https://research.adra.ac.id/index.php/islamicstudies
P - ISSN: 3048-3980
E - ISSN: 3048-4146

Secularization vs. Integration: A Comparative Global Assessment of Islamic Values within State-Mandated Educational Curricula

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ABSTRACT

Background. State-mandated curricula increasingly influence how societies negotiate religion, citizenship, morality, and national identity, generating ongoing debates regarding secularization and the inclusion of Islamic values in public education. Therefore, a contextual framework is needed to understand how Islamic values are positioned within diverse educational systems.

Purpose. This study aimed to comparatively analyze the integration of Islamic values within state educational curricula across different political and religious contexts. Specifically, it examined the patterns, determinants, and implications of Islamic value representation in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority educational settings.

Method. A qualitative comparative policy and curriculum analysis was employed using national curriculum frameworks, education policies, religious education regulations, civic education documents, selected textbooks, and relevant academic literature. The analysis focused on identifying patterns of Islamic value integration and their relationship with broader educational and sociopolitical contexts.

Results. The findings demonstrate that curricular approaches cannot be categorized solely through a secular-religious dichotomy. Islamic values are incorporated through four main models: confessional integration, ethical integration, cultural integration, and pluralistic religious literacy. The study reveals that constitutional arrangements influence curriculum design but do not determine it entirely, as religious demographics, historical development, citizenship concepts, and educational governance also shape curricular orientations. Stronger religious integration does not necessarily weaken pluralism, while stronger secularization does not always ensure complete neutrality or equal recognition.

Conclusion. This study concludes that state-religion curricular alignment provides a more comprehensive framework for evaluating the role of Islamic values in public education. Context-sensitive and inclusive curriculum design can support moral development, religious identity, civic equality, and social cohesion while respecting both religious and non-religious diversity in contemporary educational systems.

KEYWORDS

Comparative Education, Curriculum Policy, Islamic Values

Citation: Fedorova, Y., Romanov, A., & Alexandrovna, M. (2026). Secularization vs. Integration: A Comparative Global Assessment of Islamic Values within State-Mandated Educational Curricula. *Islamic Studies in the World, 3*(3), 192–208. https://doi.org/10.17323/islamicstudies.v3i3.5546

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Received: January 12, 2026
Accepted: March 15, 2026
Published: June 21, 2026

INTRODUCTION

State-mandated educational curricula are never entirely neutral instruments of knowledge transmission because they also reflect political priorities, national identities, moral expectations, and prevailing conceptions of citizenship. Governments determine which histories are

taught, which ethical values are emphasized, which forms of religious knowledge are recognized, and how cultural diversity is represented within formal schooling (Nosi dkk., 2023; Peng dkk., 2025; Sikkink & Wurm, 2026). Questions concerning religion become particularly significant in societies where Islam plays an important historical, demographic, or constitutional role. Educational systems must therefore negotiate the relationship between state authority, religious identity, social cohesion, and the rights of citizens who may differ in belief, ethnicity, or cultural background.

The global treatment of Islamic values within public education varies considerably across political and constitutional contexts. Some states integrate Islamic ethics, religious knowledge, and moral concepts directly into compulsory curricula, while others separate religious formation from state education or restrict it to optional subjects (Abellán, 2023; Chiang dkk., 2025; Vo dkk., 2026). Muslim-majority countries may combine national education with Islamic moral instruction in different proportions, whereas Muslim-minority societies frequently address Islam through religious education, multicultural citizenship, world-religions courses, or minority-rights frameworks. These variations reveal that secularization and religious integration are not simple opposites but represent different institutional arrangements through which states manage religion in education.

Contemporary debates about curriculum and Islamic values have intensified because education increasingly operates within societies marked by migration, religious pluralism, political polarization, globalization, and competing visions of national identity. Supporters of stronger religious integration often argue that Islamic ethical values can contribute to character formation, social responsibility, family cohesion, and moral education (Brenner dkk., 2026; Fernández-Aballí Altamirano & Fernández-Aballí Altamirano, 2026; Shaikh, 2026). Advocates of secular curricula emphasize state neutrality, equal citizenship, freedom of belief, and protection from religious coercion. The educational challenge lies in determining how state systems can accommodate religious values without transforming schools into instruments of exclusion, while also avoiding forms of secularization that erase the cultural and moral traditions of significant populations.

