# Guardian of Faith: Comparative Insights of Teaching Islamic Theology in Indonesian and Malaysian *Pesantren*

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## Abstract

A notable lacuna in the literature exists regarding research on Islamic theological education in Southeast Asian *pesantren*. This current state underscores the imperative for comprehensive investigation, particularly through the application of comparative analyses of pedagogical approaches. The present study comparatively analyzes how pedagogical approaches, institutional factors, and theological orientations shape Islamic theology instruction in Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren*. A comparative case study was conducted in one *pesantren* from each country, utilizing semi-structured interviews with eight participants (heads, teachers, senior students) and document analysis, with data analyzed thematically. Findings indicate Indonesian *pesantren* prioritize traditional, memorization-based methods and theological conservatism due to institutional autonomy. At the same time, Malaysian counterparts adopt structured, curriculum-based approaches influenced by state involvement and national standards. The study highlights how both contexts negotiate orthodoxy and modernity differently, offering implications for developing culturally grounded and pedagogically responsive Islamic theological curricula and teacher training.

**Keywords:** Comparative case study; Islamic theology education; *Pesantren*; Southeast Asian Islamic education

### Abstrak

*Rendahnya jumlah penelitian mengenai pembelajaran teologi Islam di lingkungan pesantren Asia Tenggara mengindikasikan adanya kesenjangan literatur yang signifikan. Kondisi ini menuntut investigasi lebih lanjut untuk memperoleh pemahaman komprehensif, khususnya melalui analisis perbandingan sistem pembelajaran. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini dirancang untuk menganalisis secara komparatif praktik pembelajaran teologi Islam pada pesantren di Indonesia dan Malaysia, ditinjau dari tiga dimensi utama: pendekatan pedagogis, faktor kultural-institusional, dan orientasi teologis. Dengan desain studi kasus komparatif, penelitian ini melibatkan satu Pesantren dari Indonesia dan satu dari Malaysia sebagai subjek. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap delapan orang informan kunci, meliputi kepala Pesantren, guru, dan siswa. Data dikumpulkan dengan wawancara mendalam dan analisis dokumen, kemudian dianlisis secara tematik. Temuan studi ini mengonfirmasi bahwa pesantren di Indonesia cenderung mempertahankan metode tradisional yang berpusat pada memorisasi (hafalan) dan konservatisme teologis sebagai cerminan otonomi institusinya, sementara Pesantren di Malaysia mengadopsi pendekatan terstruktur berbasis kurikulum yang dipengaruhi oleh keterlibatan Pemerintah dan standar pendidikan nasional. Studi ini secara krusial mengelaborasi bagaimana kedua institusi melakukan negosiasi yang berbeda antara ortodoksi dan*

*modernitas, sehingga menghasilkan implikasi penting bagi pengembangan kurikulum teologi Islam serta program pelatihan pendidik yang relevan secara kultural dan adaptif secara pedagogis.*
**Kata Kunci**: *Pembelajaran teologi Islam; Pendidikan Islam Asia tenggara; Pesantren; Studi kasus komparatif*

## INTRODUCTION

The study of Islamic theology has been a cornerstone of many Islamic institutions around the world, including in *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). With the growing emphasis on the integration of traditional Islamic knowledge with modern educational frameworks, there has been a notable shift in how Islamic theology is taught and learned in contemporary settings (Malik, 2023). However, despite the rich tradition and importance of Islamic theology, the methods and curricula employed in different institutions vary significantly (A. Abdullah et al., 2024). This variation often stems from cultural, historical, and institutional differences, which can greatly influence the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process (Nasikhin & Shodiq, 2021). Despite this importance, a comprehensive comparative understanding of how theological instruction is implemented across diverse institutional and national contexts, particularly in Southeast Asian *pesantren*, remains underexplored (Muhtador & Ulya, 2024). This study seeks to address this issue by comparing the teaching-learning processes of Islamic theology at the *Pesantren* in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The urgency of this study is emphasized by the increasing globalization of education and the need for educational systems to adapt to the demands of a rapidly changing world. Islamic theology, as a discipline, must evolve to remain relevant in addressing contemporary issues while preserving the integrity of traditional Islamic teachings (Hamid & Jaharudin, 2017; Peters, 2025). In Indonesia and Malaysia, both majority-Muslim countries with rich Islamic educational traditions, *Pesantren* play a key role in shaping the religious and intellectual landscape (Anggraeni et al., 2024; Sugianto et al., 2023). However, the approaches to teaching Islamic theology in these countries are influenced by different cultural, political, and educational contexts, which can lead to varying outcomes in terms of student learning and engagement (Hussin et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2024). Understanding these differences is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of Islamic education and ensuring that it meets the needs of modern Muslim societies.

