand different religious views in a neutral way. The aim of this is for students to be able to respect each other and interact well with their peers who come from diverse religious backgrounds
3	Provision of Space for Minority Religions	The UK's religious education system is designed to support religious diversity. The education curriculum recognizes and gives equal place to minority religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism compared to the majority religions. This is essential to create a sense of inclusion for students from minority religious backgrounds and also to help students from majority religions to understand and appreciate religious diversity in the UK
4	Curriculum Flexibility by Region	In England, the religious education curriculum is designed locally by local education authorities, known as Local Education Authorities (LEAs), through a specialized body called the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). SACRE includes representatives from the diverse religious and non-religious communities in the area, so that the curriculum can be adapted to reflect the religious composition of the area. With this approach, religious education in the UK becomes more inclusive and can be tailored to the needs and diversity of each region
5	Right to Choose	In the UK, parents can choose to exclude their children from religious education if they find the teaching incompatible with their personal beliefs. This

No	Model	Features
		measure reflects respect for individual religious freedom and aims to keep religious education inclusive, without imposing one religious view on students

(Source: data processed in 2025)

2. Impact on Social Inclusion and Interfaith Dialogue (RQ2)
a) Canada — Religious Education as a Tool of Social Cohesion

Table 2. Religious education as a tool of social cohesion

No	Strategic	Follow-up steps
1	Teaching Tolerance and Interfaith Dialogue	One of the main goals of religious education in Canada is to encourage respectful interfaith dialogue. Students are trained to understand and respect the teachings of other religions while still being able to practice their own beliefs without fear of difference. Through learning about the different religions of the world, students in Canada develop an inclusive attitude that regards differences as a plus rather than a threat
2	Emphasis on Human Rights and Religious Freedom	In Canada, the education curriculum typically includes lessons on human rights and the importance of religious freedom. This is in line with Canadian values that promote respect for individual freedom. Religious instruction not only provides information about different religions, but also emphasizes the importance of respecting the religious choices and practices of others
3	Celebration of Religious Days in Schools	One of the important practices in religious education in Canada is the celebration of the major religious days of various religious traditions. Many schools organize events to celebrate various religious holidays such as Christmas, Hanukkah, Diwali and Ramadan. These activities provide opportunities for students to learn about religious diversity and share traditions and values with each other, which helps build stronger social connections among them

(Source: data processed in 2025)

The findings indicate that religious education, when integrated into public policy, exerts a significant influence on fostering social inclusion and interfaith dialogue. This impact is particularly evident in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Indonesia, albeit in different forms according to their societal contexts and policy frameworks.

- Canada demonstrates notable success in positioning religious education as an instrument for promoting tolerance and strengthening social cohesion. From an early stage, students are introduced to a wide range of religious traditions through a non-doctrinal approach that emphasizes intercultural and interfaith understanding. This exposure cultivates an inclusive mindset among students, enabling them to engage respectfully with diverse religious backgrounds. The effect extends beyond the classroom into broader society, where high levels of tolerance toward religious differences are evident. Strong social cohesion is reflected in the decline of religion-related conflicts and the active participation of multiple faith groups in public life. Thus, Canada illustrates how religious education can serve as a cornerstone for building a multicultural and harmonious society.

- The United Kingdom provides another example of how inclusive religious education can generate transformative outcomes. One of the most significant results is the promotion of tolerance and interfaith understanding through the study of multiple religions and worldviews. Students acquire not only knowledge but also empathy toward diversity, which directly contributes to the reduction of interfaith tensions. This is achieved by encouraging dialogue and highlighting shared moral values across traditions. Religious education in the UK also enhances social cohesion by fostering interfaith activities, such as dialogues, cultural festivals, and collaborative projects, that encourage positive relationships among students from different backgrounds. Moreover, religious education is closely connected to civic education, embedding values of tolerance, democracy, and human rights into the broader framework of citizenship. In this way, inclusive religious education in the UK contributes to the formation of active, responsible citizens who are equipped to navigate diversity in constructive ways.