The central problem addressed by this study concerns the lack of a clear comparative understanding of how Islamic values are positioned within state-mandated curricula across different national settings. Public debates frequently describe educational systems as either secular or religious, yet actual curriculum structures are more complex (Blankesteijn & Ghorbani, 2025; Le, 2025; Malaktaris dkk., 2026). A formally secular state may provide extensive institutional space for Islamic religious education, while a constitutionally Islamic state may organize much of its public curriculum around secular academic disciplines. Binary classifications therefore risk obscuring the multiple ways religion, ethics, citizenship, and national identity are negotiated through educational policy.

Curricular integration also raises a normative problem concerning the distinction between value education and religious imposition. Islamic values such as justice, honesty, responsibility, compassion, knowledge-seeking, social solidarity, and respect for human dignity can be presented as ethical principles with broader civic relevance (Kretschmer & Leszczensky, 2026; Kripalani, 2025; Rosun dkk., 2026). Explicit theological instruction, ritual guidance, or confessional commitments involve different educational and constitutional questions. The absence of conceptual differentiation between ethical integration and confessional instruction can produce misleading debates in which any reference to Islam is treated either as essential moral education or as inappropriate religious intervention.

Political context creates another problem because the meaning of Islamic curricular content changes according to state structure, religious demography, and citizenship regimes. Islamic education may function as a mechanism of national identity in one country, minority recognition in

another, social regulation in a third, and cultural heritage preservation elsewhere. Curriculum content can also become politically contested when governments use religious or secular narratives to strengthen ideological legitimacy (Deans-Browne & Singmann, 2026; Jo dkk., 2026; Michaelsen dkk., 2026). A comparative analysis must therefore examine not only whether Islamic values are present, but how they are framed, who defines them, and what civic or political purposes they are expected to serve.

The primary objective of this study is to comparatively assess how Islamic values are incorporated, limited, reframed, or excluded within state-mandated educational curricula across diverse national contexts (Giuliani & Rizza, 2023; Laeven dkk., 2024; Maas dkk., 2026). The research seeks to identify patterns of curricular organization in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies, including compulsory religious education, optional religious instruction, integrated moral education, civic education, multicultural curricula, and formally secular models. This objective enables the study to move beyond simplistic secular-versus-religious classifications toward a more precise mapping of institutional arrangements.

The second objective is to evaluate the relationship between curricular treatment of Islamic values and broader educational goals such as citizenship formation, social cohesion, moral development, religious literacy, and pluralistic inclusion. Attention is directed toward whether Islamic values are presented as confessional commitments, cultural traditions, ethical resources, historical knowledge, or components of national identity (Dávila-Fernández dkk., 2026; Keleş dkk., 2024a; Wirpsa dkk., 2023). The analysis also examines whether integration supports coexistence and civic responsibility or contributes to exclusion where curricular narratives privilege one religious identity without sufficient recognition of diversity.

The third objective is to develop a comparative framework for evaluating the balance among religious identity, state neutrality, educational inclusion, and civic formation (Arruñada & López-Manuel, 2026; Pan dkk., 2025; Schafer & Upenieks, 2024). The proposed framework seeks to assess not only the presence of Islamic content but also its normative orientation, legal basis, pedagogical form, and relationship to minority rights. The expected outcome is a model capable of explaining why different states adopt different forms of religious integration and how those choices affect the educational representation of Islam within contemporary public institutions.

Existing scholarship on religion and education has extensively examined secularization, religious schooling, church–state relations, citizenship education, multiculturalism, and moral formation. Studies of Muslim-majority countries have also explored Islamic education, curriculum reform, madrasa modernization, and the integration of religious and general knowledge (Cantone & Tomaselli, 2025; Saroglou dkk., 2025; Simon dkk., 2026). Much of this literature remains nationally or regionally bounded, making it difficult to compare systematically how Islamic values operate across contrasting constitutional and educational regimes. A broader comparative framework is needed to identify recurring patterns without erasing national specificity.

Research on Muslim minorities in secular educational systems has generated important findings concerning religious accommodation, Islamic religious education, hijab policies, curriculum representation, and minority citizenship. Such studies often focus on questions of recognition and discrimination rather than comparing these experiences with states where Islamic values are formally integrated into national curricula. This separation creates a gap between scholarship on Islamic education in Muslim-majority societies and scholarship on Islam within secular public education. The present study connects these two fields by treating both as variations in state management of religion through curriculum.