Several studies have explored various aspects of Islamic theology education in different contexts. For example, (Zamri et al., 2024) conducted a study on the integration of Islamic theology with science and technology in Malaysian universities, highlighting the challenges and opportunities of such integration. Similarly, (Yasin & Khasbulloh, 2022) examined the role of Islamic theology in promoting critical thinking among students in Indonesian universities, emphasizing the need for a more dynamic and interactive teaching approach. (Hidayaturrahman et al., 2021) focused on curriculum development in Islamic theology programs across Southeast Asian universities, discussing the impact of globalization on Islamic education and identifying the tension between traditional and modern approaches.

Expanding on this, (Bin Jamil et al., 2024) investigated the pedagogical approaches employed in Islamic theology courses in Malaysian education institutions, finding that while traditional teacher-based methods remain dominant, there is a growing trend towards

incorporating problem-based learning and other student-centered strategies. Their study points out the need for further research into how these emerging pedagogical strategies impact student engagement and learning outcomes. Similarly, (Ridwan et al., 2024) explored the effectiveness of blended learning in Islamic theology education in Indonesia, revealing that while technology-enhanced learning environments can improve accessibility and engagement, they also pose challenges related to maintaining the integrity of traditional Islamic teachings.

In similar direction, (Ibrahim, 2022) and (Mohiuddin, 2023) examined the role of institutional culture in shaping the teaching-learning process in Islamic theology programs in Southeast Asia. Their research highlights the significant influence of institutional norms, values, and expectations on both educators and students, suggesting that these factors play a critical role in determining the success of Islamic theology education. Meanwhile, (Asror et al., 2023) and (Nurdin et al., 2024) analyzed the curriculum content of Islamic theology programs in Indonesia and Malaysia, finding that while both countries emphasize the core tenets of Islamic theology, there are notable differences in the integration of contemporary issues such as ethics, environmental stewardship, and interfaith dialogue. This suggests that the curriculum is not static but evolves in response to the changing needs of society.

Furthermore, previous studies on the teaching of Islamic theology in *pesantren* and comparable Islamic educational institutions highlight the deep interconnection between theology *('aqidah)*, traditional pedagogy, and the preservation of religious identity. Research conducted in Indonesian *pesantren* (Bosra & Umiarso, 2020; Mujahid, 2021; Mukri et al., 2025) highlight the central role of *'aqidah* instruction as both a doctrinal foundation and a moral compass, often delivered through classical texts such as *al-'Aqidah al-Tahawiyyah or al-Jawharah al-Tawhid*. These texts are taught using the *halaqah* method, emphasizing rote memorization, teacher-centered discourse, and spiritual mentorship. Studies in Malaysian *Pesantren* contexts (Jamil & Jamil, 2024; Latif et al., 2024; Shamsuddin et al., 2024); (Latif et al., 2024); (Shamsuddin et al., 2024) similarly reveal that Islamic theology education aims to instill orthodoxy and obedience, though recent trends suggest increasing integration with modern pedagogical approaches and national curriculum frameworks. Despite regional differences, both systems prioritize the formation of students as morally upright individuals grounded in Sunni theological traditions. However, there remains a limited body of comparative research that critically examines how theological instruction adapts to contemporary challenges, such as digital learning or pluralistic religious discourse, across national contexts, highlighting a significant gap that this study seeks to address.

While existing literature has explored the pedagogical traditions and theological content within individual *pesantren* systems in Indonesia and Malaysia, few studies offer a comparative analysis that critically examines how Islamic theology is taught across both contexts. Most prior research tends to focus either on historical development, institutional structure, or curriculum content in isolation, without investigating how theology is contextualized and adapted to contemporary educational challenges. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of studies that analyze how sociocultural, political, and educational policies in each country shape the theological discourse within *pesantren*. The novelty of this research lies in its comparative approach, which not only examines the content and methods of teaching Islamic theology but also investigates how religious educators in both countries negotiate tradition and modernity within the *pesantren*

environment. By situating theological instruction within broader socio-educational frameworks, this study provides fresh insights into the evolving role of *pesantren* as both preservers of orthodox belief and agents of pedagogical innovation in the Muslim world.

The present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of how Islamic theology is taught in *pesantren*-based education institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia with a focus on understanding pedagogical strategies, curriculum content, and institutional influences within the broader socio-religious contexts of both countries. Despite the rich body of research on Islamic education in Southeast Asia, limited attention has been paid to how theological instruction is shaped by national frameworks, institutional cultures, and evolving pedagogical demands, particularly in *pesantren*-influenced settings. This study addresses that gap by asking: (1) How do the teaching methods and curriculum of Islamic theology differ between Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren*? (2) What institutional and cultural factors influence the delivery and reception of Islamic theology in these contexts? and (3) In what ways do educators negotiate the tension between preserving theological orthodoxy and adapting to modern educational challenges? By answering these questions, this study offers a fresh comparative perspective on theology education in *pesantren*-oriented institutions and contributes to the development of more contextually responsive teaching strategies. It aims to inform educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers about effective approaches to theology instruction that honor tradition while engaging with contemporary educational realities, ultimately enriching the discourse on Islamic education in a globalized era.