- Indonesia, while still grappling with substantial challenges, has initiated efforts to incorporate more inclusive forms of religious education. Programs promoting interfaith dialogue, curricula that emphasize pluralism, and the integration of character education based on Pancasila provide the groundwork for progress. These initiatives highlight the potential for religious education to serve as a mechanism for promoting social inclusion, strengthening national unity, and addressing the risks of intolerance and radicalization. If consistently implemented with strong governmental support and active collaboration with civil society, religious education in Indonesia could play a pivotal role in building a more harmonious and equitable society.

These outcomes affirm that inclusive religious education does more than impart knowledge or shape individual morality. It functions as a powerful social instrument that enhances cohesion, expands the space for interfaith dialogue, and embeds values of tolerance, justice, and mutual respect within diverse societies. To provide a clearer picture of how these dynamics manifest across national contexts, the key findings from Indonesia, Canada, and the United Kingdom are summarized in the following comparative table. This table distills the major patterns observed in curriculum orientation, pedagogical approaches, policy frameworks, inclusive practices, and their respective social impacts, offering a concise cross-country comparison that reinforces the analytical narrative presented in the preceding sections.

Table 3. Comparative Summary of Religious Education Models and Their Social Impact

Dimension	Indonesia	Canada	United Kingdom
Curriculum Orientation	Dominantly exclusive; focuses on a single religion; limited exposure to other faiths; early initiatives introducing pluralism and character education grounded in Pancasila.	Multicultural and multifaith curriculum; non-doctrinal approach; introduces students to a wide range of world religions; reinforced by the Multiculturalism Act (1971/1988).	Statutory multifaith Religious Education; non-doctrinal; all students must study multiple religions and worldviews; curriculum aligns with Education Act (1996).
Pedagogical Approach	Predominantly doctrinal, lecture-based; some emerging interfaith dialogue initiatives; limited structured pluralistic pedagogy.	Emphasizes intercultural and interfaith dialogue; experiential learning; promotes respect for religious freedom and human rights.	Dialogic and inquiry-based RE; emphasizes shared values, critical understanding, and structured interfaith dialogue activities.
Policy Framework	National policies encourage tolerance, but implementation is uneven; public schools, madrasahs, and pesantren operate with different orientations.	Strong multiculturalism policy; public recognition of religious diversity; provincial autonomy ensures curriculum equity.	National framework supported by SACRE (local curriculum authorities); high flexibility to adapt RE to local religious demographics.
Examples of Inclusive Practices / Programs	Interfaith dialogue programs; pluralism-based curriculum initiatives; Pancasila-based character education.	Multifaith celebrations (Diwali, Ramadan, Hanukkah, etc.); human-rights-centered religious instruction; equity and diversity programs.	Multireligious curriculum units; cultural festivals; interfaith dialogues; SACRE-led local adaptation of RE.
Observed Positive Impacts	Early signs of improved interfaith interaction in pilot initiatives;	Strong social cohesion; high tolerance levels; reduced religion-related tensions;	Increased empathy and understanding; reduced interfaith tensions;

	potential foundation for reducing intolerance and radicalization.	active participation of diverse faith groups in public life.	strengthened civic values (tolerance, democracy, human rights).
Key Challenges	Exclusive curriculum; lack of exposure to minority religions; fragmented system; inconsistent regional implementation.	Maintaining neutrality while respecting religious identities; subtle discrimination against minorities.	Overemphasis on Christianity (criticized by minorities); secularization; risks of extremism in marginalized communities.

(Source: data processed in 2025)

This comparative summary highlights both the shared strengths and distinctive challenges of each national model. While all three countries demonstrate that inclusive religious education contributes to greater social cohesion and improved interfaith understanding, the mechanisms through which these outcomes emerge vary significantly according to curricular orientation, pedagogical design, and policy implementation. These contrasts form the basis for identifying deeper structural challenges and strategic opportunities, which are examined in the following section.

3. Challenges and Opportunities in Embedding Religious Education (RQ3)
a) Indonesia: Challenges in Religious Education

Religious education in Indonesia faces a number of systemic challenges that hinder its potential to foster inclusivity and interfaith understanding. The education system remains largely fragmented, with faith-based schools such as madrasah and pesantren focusing exclusively on the teachings of a particular religion, thereby offering limited opportunities for students to engage with other faith traditions. Similarly, in many public schools, religious education tends to be centered on the majority religion practiced by students in a given locality, reducing exposure to alternative perspectives and minimizing opportunities for interfaith interaction. This fragmented approach restricts the development of cross-religious dialogue and reinforces the separation of communities from an early stage.