Curriculum research also frequently evaluates religious content in terms of quantity or formal inclusion while paying less attention to the ideological framing of that content. Two educational systems may both include Islamic studies but differ radically in whether Islam is presented as theological truth, moral heritage, cultural identity, historical knowledge, or one tradition among many. Limited attention to framing prevents a deeper understanding of how curricular integration shapes citizenship and religious identity. The present study addresses this gap by examining both structural inclusion and the interpretive positioning of Islamic values within state educational policy.

The principal novelty of this study lies in developing a state–religion curricular alignment framework for comparing the treatment of Islamic values across diverse educational systems. The framework moves beyond a binary distinction between secularization and integration by assessing multiple dimensions, including constitutional orientation, curricular status of religion, pedagogical purpose, level of compulsion, ethical framing, minority inclusion, and relationship to citizenship education. Such an approach recognizes that secular systems may accommodate religion and religiously oriented states may simultaneously preserve substantial secular curricular domains.

A second element of novelty involves distinguishing confessional integration, ethical integration, cultural integration, and pluralistic religious literacy as separate curricular models. Confessional integration presents religious teaching within a faith-affirming framework, ethical integration incorporates religiously derived moral principles into broader value education, cultural integration emphasizes historical and civilizational significance, and pluralistic religious literacy situates Islam within comparative study of religions and worldviews. This distinction enables a more precise assessment of how Islamic values enter public education and prevents all forms of religious inclusion from being treated as institutionally equivalent.

The justification for this research rests on the increasing importance of education as a site where societies negotiate religion, identity, diversity, and national belonging. Global migration, demographic change, political polarization, and debates over secularism have made curricular treatment of Islam a sensitive issue in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies. Comparative evidence can help policymakers avoid false choices between total secular exclusion and uncritical religious incorporation. The study contributes to Islamic education, comparative education, curriculum studies, sociology of religion, citizenship education, and public policy by demonstrating that the central issue is not simply whether Islamic values should appear in state curricula, but how they can be positioned in ways that preserve religious identity, educational integrity, equal citizenship, and socially inclusive moral formation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative comparative policy and curriculum analysis to examine how Islamic values are incorporated, reframed, limited, or excluded within state-mandated educational curricula across diverse national contexts (Berger & Dasré, 2024; Pacho & Lianggong, 2026; Richardson & Richardson, 2026). The design was selected because the research focused on differences in constitutional orientation, educational governance, curricular structure, religious instruction, civic education, and the political framing of Islam within public schooling. Comparison was conducted across Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority settings to identify recurring patterns while preserving the historical and institutional specificity of each educational system.

The analytical design combined comparative education, curriculum studies, and sociology of religion. State-mandated curricula were treated not merely as collections of subjects but as institutional texts through which governments communicate preferred forms of citizenship,

morality, identity, historical memory, and religious belonging. Particular attention was directed toward the relationship between formal constitutional arrangements and actual curricular practices. A constitutionally secular state, for example, could still provide extensive space for Islamic religious education, while a state with an official Islamic identity could maintain substantial secular academic domains within its national curriculum.

The study adopted a multidimensional rather than binary model of secularization and integration. Curricular systems were analyzed according to four broad orientations: confessional integration, ethical integration, cultural integration, and pluralistic religious literacy. Confessional integration referred to faith-affirming instruction grounded in Islamic doctrine and practice; ethical integration referred to the incorporation of Islamic moral principles within character or value education; cultural integration referred to the presentation of Islam as part of national history and civilization; and pluralistic religious literacy referred to the study of Islam alongside other religions and worldviews. These categories served as comparative analytical orientations rather than rigid classifications.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The final analytical corpus comprised 198 official and secondary documents drawn from 24 national education systems representing Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, Europe, and selected pluralistic minority contexts. The dataset included national curriculum frameworks, religious education standards, civic education policies, ministerial regulations, implementation guidelines, selected textbooks, and peer-reviewed studies used for contextual verification. Twelve cases represented Muslim-majority societies and twelve represented settings in which Muslims constituted a religious minority. Comparative coding identified four dominant curricular orientations toward Islamic values: confessional integration, ethical integration, cultural integration, and pluralistic religious literacy. Confessional integration appeared as the dominant orientation in seven national cases, ethical integration in six, cultural integration in five, and pluralistic religious literacy in six.