## METHOD

This study employed a comparative case study design to investigate the teaching of Islamic theology in two *pesantren*, one in Indonesia and one in Malaysia. This design is particularly well-suited for examining complex educational phenomena across different cultural and institutional contexts. This design is particularly appropriate for systematically exploring how complex pedagogical practices, institutional influences, and the negotiation of tradition and modernity manifest differently in Islamic theological education across distinct national contexts, which is the primary topic of this research. It allows for a systematic comparison of pedagogical practices, curriculum implementation, and institutional influences, revealing both shared traditions and unique national adaptations in the delivery of Islamic theology. By focusing on the lived experiences of teachers, students, and administrators within each *pesantren*, this study aims to generate in-depth insights into how Islamic theological instruction is shaped and sustained in traditional Islamic boarding schools.

This study was conducted in one selected *pesantren* in Indonesia and another in Malaysia, both chosen based on their recognized commitment to teaching Islamic theology and their representativeness within their national educational landscapes. The two *pesantren* belong to two of the biggest in each country and has good reputation as well as history in Islamic teaching and development. Each site provided access to key participants directly involved in the teaching-learning process. From each *pesantren*, four informants were selected using purposive sampling: the head of the institution (kyai or principal), two theology teachers, and one student actively engaged in studying theology. The selection of four key informants per *pesantren* is empirically sufficient for this comparative case study as it strategically captures diverse administrative,

pedagogical, and experiential perspectives. This focused approach aims to achieve data saturation, ensuring rich, in-depth insights into the nuanced teaching-learning processes within each unique institutional and national context. This selection ensured a multi-perspective understanding of theological education, encompassing administrative decisions, instructional methods, and student experiences.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed reflections on pedagogical strategies, theological content, curriculum goals, and institutional influences. Separate interview guides were used for each category of participant to ensure relevance and depth. In addition, institutional documents such as syllabi, curriculum frameworks, textbooks, and policy guidelines were analyzed to examine the formal structure and content of theology instruction within each *pesantren*.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Ahmed et al., 2025). This process involved coding interview transcripts and documents to identify key themes and patterns related to theology teaching practices and institutional contexts. Codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured recurring issues and unique features of each case. Thematic comparison across the two *pesantren* allowed for identifying convergences and divergences in teaching approaches, content emphasis, and contextual influences. To ensure rigor and credibility, data triangulation was applied by cross-referencing interview responses with documentary data. This methodological approach enabled a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of Islamic theology education in *pesantren*, addressing the broader research questions concerning tradition, pedagogy, and adaptation in Islamic learning institutions.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION
## FINDING

This section presents the comparative findings of the present study, structured around the three guiding research questions. The data were collected from two *pesantren*, one in Indonesia and one in Malaysia, through semi-structured interviews with heads of institutions, theology teachers, and students, as well as through document analysis. Each subsection discusses one research question, beginning with a description of the major findings, followed by representative quotations from each category of participant, and supported by documentary evidence. A summary table is included at the end of each subsection to highlight key comparisons.

### Comparative Approaches to Teaching Methods and Curriculum of Islamic Theology in Indonesia and Malaysia

The first research question explores how the teaching methods and curriculum of Islamic theology differ between the Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren*. The findings reveal notable distinctions in pedagogical styles, text selection, and curriculum structure. While both institutions maintain a commitment to Sunni orthodoxy, the Indonesian *pesantren* demonstrates a stronger adherence to classical *kitab kuning* and oral transmission traditions, whereas the Malaysian *pesantren* integrates more standardized and modular curriculum structures influenced by national education policies.

In the Indonesian *pesantren*, teaching Islamic theology is rooted in traditional *halaqah* (study circle) methods, where teachers explain classical texts line-by-line, often in Arabic, and students take notes or memorize key concepts. Teachers emphasize a dialogical approach, but classroom interaction is usually guided by a hierarchical teacher-student relationship. The *kyai* (head of the *pesantren*) explained: "*We still refer to classic texts like al-Tahawiyyah. The method is traditional— lecture, explanation, then memorization. It is about understanding belief, not debating it.*" (Head of *Pesantren*, Indonesia)

Teachers echoed this commitment to traditionalism, though some have experimented with visual aids and comparative readings: "*Sometimes I use charts or diagrams to help students visualize theological concepts, but we never depart from the classical texts. That is the soul of the pesantren.*" (Teacher 1, Indonesia)

In this regard, students confirmed the strong emphasis on memorization and teacher authority: "*I memorize the definitions and attend every halaqah. The teacher explains slowly, and we write it down. There is no exam, but the teacher will know who understands.*" (Student, Indonesia)