Another challenge lies in the limitations of the existing religious education curriculum, which often remains exclusive in its orientation. Teaching materials are largely doctrinal, offering little room for critical engagement, dialogue, or comprehensive understanding of different religious traditions. In some cases, these materials even risk perpetuating stereotypes or reinforcing biases against minority faiths. Such exclusivity not only narrows students' worldviews but also undermines the principles of pluralism that are essential in a society as diverse as Indonesia. Alongside these curricular weaknesses, the emergence of intolerant attitudes and the risk of radicalization among students further highlight the vulnerability of the current system. Both formal and non-formal educational settings have occasionally become avenues for the dissemination of exclusive or extreme ideologies, raising concerns about the role of

education in either fostering harmony or deepening divisions.

Compounding these issues are gaps in policy implementation. While the Indonesian government has introduced a number of policies designed to promote tolerance and inclusivity in education, significant discrepancies remain between the aspirations set at the national level and their execution in local contexts. In regions where a single religion predominates, religious education is often delivered in a highly exclusive manner, with insufficient regard for the needs of students from minority backgrounds. This uneven implementation weakens the effectiveness of policy efforts and exacerbates the sense of marginalization experienced by minority groups.

Despite these challenges, Indonesia holds considerable opportunities to transform its religious education into a vehicle for social inclusion and unity. The nation's constitutional framework and the values enshrined in Pancasila provide a strong legal and ethical foundation for advancing pluralism. The principle of "unity in diversity" embodied in Pancasila can serve as a guiding ethos for educational reform, encouraging respect for multiple faiths and nurturing tolerance across communities. Complementing this foundation is the Character Education Strengthening Program (PPK), which seeks to instill moral and ethical values that emphasize inclusivity and respect for diversity. When integrated effectively, this program has the potential to shift the orientation of religious education away from doctrinal exclusivity toward fostering broader social cohesion.

Another significant opportunity lies in the professional development of teachers. As key actors in shaping students' attitudes, religion teachers must be adequately trained to embrace pedagogical approaches that highlight pluralism and interfaith dialogue. Enhanced training programs can equip educators with the skills necessary to promote critical thinking, empathy, and constructive engagement with difference. Multicultural schools can also serve as exemplary models in this process by integrating learning about different religions into their curricula and providing structured opportunities for interfaith interaction among students. Expanding such initiatives to a wider range of schools across the country would help to normalize inclusive practices in religious education.

Civil society organizations and religious institutions likewise play an essential role in fostering interfaith harmony beyond formal education. Many organizations have already demonstrated success in promoting dialogue, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence through community-based programs. Strengthening partnerships between government agencies, schools, and these organizations could enhance the reach and sustainability of inclusive religious education initiatives. Finally, the rapid advancement of digital technology and social media offers powerful channels for disseminating messages of pluralism and countering extremist narratives. By leveraging these platforms, inclusive values can be communicated widely and effectively, particularly among younger generations who are highly active in digital spaces. These challenges and opportunities illustrate both the complexity and the promise of religious education in Indonesia. While significant barriers remain—ranging from structural fragmentation to risks of intolerance—the country possesses strong ideological, institutional, and social resources that can be mobilized to promote an education system that not only respects but also celebrates diversity. With sustained commitment and effective implementation, Indonesia's religious education has the potential to evolve into a powerful instrument for social inclusion and national cohesion.

b) Strategic Steps to Realize Inclusive Religious Education

Table 4. Strategic steps to realize inclusive religious education

No	Strategic	Follow-up steps
1	Revision of the National Curriculum	The government needs to review the religious education curriculum to make it more inclusive, including the inclusion of material on various religions as well as issues of tolerance, human rights and diversity
2	Promoting Community Involvement in Religious Education	Active participation of the community, including religious leaders, in religious education in schools and communities can raise collective awareness of the importance of social inclusion. Such involvement ensures that religious education reflects the values held by society at large
3	Strengthening Interfaith Dialogue in Schools	Organizing interfaith dialogues in schools can be a useful method to build mutual understanding and respect between students from different religious backgrounds. This can be done through various means, such as extra classes, religious festivals and visits between communities to learn from each other