Table 1. Dominant Curricular Orientations toward Islamic Values across 24 National Cases

Curricular Orientation	National Cases (n = 24)	Percentage (%)	Dominant Educational Function
Confessional integration	7	29.2	Faith formation, doctrine, religious practice
Ethical integration	6	25.0	Character formation and moral citizenship
Cultural integration	5	20.8	Historical and civilizational knowledge
Pluralistic religious literacy	6	25.0	Comparative understanding and civic inclusion

The distribution showed that no single curricular model dominated the global sample. Islamic values were embedded through different institutional logics depending on constitutional arrangements, religious demography, and educational priorities. Muslim-majority systems were more likely to combine confessional and ethical integration, whereas Muslim-minority contexts

more frequently positioned Islam through cultural or pluralistic religious-literacy frameworks. The evidence also revealed several hybrid systems in which Islamic moral values appeared across civic education and character education even when formal religious instruction remained optional or denominational.

The prevalence of multiple curricular orientations demonstrates that the conventional secular-versus-religious binary provides an incomplete description of how states manage Islamic values within education. Formal secularism did not necessarily produce curricular exclusion of Islam, just as constitutional recognition of Islam did not automatically result in uniformly confessional schooling. Several systems maintained strong secular academic structures while incorporating Islamic moral concepts into citizenship or character education. Other systems preserved religious instruction while simultaneously emphasizing pluralism, constitutional rights, or national civic identity.

The findings also indicate that curricular meaning depended heavily on the way Islamic values were framed. Concepts such as justice, honesty, responsibility, compassion, social solidarity, and respect for knowledge appeared across diverse systems, but their pedagogical presentation varied. Confessional models linked these values explicitly to revelation and religious obligation, ethical models translated them into broader moral language, cultural models located them within Islamic civilization and national heritage, and pluralistic models presented them alongside other religious and philosophical traditions. Similar values therefore performed different educational functions depending on curricular framing.

Cross-national analysis revealed four broader state–religion curriculum configurations. The first combined formal Islamic identity with relatively strong confessional instruction. The second represented Muslim-majority systems where Islamic values were embedded primarily through moral, civic, or cultural education rather than intensive confessional teaching. The third consisted of secular or pluralistic systems that accommodated Islamic religious education through optional, denominational, or community-linked arrangements. The fourth represented more restrictive secular models in which Islam appeared mainly through history, culture, or comparative religion rather than faith-based instruction.

Table 2. Comparative State–Religion Curricular Configurations

State–Religion Configuration	Dominant Form of Islamic Value Inclusion	Religious Instruction Status	Main Educational Goal	Primary Tension
Islamic-identity integration	Confessional + ethical	Commonly compulsory or strongly institutionalized	Religious identity and moral formation	Minority inclusion
Ethical-national integration	Ethical + cultural	Mixed or partially compulsory	Character and national cohesion	Boundary between religion and citizenship
Pluralist accommodation	Pluralistic + confessional options	Optional or denominational	Religious literacy and equal recognition	Institutional equality among faiths

Restrictive secularization	Cultural + comparative literacy	Limited confessional provision	Civic neutrality and secular citizenship	Religious visibility and minority recognition

The comparative data further showed that curricular integration was not linearly associated with reduced pluralism. Some systems with substantial Islamic content also incorporated explicit references to tolerance, minority protection, and civic equality. Some highly secular systems formally emphasized neutrality while generating debates over unequal recognition, religious visibility, or access to faith-sensitive education. Curricular inclusiveness therefore depended less on the quantity of religious content than on how religious identity was related to citizenship, diversity, and participation.

Comparative inference suggests that the constitutional status of religion influences but does not determine curricular treatment of Islamic values. Cases with official recognition of Islam generally provided broader institutional space for confessional or ethical integration, yet the intensity and pedagogical form of that integration varied significantly. Cases with formal secular commitments also demonstrated wide differences, ranging from accommodation of denominational religious education to strong curricular separation between public schooling and confessional instruction. Constitutional orientation therefore functioned as an enabling or constraining condition rather than a complete predictor of curriculum design.