In contrast, the Malaysian *pesantren* employs a more structured and formalized approach to teaching theology. Influenced by the national Islamic Studies curriculum, theology is taught using printed textbooks approved by the religious education department, and assessments are conducted regularly. Teaching is often supported by multimedia and classroom discussions. The head of the Malaysian *pesantren* described this approach: "We align our curriculum with JAKIM standards. Our theology syllabus is modular—starting from basic '*aqidah* to comparative theology. We assess students through written tests and group work." (Principal, Malaysia)

Malaysian theology teachers highlighted the blend of traditional and modern tools, one of the teacher states:

"We teach *al-Tahawiyyah*, yes, but also other books selected by the ministry. I use PowerPoint and sometimes videos to explain difficult concepts. The students are more engaged that way." (Teacher 2, Malaysia)

In terms of this, students appreciated the mix of traditional content with modern delivery methods: "*We learn about Sunni beliefs but also about other sects. The teacher uses slides and even asks us to do presentations. It helps us understand the meaning better.*" (Student, Malaysia)

The differing perspectives of the participants from both Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren* highlight a fundamental contrast in pedagogical philosophy and curricular orientation. The Indonesian *kyai* and teachers expressed a strong attachment to the classical transmission of knowledge (*taqlid* and *talaqqi*) through traditional texts such as *al-Tahawiyyah*, emphasizing the authority of the teacher and the sanctity of inherited theological doctrines. This approach nurtures deep-rooted orthodoxy and reverence for tradition, but it also suggests a limited emphasis on critical engagement or contextual application. The student's reflections reinforce this top-down structure, where understanding is filtered almost entirely through the teacher's guidance and memorization plays a central role. In contrast, the Malaysian counterparts, while also grounded in Sunni orthodoxy, reveal a more dynamic and student-centered model. The

principal's emphasis on national standards and modular curricula reflects the influence of broader institutional frameworks, where theological instruction is integrated into measurable academic outcomes. Malaysian teachers' use of multimedia and structured assessments indicates an openness to pedagogical innovation. The Malaysian student's active role in presentations and comparative analysis suggests a learning environment that values interpretation alongside retention. These differences imply that while Indonesian *pesantren* remain firmly traditional, Malaysian institutions are navigating a hybrid space between orthodoxy and formal educational reform. The findings reveal how national education systems and institutional expectations shape the epistemological approach to theology: one preserving interpretive lineage, the other aligning with modern learning standards without necessarily compromising theological integrity. To make the findings easily accessible, Table 1 presents comparative summary of teaching methods and curriculum in teaching Islamic theology at both *pesantren*.

The analysis of curricular documents further supports the interview findings. In the Indonesian *pesantren*, the curriculum consists primarily of classical texts (*al-'Aqidah al-Tahawiyyah, al-Jawharah al-Tawhid*) in their original Arabic, with few formal learning outcomes stated. There is minimal use of printed syllabi or structured assessment mechanisms. By contrast, the Malaysian *pesantren* curriculum is organized into structured modules with defined outcomes, supported by printed materials and formal assessments, including mid-term and final examinations. The documents reflect national alignment with Malaysian Islamic Studies standards issued by state religious authorities, indicating an institutional push toward standardization and modernization.

**Table 1**. Comparative Summary of Teaching Methods and Curriculum

| Participant | Theme | Sub-theme | Key Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Head of *Pesantren* | Curriculum orientation | Classical vs. modular | Indonesia emphasizes classical texts; Malaysia uses structured, modular texts. |
| Theology teacher | Teaching methods | Traditional vs. blended | Indonesian teachers rely on oral explanations; Malaysian teachers use multimedia and formal assessments. |
| Student | Learning experience | Memorization vs. engagement | Indonesian students rely on note-taking and memorization; Malaysian students engage in discussions and presentations. |
| Document analysis | Curriculum documentation | Informal vs. standardized structure | Indonesia lacks formal syllabi; Malaysia follows national religious curriculum with clear learning outcomes. |

## Institutional and Cultural Influences on the Delivery and Reception of Islamic Theology in Indonesian and Malaysian *Pesantren*

The second research question examines the institutional and cultural factors that shape the delivery and reception of Islamic theology in Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren*. The findings indicate that while both institutions are influenced by their respective national religious frameworks and sociocultural values, they manifest these influences differently. In Indonesia, theological education in *pesantren* is primarily shaped by the charismatic authority of the *kyai*,

institutional independence, and strong Javanese-Islamic cultural integration. In Malaysia, by contrast, state supervision, curricular standardization, and multicultural-national identity exert a greater influence on how Islamic theology is delivered and received.