(Source: data processed in 2025)

The integration of religious education into public policy frameworks presents both persistent challenges and significant opportunities across different national contexts. In Indonesia, the challenges are deeply rooted in the fragmented nature of the education system and the dominance of majority religious traditions. Faith-based schools, such as madrasah and pesantren, tend to focus exclusively on particular religious teachings, thereby limiting students' exposure to other faiths. Public schools often reinforce this exclusivity by centering religious instruction on the majority religion represented within their student body. Such patterns constrain interfaith interaction and undermine opportunities for cross-religious dialogue. Compounding this problem is the limited inclusivity of the religious education curriculum, which in many cases emphasizes doctrinal content over pluralist perspectives and risks reinforcing stereotypes of minority religions. The emergence of intolerant attitudes and the spread of radical ideologies through both formal and non-formal education platforms further highlight the urgency of reform. Although national policies have been introduced to promote tolerance, gaps in implementation remain evident at the regional level, where religious education often reflects local majoritarian dominance rather than national commitments to inclusivity.

Canada, despite its reputation as a champion of multiculturalism, also faces its own set of challenges. A key issue lies in balancing neutrality with the need to respect religious diversity. While Canadian schools aim to teach about multiple religions in a non-doctrinal manner, tensions sometimes arise in maintaining a neutral stance that neither privileges nor undermines particular faiths. Moreover, invisible discrimination persists in the form of subtle prejudice against religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Jews. These challenges illustrate that even in a policy environment committed to

equality, structural and social biases can limit the full realization of inclusivity. Nevertheless, Canada's successes demonstrate that these obstacles are not insurmountable. The country has cultivated a high level of tolerance across society, fostered strong social cohesion, and significantly reduced religion-related conflict. The active participation of diverse religious groups in civic life reflects the tangible outcomes of policies that embed pluralism into the educational system.

The United Kingdom provides yet another instructive case. Its inclusive model of religious education, in which all students are required to study multiple religions and non-religious worldviews, has yielded considerable benefits in promoting tolerance and civic values. However, three major challenges remain. First, minority groups often criticize the curriculum for placing disproportionate emphasis on Christianity at the expense of other faiths. Second, the growing secularization of British society has raised questions about the relevance of religious education for non-religious students, who increasingly form a large segment of the population. Third, risks of extremism and intolerance persist among marginalized communities, underscoring the limitations of inclusive education in addressing radicalization. Despite these challenges, the UK has identified opportunities to strengthen its model through teacher training in neutral and inclusive pedagogy, curriculum revisions that give greater attention to minority and non-religious perspectives, and the expansion of interfaith dialogue forums in schools. These measures build on the success of the current model in fostering tolerance, reducing interfaith tensions, and embedding values of democracy and human rights within the educational framework.

These three cases highlight both commonalities and differences in embedding religious education within public policy. A recurring challenge across all contexts is the tension between inclusivity at the policy level and the realities of implementation on the ground. Indonesia struggles with structural exclusivity and uneven regional practices; Canada faces the subtleties of maintaining neutrality and countering covert discrimination; and the UK must continually adjust to the pressures of secularization and the need for balanced representation. At the same time, each country offers important opportunities. Indonesia can leverage its constitutional principles, Pancasila values, and civil society engagement to foster more inclusive approaches. Canada provides evidence of how embedding pluralism in education contributes to high societal tolerance and cohesion. The UK illustrates how an explicitly inclusive and non-doctrinal model can cultivate both interfaith understanding and civic responsibility. Collectively, these cases affirm that while challenges remain significant, religious education, when inclusively designed and effectively implemented, can serve as a powerful instrument of social inclusion and cohesion across diverse national settings.

4. Lessons from Comparative Case Studies for Policy Reform in Indonesia (RQ4)

The comparative experiences of Canada and the United Kingdom provide valuable insights that can inform policy reforms in Indonesia, particularly as the country seeks to transform religious education into a more inclusive and socially cohesive framework. Despite the challenges Indonesia faces—such as fragmented systems, exclusive curricula, and uneven policy implementation—lessons from these contexts demonstrate that reform is both possible and achievable through targeted strategies.