A second inference concerns the role of religious demography. Muslim-majority status increased the likelihood that Islamic values would be connected to national identity or moral citizenship, while Muslim-minority status increased the likelihood that Islam would be framed through multicultural recognition, religious literacy, or minority rights. Demography did not operate independently of political history, however. Similar minority populations received different curricular treatment depending on national traditions of secularism, federalism, church–state relations, and multicultural policy. State–religion curricular alignment was therefore produced by the interaction of demography, constitutional history, and educational governance.

A strong relationship emerged between the degree of curricular compulsion and the need for explicit mechanisms of pluralistic accommodation. Systems with compulsory religious or moral instruction tended to require exemptions, differentiated curricula, or separate provisions for students from minority traditions. Curricular legitimacy became more contested when a majority religious framework was imposed without clear accommodation. Systems that incorporated Islamic values through broadly ethical rather than explicitly confessional language encountered fewer formal inclusion problems, although they sometimes faced criticism for diluting religious specificity.

Another relationship appeared between curricular framing and citizenship goals. Confessional integration was more frequently associated with religious identity formation and moral discipline, while pluralistic religious literacy was more closely connected to intercultural understanding and democratic citizenship. Ethical integration occupied an intermediate position by translating religiously derived values into civic or character language. Cultural integration often supported national historical identity but could become superficial when Islam was presented primarily as heritage rather than as a living religious tradition. Curricular framing therefore shaped not only what students learned about Islam but also what kind of citizen the curriculum implicitly sought to form.

The first representative case involved a Muslim-majority educational system in which Islamic values were embedded across religious education, civic education, and character-development

programs. Formal religious instruction remained institutionally significant, but concepts such as justice, responsibility, social solidarity, and respect for diversity were also presented as national civic values. Curriculum documents demonstrated an effort to connect Islamic ethics with citizenship rather than confining religion to a separate subject. Implementation evidence nevertheless revealed tensions concerning minority inclusion, variation in teacher interpretation, and the boundary between moral formation and confessional instruction.

The second representative case involved a secular Muslim-minority context in which public schools did not ordinarily provide compulsory Islamic faith formation but addressed Islam through comparative religion, history, citizenship, and optional denominational arrangements. Students encountered Islamic beliefs and practices primarily within a pluralistic framework designed to improve religious literacy and social understanding (Hadri & Marakbi, 2025; Radics, 2024; Vrijmoeth dkk., 2025). The model supported formal state neutrality, yet debates persisted over whether limited space for confessional Islamic education placed Muslim families at a disadvantage compared with historically established religious communities or non-state educational alternatives.

The Muslim-majority case illustrates why religious integration should not automatically be interpreted as the opposite of civic education (Buba dkk., 2026; Duc, 2026; Marcillia dkk., 2026). Islamic values can be incorporated into national curricula in ways that connect religious ethics with honesty, public responsibility, social justice, and respect for others. The critical issue is whether such integration leaves sufficient room for diversity and avoids treating one religious identity as the sole legitimate form of citizenship. Inclusive integration therefore depends on the capacity to distinguish shared civic ethics from compulsory theological conformity.

The secular minority-context case demonstrates that state neutrality is also more complex than the absence of religion from public education (Assareh dkk., 2026; Keleş dkk., 2024b; Wahl dkk., 2024). Limited confessional provision may protect students from religious coercion, yet complete institutional separation can reduce opportunities for structured religious literacy or equal recognition of minority communities. Neutrality becomes substantively credible when different traditions are treated fairly and students acquire sufficient knowledge to understand religious diversity. Secularization can therefore support inclusion or generate marginalization depending on how institutional neutrality is implemented.

The overall findings indicate that the relationship between secularization and integration is best understood as a multidimensional continuum rather than a binary choice. Islamic values enter state-mandated curricula through different combinations of confessional teaching, ethical formation, cultural representation, and pluralistic religious literacy (Higgs, 2024; Morris & Harrison, 2026; von der Ruhr, 2023). The effectiveness and legitimacy of these arrangements depend on constitutional context, religious demography, pedagogical purpose, level of compulsion, and treatment of minority students. Greater religious content does not automatically reduce pluralism, while stronger secularization does not automatically guarantee neutrality.

The findings also support the proposed state–religion curricular alignment framework by showing that the central comparative question is not simply whether Islam is present in the curriculum, but how its presence is structured and what educational purpose it serves. Curricular systems appear most balanced when religious identity, civic formation, and pluralistic inclusion are treated as mutually negotiable rather than mutually exclusive goals (Amit, 2025; Kudeto dkk., 2026; Zhou, 2023). A globally relevant model of Islamic value integration therefore requires sensitivity to context, clear distinctions between confessional and ethical instruction, and institutional safeguards that allow religious meaning to coexist with equal citizenship and educational inclusion.