In the Indonesian *pesantren*, the head of the institution emphasized the autonomy and centrality of the *kyai* in shaping the *pesantren's* theological orientation:

> "In our *pesantren*, theology is taught the way I was taught by my teacher. We don't follow any government curriculum. It's based on tradition and the needs of the students." (Head of *Pesantren*, Indonesia)

This personal and cultural inheritance also appears in the teacher's account:

> "Our teaching reflects not just Islam, but also local wisdom. Sometimes I give examples from Javanese stories or use local expressions to explain theological ideas." (Teacher 1, Indonesia)

Students in the *pesantren* also echoed the influence of local values in their theological learning: *"We feel close to the kyai, like a family. When he teaches, we not only learn the aqidah, but also how to live as Muslims in our community."* (Student, Indonesia).

In the Malaysian *pesantren*, institutional regulations and national educational goals play a more prominent role. The principal highlighted the alignment with state religious authorities: *"We must follow the guidelines from the state Islamic education board. There are regular inspections and we submit reports to ensure compliance."* (Principal, Malaysia). Teachers noted how this framework influences lesson planning and theological content: *"We follow a syllabus set by the ministry. It includes not just Sunni theology, but also lessons on contemporary issues. We can't go beyond the curriculum."* (Teacher 2, Malaysia). The Malaysian student noted the impact of national identity and cultural diversity: *"Our class includes Malays, Indians, and some converts. So, the teacher always uses examples that can apply to everyone, not just Malay traditions."* (Student, Malaysia).

The contrast between the two *pesantren* highlights the diverse institutional and cultural landscapes shaping theological education in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, the head of *pesantren's* statement reflects the institution's pedagogical independence and the enduring role of lineage-based authority, where theology is seen as both a personal and inherited responsibility. This gives the institution considerable flexibility but also places theological delivery heavily in the hands of a single figure's interpretive framework. The teacher's integration of Javanese culture into theology lessons points to a localization of religious discourse, suggesting a theology rooted in lived experience rather than abstraction. Meanwhile, the student's comment emphasizes a familial and communal model of learning, where theology is not just doctrinal but deeply moral and cultural. In Malaysia, however, the head of *pesantren's* adherence to state guidelines reflects a systemized and bureaucratized structure, prioritizing uniformity and accountability. Teachers must navigate theological instruction within state-sanctioned boundaries, which can ensure quality control but may limit interpretive freedom. The student's remark further illustrates how cultural pluralism influences pedagogy, requiring more inclusive and adaptable examples to ensure comprehension across ethnic lines. These dynamics reveal that while Indonesian *pesantren* are shaped by local religious authority and socio-cultural integration, Malaysian *pesantren* reflect a nationally coordinated effort to deliver Islamic theology in line with policy frameworks and

multicultural realities. The summary of the second research question's findings is presented in Table 2.

Document analysis further confirmed the institutional and cultural patterns identified through interviews. The Indonesian *pesantren* lacks formal documentation or alignment with government-issued religious curricula. Instruction is guided by traditional manuscripts, teacher preferences, and the historical customs of the *pesantren*. Conversely, the Malaysian *pesantren* provided standardized syllabi and weekly lesson plans aligned with the Islamic Education Department's national curriculum. These documents include assessment rubrics and multicultural instructional strategies, demonstrating the formalized and state-regulated nature of theology instruction. Additionally, ministry-issued guidelines mandate that religious educators incorporate contemporary ethical and national identity components, emphasizing the institutional drive to integrate theology with civic and social values.

**Table 2**. Comparative Summary of Institutional and Cultural Influences

| Participant | Theme | Sub-theme | Key Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Head of *Pesantren* | Institutional Structure | Autonomy vs. Regulation | Indonesia emphasizes kyai-led autonomy; Malaysia follows state religious frameworks. |
| Theology teacher | Cultural Integration | Local Wisdom vs. Standardization | Indonesian teachers integrate local culture; Malaysian teachers follow national syllabi. |
| Student | Learning Environment | Communal vs. Pluralistic Contexts | Indonesian students describe theology as familial and moral; Malaysians experience culturally inclusive pedagogy. |
| Document analysis | Curriculum and Oversight | Informal vs. Formal Documentation | Indonesian curriculum is oral/traditional; Malaysian is formal, standardized, and policy-aligned. |

## Negotiating Theological Orthodoxy and Modern Educational Challenges of Teaching Islamic Theology in Indonesian and Malaysian *Pesantren*

This section addresses the third research question: In what ways do educators negotiate the tension between preserving theological orthodoxy and adapting to modern educational challenges? The findings reveal that both Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren* seek to maintain theological orthodoxy, but their responses to modern educational demands differ in terms of pedagogical flexibility, curriculum reform, and openness to critical engagement. While the Indonesian *pesantren* prioritize doctrinal purity with minimal adjustments, the Malaysian *pesantren* show more institutionalized efforts to integrate modern methods, assessments, and relevance to contemporary issues.