One of the most significant lessons comes from Canada's success in embedding multiculturalism into its education system. By formally integrating interfaith

perspectives into the curriculum, Canada has cultivated a high level of tolerance and reduced interreligious conflict. For Indonesia, adopting a similar approach would mean revising the national religious education curriculum to incorporate exposure to multiple religious traditions alongside universal values such as tolerance, respect, and human rights. Such revisions would not compromise the teaching of specific faiths but would situate them within a broader pluralist framework that reflects Indonesia's constitutional commitment to unity in diversity.

The Canadian case also underscores the importance of maintaining neutrality in religious education. While schools should provide students with knowledge of different religions, they must do so in a manner that does not privilege the majority or marginalize minority groups. For Indonesia, this entails ensuring that both public and faith-based schools provide balanced opportunities for students to engage with diverse religious perspectives. Neutrality would strengthen perceptions of fairness in education and enhance the trust of minority communities in the national education system.

The United Kingdom further highlights the benefits of adopting a non-doctrinal, inclusive approach to religious education. The UK's emphasis on teaching multiple religions and non-religious worldviews has proven effective in promoting tolerance, interfaith understanding, and civic values such as democracy and human rights. For Indonesia, integrating non-doctrinal components into religious education—while respecting doctrinal instruction within each faith—would help students develop the capacity to critically engage with diversity and appreciate shared ethical values across traditions. Additionally, the UK's practice of tailoring curricula at the regional level through advisory councils (SACREs) demonstrates the value of contextual flexibility. Indonesia could explore similar mechanisms by establishing local advisory bodies that include representatives from diverse religious communities, educators, and policymakers to ensure that curricula are adapted to regional contexts while upholding national standards of inclusivity.

Both Canada and the UK also highlight the central role of teacher preparation in shaping students' attitudes toward religious diversity. Indonesia could strengthen its teacher training programs by embedding modules on pluralism, interfaith dialogue, and inclusive pedagogy. Teachers equipped with these skills would not only impart knowledge but also serve as role models for tolerance and mutual respect. Beyond the classroom, the promotion of interfaith dialogue through school-based activities, community partnerships, and digital platforms could further expand the reach of inclusive education. These initiatives would align with Indonesia's existing efforts, such as character education programs and the promotion of Pancasila values, while situating them within a broader global framework of best practices.

Ultimately, the lessons from Canada and the UK affirm that inclusive religious education requires more than curriculum reforms; it demands a systemic commitment to pluralism at every level of policy and practice. For Indonesia, this means aligning constitutional principles and national ideology with concrete educational reforms, empowering teachers and schools as agents of change, and fostering collaboration between government, civil society, and religious institutions. By learning from international experiences while grounding reforms in its own cultural and ideological context, Indonesia has the potential to transform religious education into a powerful instrument for promoting social inclusion, preventing radicalism, and strengthening national unity.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how religious education (RE) is integrated into public policy in Indonesia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, its relationship with social inclusion and interfaith dialogue, and lessons for policy reform in Indonesia. The findings reveal that inclusive, non-doctrinal, and civically oriented RE correlates strongly with intergroup understanding and social cohesion, aligning with MacMullen's (2018) framework emphasizing civic education in religious schooling. Similar perspectives are offered by Bråten and Everington (2019), who highlight the role of intercultural RE in fostering pluralism and interfaith respect. In Indonesia, Wajdi and Tobroni (2020) stress that Islamic religious education must integrate multicultural values and tolerance to address exclusivity and radicalization risks. Likewise, Untung et al. (2025) argue that religious moderation in multicultural contexts requires both curricular reform and community engagement. Despite these potentials, challenges persist, including neutrality, minority representation, secularization, and uneven local policy implementation, shaping how national commitments translate into practice.