The findings demonstrate that the relationship between secularization and the integration of Islamic values within state-mandated curricula cannot be reduced to a binary opposition. Educational systems across different national contexts displayed multiple combinations of confessional instruction, ethical integration, cultural representation, and pluralistic religious literacy. Muslim-majority societies were more likely to institutionalize Islamic values through formal religious education or moral formation, while Muslim-minority societies generally positioned Islam within comparative religion, cultural education, or minority-rights frameworks. The results therefore indicate that the curricular presence of Islam is shaped by institutional configuration rather than by a simple distinction between religious and secular states.

The analysis also showed that constitutional orientation influenced but did not fully determine curricular arrangements. States formally associated with Islam differed significantly in the intensity and pedagogical purpose of religious integration, while secular states varied in the extent to which Islamic education was accommodated. Some secular systems provided structured denominational religious education, whereas others restricted confessional instruction and treated Islam primarily as cultural or comparative knowledge. Constitutional identity should therefore be understood as one factor among several, interacting with historical trajectories, demographic composition, governance structures, and educational policy.

The findings further reveal that the manner in which Islamic values are framed is as important as their formal presence within the curriculum. Values such as justice, honesty, responsibility, compassion, social solidarity, and respect for knowledge appeared in different educational systems, yet they were interpreted through distinct pedagogical logics. Confessional curricula linked them explicitly to religious obligation, ethical curricula presented them as moral resources for citizenship, cultural curricula emphasized civilizational heritage, and pluralistic models positioned them within comparative religious literacy. Similar values therefore produced different educational meanings according to how states framed their relationship to religion and citizenship.

The comparative evidence also showed that neither stronger religious integration nor stronger secularization automatically produced greater inclusion. Religious curricula could incorporate commitments to pluralism and equal citizenship, while secular systems could generate forms of marginalization when neutrality was interpreted as exclusion of minority religious identities. Curricular legitimacy depended more directly on whether educational systems balanced religious identity, civic equality, minority recognition, and freedom of belief. The findings therefore support a multidimensional approach to state–religion curricular alignment rather than an ideological continuum that treats secularism and religion as mutually exclusive endpoints.

The findings are consistent with comparative education scholarship showing that national curricula function as instruments of both knowledge transmission and citizenship formation. Educational systems routinely communicate expectations concerning morality, national belonging, collective history, and acceptable public identities. The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that Islamic values can enter state curricula through multiple institutional pathways rather than only through formal religious subjects. Religious content therefore operates within broader processes through which states define desirable forms of citizenship and social cohesion.

The results also correspond with scholarship on secularization that questions the assumption that modernization inevitably removes religion from public institutions. Contemporary educational systems often demonstrate forms of accommodation, negotiation, and selective integration rather than complete separation between religion and state. The findings support this interpretation by showing that formally secular educational systems can provide meaningful space for Islamic religious education or religious literacy. Secularization within education therefore appears as an

institutional arrangement governing religion rather than simply the disappearance of religion from the curriculum.

The findings align with research on Islamic education that emphasizes the role of religious values in moral formation and identity development. Studies of Muslim-majority educational systems frequently identify religious instruction as an important mechanism for connecting knowledge with ethical responsibility. The present study adds a comparative qualification by demonstrating that Islamic values can also be translated into non-confessional civic or ethical language. Religious values therefore need not remain confined to explicitly theological instruction to influence moral and citizenship education.

The results differ from approaches that assume religious integration necessarily undermines pluralism or that secular curricula inherently guarantee neutrality. Comparative evidence showed that both models can produce inclusive or exclusionary outcomes depending on institutional design. Religious integration becomes problematic when it equates citizenship with adherence to a single faith, while secularization becomes problematic when neutrality is defined through the erasure of religious difference. The present findings therefore favor substantive inclusion over formal ideological labels as the more appropriate criterion for evaluating curricular fairness.

The findings signify that education remains one of the most important institutional spaces in which modern states negotiate the boundary between religion and public life. Curriculum decisions reveal how governments understand the relationship among moral formation, national identity, religious diversity, and civic responsibility. The presence or absence of Islamic content is therefore never merely a pedagogical decision. It also reflects broader political assumptions regarding which values and identities are considered legitimate within public institutions.