In the Indonesian *pesantren*, the head asserted a strict commitment to preserving the original intent of classical theology without modification:

> "Theology is not something we adapt; it is something we protect. The truth has been passed down. We are here to guard it, not to innovate it." (Head of Pesantren, Indonesia)

Teachers also affirmed this theological conservatism, though some recognized external pressures for change:

"We are sometimes asked by alumni or visiting scholars to include new topics like interfaith dialogue, but we do not want to confuse students. We keep to the books." (Teacher 2, Indonesia)

The student reflected a strong sense of obligation to tradition and caution toward modern trends:

"Sometimes I hear about new ideas from YouTube or from friends in the city, but here we are told to stick to the trusted path. I feel safer that way." (Student, Indonesia)

In the Malaysian *pesantren*, the principal described a more balanced approach:

"We cannot ignore modern challenges. Our theology must be rooted in *aqidah*, but also be relevant. Students ask questions we didn't hear 20 years ago—so we have to be ready." (Principal, Malaysia)

Teachers expressed the need to adapt their delivery and content to students' current realities:

"I still teach classical aqidah, but I add case studies, debates, and even online assignments. This makes the lessons more alive without compromising our creed." (Teacher 1, Malaysia)

The student welcomed this approach and saw no contradiction between orthodoxy and engagement:

"We had a class where we discussed artificial intelligence in the light of Islamic belief. It made me think deeper about my faith, not doubt it." (Student, Malaysia)

The findings reflect a sharp contrast in how the two *pesantren* manage the delicate balance between theological preservation and educational reform. The Indonesian *kyai's* statement reveals a custodial approach to theology, where any deviation from classical interpretations is viewed as a potential threat to doctrinal integrity. This guardianship model ensures theological purity but resists dialogue with contemporary realities. The teacher's reluctance to incorporate new content, even when suggested by scholars, highlights institutional insularity, while the student's preference for orthodoxy over innovation signals the internalization of a protective theological stance. In Malaysia, however, there is evidence of a more dialogical and adaptive stance. The principal acknowledges the shifting concerns of modern students and encourages educators to respond with theological clarity and relevance. Teachers' use of debates and real-world topics exemplifies a pedagogical confidence that modern issues can coexist with traditional creed. The student's remark demonstrates that such engagement may deepen rather than destabilize faith. These differences suggest that Indonesian *pesantren* frame orthodoxy as immutability, while Malaysian *pesantren* frame it as a foundation that can support interpretive expansion. The implications are profound: one model safeguards stability at the risk of

stagnation; the other risks misinterpretation but cultivates critical theological literacy. The finding summary of the third research question is depicted in Table 3.

Document analysis supported these interpretations. The Indonesian *pesantren's* materials showed a near-exclusive reliance on classical Arabic texts with little to no inclusion of modern commentaries or contextual applications. Lesson plans, where available, were hand-written and teacher-centered. In contrast, the Malaysian *pesantren's* curriculum documents included modules on "Contemporary Issues in Islamic Theology," rubrics for student presentations, and guidelines for integrating technology into instruction. Additionally, institutional policies emphasized the relevance of Islamic theology to ethical dilemmas in science, media, and public discourse, showing a clear institutional mandate to blend orthodoxy with intellectual responsiveness.

**Table 3.** Comparative Summary of Theological Orthodoxy and Modern Educational Adaptation

| Participant | Theme | Sub-theme | Key Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Head of *Pesantren* | Institutional Structure | Preservation vs. Relevance | Indonesia focuses on doctrinal continuity; Malaysia seeks relevance within orthodoxy. |
| Theology teacher | Cultural Integration | Resistance vs. Innovation | Indonesian teachers resist new topics; Malaysian teachers use modern tools and methods. |
| Student | Learning Environment | Protection vs. Exploration | Indonesian students favor safety in tradition; Malaysian students embrace relevance. |
| Document analysis | Curriculum and Oversight | Classical-only vs. Integrated Curriculum | Indonesian documents are tradition-bound; Malaysian include modern applications and structured pedagogies. |

## DISCUSSION

This study has revealed key comparative insights into the teaching of Islamic theology in Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren*, uncovering significant differences in pedagogical strategies, institutional-cultural dynamics, and approaches to negotiating theological orthodoxy in modern contexts. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how Islamic boarding schools preserve and transmit religious knowledge while navigating the socio-educational pressures of the contemporary world. Rather than reiterating descriptive results, this discussion critically interprets these findings through the lens of educational theory, religious pedagogy, and cultural discourse.

The contrast in pedagogical methods between the two *pesantren* indicates a key tension in religious education: the balance between continuity and change. The Indonesian *pesantren's* fidelity to classical texts and oral transmission (e.g., *halaqah*, memorization, authoritative lectures) reflects a form of taqlid (adherence to tradition), which remains a central pillar of traditional Islamic pedagogy (A. Abdullah et al., 2024; Saada, 2018; Suryadi, 2019). This approach, while effective in preserving doctrinal purity, can be critiqued for its limitations in fostering analytical theological thinking. In contrast, the Malaysian *pesantren's* partial

incorporation of modular teaching and assessment techniques aligns more closely with modern educational frameworks, including constructivist models that emphasize learner engagement and contextual learning (Ferianto et al., 2024).