Canada and the United Kingdom have developed institutionalized models of religious education (RE) that embed pluralism within curriculum design, instructional practices, assessment frameworks, and governance structures. Both countries combine curricular plurality with non-doctrinal delivery in public education, ensuring that students encounter multiple religious and non-religious worldviews as bodies of knowledge rather than prescriptive doctrines. This approach aligns with Newcombe (2013) and Lefebvre et al. (2025), who emphasize that exposure to diverse traditions fosters civic literacy, interfaith understanding, and democratic engagement. Furthermore, Canada's multicultural education policies and the UK's Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) provide institutional mechanisms that adapt curricula to local demographics while maintaining inclusive national standards (Mokotso, 2017; Rissanen et al., 2020). Such systemic support allows RE to function not merely as theological instruction but as civic education, integrating human rights, religious freedom, and dialogic skills into students' broader moral and intellectual development (Knoblauch, 2024; Hendek & Zengin, 2024).

In contrast, Indonesia presents a structurally plural yet fragmented landscape of religious education. Faith-based institutions and local majorities often deliver RE as doctrinal instruction confined to a single tradition, thereby limiting structured interfaith exposure and cross-religious dialogue. While initiatives promoting pluralism-oriented curricula, Pancasila-based character education, and interfaith programs exist, policy ambitions frequently outpace local implementation (Mulyatno, 2022; Mizani, 2022). As Kosim (2020) and Husaeni (2023) note, weak alignment between curriculum design, pedagogical practice, teacher preparation, and regional accountability mechanisms constrains the realization of national inclusivity goals. These findings support the hypothesis that inclusive, non-doctrinal RE strengthens social cohesion and interfaith understanding, as evidenced in Canada and the UK (Niyozov, 2016; Pedersen, 2016). However, Indonesia's reforms require systemic reinforcement—particularly in curriculum integration, teacher capacity building, and equitable policy implementation—to achieve comparable outcomes and to counteract exclusivist tendencies embedded in local educational ecologies (Parker, 2014; Nuryatno, 2014).

A second hypothesis posits that national policy commitments must be matched by classroom-level capacities to ensure sustainable outcomes. Evidence from Canada and the UK demonstrates that when teacher training, assessment practices, and community engagement align with inclusive objectives, religious education produces measurable gains in interfaith tolerance and civic responsibility (Hendek & Zengin, 2024; Knoblauch, 2024). By contrast, Indonesia illustrates how doctrinal exclusivity, uneven regional norms, and limited pedagogical innovation dilute reform efforts (Lefebvre et al., 2025). Furthermore, structured interfaith contact and civic framing emerge as critical mechanisms translating knowledge-about-religion into prosocial dispositions and behaviors (Saputra, 2025; Hameed & Adnan, 2024). Nonetheless, persistent challenges remain. Canada's emphasis on neutrality occasionally conflicts with equitable recognition of minority traditions, the UK faces secularization pressures that question RE's contemporary relevance, and Indonesia contends with local majoritarian dominance. These constraints highlight the need for accountability structures ensuring that inclusive policies translate consistently into classroom realities across diverse educational settings.

The implications for Indonesia center on reorienting religious education toward pluralist civic literacy while retaining doctrinal instruction within respective faith traditions. Key priorities include revising the national curriculum to mandate cross-religious modules, embedding inclusive pedagogy and dialogic facilitation into teacher education, and establishing local multi-faith advisory councils modeled on the UK's SACREs to ensure contextual responsiveness (Mulyatno, 2022; Mizani, 2022). Moreover, assessment reforms emphasizing reflective portfolios, interfaith projects, and community engagement would signal that dialogue, empathy, and civic responsibility constitute core learning outcomes (Rissanen et al., 2020; Knoblauch, 2024). Equally important are implementation equity measures—such as public dashboards and minimum service standards—to monitor teacher training, curricular compliance, and regional disparities (Saputra, 2025). Finally, partnerships with civil society and the use of digital platforms for interfaith dialogue and media literacy could amplify inclusive narratives while countering online intolerance, especially among younger generations (Hameed & Adnan, 2024).