The diversity of curricular models signifies that Islamic values possess considerable interpretive flexibility within public education. Concepts rooted in Islamic moral tradition can be presented through confessional theology, universal ethics, cultural heritage, or comparative religious knowledge. This flexibility creates opportunities for contextual adaptation but also raises questions about whether the religious meaning of values becomes diluted when translated entirely into civic language. Educational systems must therefore balance accessibility across diverse student populations with fidelity to the intellectual traditions from which particular values originate.

The relationship between compulsion and pluralistic accommodation signifies that religious education becomes most politically sensitive when state authority determines participation without sufficient recognition of difference. Compulsory religious instruction can support collective moral identity in relatively homogeneous settings, yet it becomes more contested in religiously diverse societies. Educational legitimacy therefore depends partly on whether students from minority backgrounds have meaningful alternatives and whether majority religious values are presented in ways compatible with equal citizenship.

The findings concerning secular neutrality signify that absence of confessional instruction should not automatically be interpreted as absence of ideological influence. Secular curricula also embody normative assumptions about public reason, citizenship, individual freedom, and the proper place of religion. Neutrality is therefore better understood as a method of governing diversity than as a value-free condition. This interpretation helps explain why secular systems can generate political controversy over religious dress, faith-based education, or the representation of Islam despite formally separating religion from public schooling.

The theoretical implication is that comparative studies of religion and education should move beyond the secularization–integration binary. A multidimensional framework can better explain how state curricula combine confessional, ethical, cultural, and pluralistic forms of religious

representation. Such an approach captures institutional complexity and avoids misleading assumptions based solely on constitutional labels. State–religion curricular alignment therefore provides a more precise conceptual tool for comparing educational systems globally.

The curriculum-policy implication is that governments should distinguish clearly between theological instruction, ethical education, cultural knowledge, and religious literacy. Confusion among these categories can generate unnecessary political conflict because stakeholders may interpret any reference to Islam either as indoctrination or as insufficiently religious. Explicit curricular objectives can clarify whether a course seeks to cultivate religious practice, shared ethical responsibility, historical understanding, or literacy about diverse traditions. Such clarity improves both pedagogical design and public accountability.

The citizenship implication is that religious-value integration should be evaluated according to whether it expands or restricts equal participation. Islamic values can contribute meaningfully to citizenship education when principles such as justice, responsibility, compassion, and social solidarity are connected to respect for pluralism and the rights of others. Curricula become more problematic when religious identity is used as a criterion for full civic belonging. Educational integration should therefore strengthen moral formation without converting religious majority status into political hierarchy.

The institutional implication is that schools need teachers capable of navigating both religious knowledge and pluralistic educational contexts. Effective implementation requires more than curriculum documents because classroom interpretation determines how students encounter Islamic values in practice. Teacher education should therefore include religious literacy, pedagogical ethics, constitutional awareness, and strategies for managing disagreement. Curriculum reform without corresponding investment in teacher competence may produce outcomes very different from those intended by policymakers.

The variation across national systems can be explained by differences in historical state formation. Countries have inherited distinct relationships among religious institutions, colonial legacies, nationalism, legal systems, and educational governance. These historical trajectories shape how religion is positioned within public education long after constitutional changes occur. Curricular arrangements therefore reflect accumulated political histories rather than contemporary demographic conditions alone.

The influence of religious demography can be explained by the relationship between majority identity and state legitimacy. Muslim-majority societies often treat Islamic values as part of national moral identity, making complete curricular separation politically and culturally difficult. Muslim-minority societies face a different challenge because Islamic education is more frequently framed through accommodation, multiculturalism, or minority rights. Demography changes the political meaning of curricular integration even when the religious content itself is similar.

The persistence of hybrid models can be explained by competing educational objectives. States seek simultaneously to transmit national identity, promote moral development, prepare students for pluralistic societies, and protect freedom of religion. No single curricular arrangement satisfies all these goals equally. Hybrid systems emerge because policymakers combine different strategies to manage these competing demands. Ethical and cultural integration, for example, can preserve religious heritage while reducing the coercive implications of compulsory confessional instruction.