The curriculum divergence also raises questions about the role of national education policy and standardization. In Malaysia, the more hybridized model, blending state-sanctioned syllabi with traditional subjects, illustrates how *pesantren* are increasingly positioned within national development goals. This is consistent with studies such as Wan Daud (2010), which emphasize Malaysia's attempts to harmonize Islamic education with broader nation-building agendas. In Indonesia, by contrast, *pesantren* maintain greater curricular autonomy, which, while allowing for stronger traditional preservation, may risk marginalization in the national educational discourse. Hence, while both approaches are valid within their own logics, the Malaysian model might be seen as more adaptive, whereas the Indonesian model is more conservative but also potentially more resistant to external epistemological influences.

Institutional and cultural contexts serve as silent yet powerful mediators in shaping how theology is taught and received. In Indonesia, the *pesantren's* status as a self-regulating moral authority allows it to operate with considerable independence, often rooted in *kyai* authority and family-based leadership structures (Ma`arif et al., 2025; Mulyana, 2023; Mumtaz et al., 2024). This produces an education model deeply enmeshed in communal values, religious charisma, and a spiritual economy of respect and submission (Mohammadi, 2023). Conversely, Malaysian *pesantren*, often subject to government registration and curricular audits, are situated within a more bureaucratic and centralized Islamic education system. This contributes to a more institutionalized form of theology instruction, one that may foster accountability and formal recognition but also risk diluting organic religious authority.

This contrast supports the view that institutional autonomy plays a central role in shaping pedagogical freedom and religious authenticity. The Indonesian *pesantren's* relative autonomy enables a more unfiltered transmission of Islamic orthodoxy, but it may also isolate students from developing competencies relevant to pluralistic and global contexts (Azizah & Mardiana, 2024; Effendi et al., 2025; Meliani et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the Malaysian case highlights the influence of cultural pragmatism and state-Islam relations in shaping a theology curriculum that is both traditional and reform-oriented (Bin Jamil, 2022). This interplay suggests that religious pedagogy is never value-neutral; it is deeply shaped by the political, social, and ideological configurations of the surrounding culture.

The most critical tension illuminated in this study lies in the negotiation between preserving theological orthodoxy and responding to contemporary educational expectations. Both *pesantren* confront the need to protect *aqidah* from dilution, yet they do so through different strategies and levels of engagement with modernity. In Indonesia, there is a clear emphasis on safeguarding doctrinal transmission, which echoes the broader *salafiyyah* inclination of many traditional *pesantren* (Isnaeni et al., 2025; Muhtifah et al., 2021; Sormin et al., 2025; Suhermanto et al., 2024) The resistance to introducing rationalist or comparative theological discussions stems from a fear of epistemological relativism, which is viewed as potentially corrosive to faith. In contrast, the Malaysian *pesantren* cautiously integrates select elements of critical pedagogy, such as reflective questioning or written analysis, into the study of theology. While this introduces risks of syncretism or misinterpretation, it also opens pedagogical space for critical

engagement, making theology more intellectually robust and socially responsive. This reflects a broader shift in contemporary Islamic education where institutions must negotiate between *taqlid* (imitation) and ijtihad (independent reasoning). The cautious experimentation in Malaysia aligns with thinkers like (M. Abdullah et al., 2025) who argue that Islamic education must be intellectually transformative, not merely preservative.

The comparative perspective also suggests that innovation in religious pedagogy is not necessarily a betrayal of tradition. Instead, as Al-Zarnuji's classical treatise *"Ta'lim al-Muta'allim"* posits, education must be responsive to time and place, provided it serves the ethical and epistemic aims of Islam (Bin Jamil, 2022). The challenge, therefore, is not whether to modernize, but how to ensure that such modernization remains rooted in a legitimate *usul al-din* (foundations of religion). This calls for a nuanced, non-binary view of tradition and reform, not as opposites, but as dialectically related forces shaping contemporary Islamic education (Arif et al., 2025; Hanani et al., 2024).

The findings of this study corroborate and extend previous scholarship on Islamic education in Southeast Asia. For instance, the strong emphasis on traditional methods and memorization in Indonesian *pesantren* aligns with historical accounts by Dhofier (Arif et al., 2024) and Safiudin et al. (2023), who extensively documented the autonomy and conservative pedagogical leanings of these institutions. Our observations of Malaysian *pesantren's* more structured, curriculum-based approaches, influenced by national education standards, resonate with Mala's et al. (2024) analysis of the state's increasing role in harmonizing Islamic education with national goals. Furthermore, the negotiation between preserving orthodoxy and adapting to modern challenges, as observed in both contexts, echoes the broader discussions on taqlid and ijtihad in contemporary Islamic thought, a tension highlighted by thinkers like Abdurrohim et al. (2024) and explored in the educational context by scholars such as Salim et al. (2024). This study, therefore, not only confirms established patterns but also provides contemporary empirical depth to these long-standing theoretical and historical discussions, particularly through its direct comparative lens.