Overall, while Canada and the UK illustrate distinct yet complementary pathways for aligning curriculum, pedagogy, governance, and accountability, Indonesia offers a unique normative foundation through Pancasila and constitutional commitments to religious freedom. However, translating these principles into consistent educational practice requires systemic alignment, sustained policy commitment, and localized accountability structures (Pedersen, 2016; Parker, 2014). Comparative evidence suggests that transferable design principles—pluralist purpose, dialogic pedagogy, locally responsive governance, and outcome-focused accountability—can guide reform without imposing external models wholesale (Niyozov, 2016; Lefebvre et al., 2025). Future research should employ longitudinal designs, teacher-focused interventions, and assessment innovations to examine how pluralist religious education shapes civic dispositions over time. Through such efforts, Indonesia can transform religious education into a powerful vehicle for interfaith cohesion, democratic resilience, and inclusive nation-building in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world (Saputra, 2025; Hameed & Adnan, 2024).

D. CONCLUSION

This study examined how religious education (RE) is integrated into public policy in Indonesia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and how such integration relates to social inclusion and interfaith dialogue. Canada and the UK demonstrate that inclusive, non-doctrinal, and civically oriented RE—supported by pluralistic curricula and robust governance structures—correlates with higher levels of interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and social cohesion. Indonesia exhibits several promising initiatives, including pluralism-oriented curricula, Pancasila-based character education, and interfaith programs. However, it continues to face systemic fragmentation, local majoritarianism, and uneven implementation, which constrain opportunities for interreligious dialogue across many educational settings.

Two hypotheses were supported: inclusive RE enhances social inclusion and interfaith dialogue, and policy commitments must be matched by classroom-level capacity. The findings reaffirm the strategic value of RE as civic literacy: when knowledge about religions is paired with democratic norms, human rights, and dialogic competence, schools function as engines of cohesion rather than sites of division. Moreover, cross-national evidence suggests that pluralism-based civic literacy can serve as a buffer against social polarization and strengthen democratic culture in multireligious societies.

This study contributes a comparative lens illustrating how policy architectures—such as multicultural mandates and local advisory councils—translate inclusive intentions into routine practice. In terms of curriculum reform, cross-tradition modules should be explicitly designed to address pluralism through comparative study of values, ethics, history, and major religious traditions. Such an approach enables students to understand both points of convergence and divergence across traditions. Policymakers should mandate cross-tradition modules across all school types, institutionalize local multi-faith advisory councils to contextualize the curriculum, and align assessment with inclusive outcomes such as dialogue, empathy, and civic responsibility.

Teacher education must incorporate inclusive pedagogy, bias awareness, and practical facilitation of interfaith dialogue. Partnerships with civil society organizations and carefully designed digital initiatives can further extend the reach of inclusive RE while countering online intolerance. Transparency dashboards and minimum service standards can support more equitable implementation. Nevertheless, several barriers remain, including local resistance, limited teacher capacity, regulatory inconsistencies, and weak policy coordination. These challenges can be mitigated through structured stakeholder dialogue, incentives and training for teachers, and pilot initiatives prior to nationwide scaling. Gradual and participatory reform can enhance local acceptance and alignment with community norms.

This analysis is based on macro-level policy review across three national contexts. Intra-country variation, measurement limitations for constructs such as cohesion and tolerance, and the lack of longitudinal evidence place boundaries on the generalizability of the findings. Social, cultural, and political differences—such as Canada's strong multicultural identity, the UK's civic-religious tradition, and Indonesia's majority–minority dynamics—also shape the design and effectiveness of RE systems. These

contextual factors indicate that the comparison is illustrative rather than prescriptive, and that policy transfer requires careful contextual adaptation.

Future research priorities include longitudinal studies tracking attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of pluralist RE; experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations of teacher professional development and assessment innovations; implementation research on local advisory councils and accountability mechanisms; and investigations of digital and media-literacy interventions, with particular attention to minority and non-religious students and regional disparities. More methodologically diverse studies will strengthen the empirical foundations for inclusive RE reforms.

Integrating RE into public policy as pluralist civic literacy is both feasible and impactful when curriculum, pedagogy, governance, and accountability are coherently aligned. By adapting design principles evident in Canada and the UK—while grounding reforms in Pancasila and Indonesia's constitutional commitments—Indonesia can translate policy aspirations into everyday classroom practice and ultimately foster stronger social inclusion, interfaith cohesion, and democratic resilience.

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