The variation in inclusiveness can be explained by the distinction between formal structure and implementation. Curriculum documents may emphasize tolerance and pluralism, yet classroom practice can reproduce exclusion through teacher interpretation or local institutional culture. Secular

policies may promise neutrality but operate unevenly when established religions receive greater recognition than minority traditions. Educational outcomes therefore depend on how formal rules interact with social practices, institutional resources, and local power relations.

Future research should expand cross-national comparison through a larger number of cases and more systematic coding of curriculum documents, textbooks, teacher guides, and assessment materials. Longitudinal analysis would also help explain how curricular treatment of Islam changes in response to political transitions, migration, demographic shifts, or educational reform. Such work could distinguish temporary policy adjustments from more durable transformations in state–religion relations.

Future empirical studies should investigate how teachers and students experience different models of Islamic value integration. Formal curriculum analysis cannot determine whether students interpret religious content as meaningful, coercive, inclusive, superficial, or politically instrumental. Interviews, classroom observations, surveys, and ethnographic studies could reveal the gap between intended curricula and lived educational practice. Such evidence would strengthen evaluation of whether particular integration models actually support social cohesion and moral development.

Future policy research should examine how exemption mechanisms, denominational options, minority representation, and teacher preparation affect the inclusiveness of compulsory religious or moral education. Comparative attention to these institutional details would clarify why similar curricular models produce different social outcomes. Policymakers should particularly examine whether students from minority traditions possess genuine educational choices rather than only formal rights that are difficult to exercise.

Future theoretical development should refine the state–religion curricular alignment framework by integrating educational quality, religious freedom, civic equality, and social cohesion into a common comparative model. The most productive direction is not to identify a universally superior secular or religious curriculum, but to determine which institutional arrangements allow religious traditions to contribute to moral and cultural education without undermining pluralistic citizenship. Islamic values can occupy legitimate space within state-mandated education when their integration is transparent, context-sensitive, pedagogically coherent, and compatible with the equal dignity of students from different religious and non-religious backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that the relationship between secularization and the integration of Islamic values within state-mandated educational curricula cannot be understood through a simple religious–secular binary. Comparative evidence shows that educational systems combine confessional instruction, ethical integration, cultural representation, and pluralistic religious literacy in different ways according to constitutional history, religious demography, citizenship models, and educational governance. Stronger Islamic content does not automatically reduce pluralism, just as stronger secularization does not necessarily guarantee neutrality or equal recognition. The decisive factor is how Islamic values are framed, institutionalized, and connected to civic participation, freedom of belief, and minority inclusion. State curricula therefore become most sustainable when religious identity, moral formation, and equal citizenship are treated as compatible educational objectives rather than mutually exclusive political choices.

The principal contribution of this research is conceptual, supported by a qualitative comparative policy and curriculum methodology. The study advances a state–religion curricular alignment framework that moves beyond conventional classifications of educational systems as simply secular or religious. The framework distinguishes four modes of curricular positioning—

confessional integration, ethical integration, cultural integration, and pluralistic religious literacy—and evaluates them according to constitutional orientation, pedagogical purpose, level of compulsion, civic formation, and minority inclusion. Methodologically, the integration of within-country curriculum analysis, cross-national comparison, policy interpretation, curricular framing, and negative-case analysis provides a more systematic means of examining how Islamic values operate within public education. This approach contributes to Islamic education, comparative education, curriculum studies, sociology of religion, citizenship education, and public policy by linking the presence of religious content with its institutional and civic meaning.

The study is limited by its reliance on official curriculum documents, policy materials, selected textbooks, and secondary scholarship, which may not fully represent how Islamic values are interpreted and enacted within classrooms. Differences in teacher competence, regional implementation, school culture, political change, denominational diversity, and student experience may produce outcomes that diverge from formal curriculum intentions. Future research should combine comparative document analysis with interviews, classroom observations, surveys, textbook analysis, and longitudinal studies across a broader range of national contexts. Further investigation should examine how students from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds experience compulsory and optional religious education, how teachers negotiate tensions between faith formation and pluralistic citizenship, and how curriculum reforms respond to migration and demographic change. Such research would refine the state–religion curricular alignment framework and clarify which forms of Islamic value integration can preserve religious meaning while strengthening educational inclusion, civic equality, and social cohesion.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with English language refinement, grammatical correction, academic writing structure, and improving the clarity and coherence of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This is a short text to acknowledge the contributions of specific colleagues, institutions, or agencies that aided the efforts of the authors.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.
Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.
Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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