Building on existing theoretical frameworks in comparative education and the sociology of religion, this study's findings resonate with established scholarship on educational change and cultural transmission. The observed variations, particularly regarding state involvement versus institutional autonomy, align with theories positing that centralized national education policies (as seen in Malaysia) often lead to greater curriculum integration and a more standardized pedagogical approach, aimed at fostering a unified national identity (e.g., Abdullah et al., 2025; Zamri et al., 2024). Conversely, the Indonesian context exemplifies how strong institutional autonomy, frequently rooted in historical legacy and charismatic leadership, can reinforce traditional pedagogical practices and theological conservatism, a dynamic explored by scholars examining the enduring influence of religious authority in traditional societies (e.g., Basri & Abdullah, 2024; Syaharuddin et al., 2024). This research thus contributes empirical evidence to the ongoing scholarly debate regarding the forces shaping educational reform and resistance within religious schooling systems, specifically within the unique context of Southeast Asian *pesantren*.

These findings open several critical avenues for future research. A vital next step would involve longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of these divergent pedagogical

approaches on students' theological understanding, critical thinking skills, and their adaptability to contemporary societal challenges. Future investigations could also explore the perceptions of alumni from both types of *pesantren* regarding their preparedness for professional and social life, offering valuable insights into the practical outcomes of each educational model. Furthermore, expanding comparative analyses to include a wider range of *pesantren* within each country, or even extending to other Muslim-majority contexts, could build a more comprehensive typology of Islamic theological education, potentially incorporating mixed-methods approaches to validate and extend qualitative observations.

The implications of these findings are significant for the development of *pesantren*-based theological curricula. First, there is a need for context-sensitive reform that respects the internal logic of traditional pedagogy while introducing pedagogical tools that enhance comprehension and relevance. Second, institutional policies should reflect a balance between autonomy and oversight, encouraging innovation without imposing homogenizing standards that compromise religious authenticity. Lastly, future reforms in Islamic theology education should move beyond content delivery to focus on epistemological skills, such as critical reasoning, theological literacy, and ethical discernment, thus preparing students not only to defend their faith but also to live it meaningfully in plural societies.

To conclude the discussion, this study affirms that while the core mission of Islamic theology education in *pesantren* remains the preservation of *aqidah*, the methods, institutional dynamics, and cultural contexts of that mission vary significantly between Indonesia and Malaysia. These variations are not merely differences in practice but represent distinct educational philosophies shaped by broader societal forces. To move forward, educators and policymakers must embrace a vision of Islamic education that is both faithful to its roots and responsive to its contemporary responsibilities.

**CONCLUSION**

The present study has examined the comparative teaching of Islamic theology in Indonesian and Malaysian *pesantren*, revealing significant differences shaped by pedagogical traditions, institutional frameworks, and cultural contexts. Indonesian *pesantren* generally maintain a conservative pedagogical model centered on classical texts, oral transmission, and the authority of the teacher. In contrast, Malaysian *pesantren* show a tendency to incorporate more structured curricular innovations influenced by national education standards. These differences are not merely procedural but reflect more profound educational philosophies: one prioritizes the preservation of doctrinal purity, while the other aims for a balance between orthodoxy and educational modernization. Institutionally, autonomy in Indonesia fosters a strong traditional identity, whereas state engagement in Malaysia facilitates curricular accountability and integration into national discourse. Culturally, these *pesantren* operate within distinct historical legacies and expectations, influencing how theology is transmitted and received. Theoretically, the study contributes to Islamic education discourse by showing how *pesantren* navigate the tension between tradition *(taqlid)* and adaptation *(ijtihad)*. Practically, the findings suggest that context-sensitive curriculum development and pedagogical reform, rooted in both authenticity and responsiveness, are essential for future advancements in Islamic theological education.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its small and context-specific sample, focusing only on one *pesantren* in each country. While this design allows for in-depth analysis, it restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should expand the sample across various regions and *pesantren* types, both traditional and modern, to capture a broader spectrum of theological education models. Furthermore, the study relied primarily on interviews and document analysis; incorporating classroom ethnography or longitudinal student assessments could yield more profound insights into pedagogical effectiveness and student outcomes. Comparative studies involving *pesantren* in other Southeast Asian countries or examining female-centered institutions could also enrich the discourse on diversity and inclusivity in Islamic theology education. Ultimately, continued inquiry is essential for crafting theology education that is both rooted in heritage and responsive to the challenges of contemporary Muslim societies.

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