

Comparative Thoughts on Religious Education: The Perspectives of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr

Ucep Hermawan

Laras Hambalan Art Studio Tangerang, Indonesia
ucephermawan2230030012@gmail.com

Muhlas

Sunan Gunung Djati State Islamic University Bandung, Indonesia
muhlas@uinsgd.ac.id

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Abstract:

Religious education plays an important role in shaping moral values that are relevant to the challenges of the increasingly complex modern world. This study aims to compare the thoughts of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr regarding religious education, as well as explore their different perspectives that reflect the richness of their respective theological traditions. Using a qualitative approach and literature study method, this study analyzes the main works of the three figures, including Heschel's *Man Is Not Alone*, Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman*, and Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, as well as various other relevant sources. The results of the study show that although there are similar views on the importance of religious education that prioritizes morality and social responsibility, these three thinkers have different approaches. Heschel emphasized social morality as an integral part of religious education, Wadud advocated women's empowerment and gender equality, while Niebuhr taught the importance of compromise and adaptation to the complexities of the social world. This research contributes to the development of religious education that is more inclusive and relevant to the social context, as well as enriching interfaith dialogue in a diverse global society.

Keywords: *Religious education, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, Reinhold Niebuhr, social morality, gender equality, inclusive education, interfaith dialogue.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's global landscape, religious education faces increasingly complex challenges. An increasingly connected and culturally and religiously plural world demands a new approach to character building and social responsibility (Afrilsah, 2024). Humanitarian crises, social inequality, identity conflicts, and rising religious-based intolerance are some of the global phenomena that demonstrate the importance of religious education that is not only dogmatic, but also ethical and transformative (Allouche et al., 2020). In different

parts of the world, from Western to Eastern countries, religious education continues to be in the spotlight because of its role in shaping the way individuals think about the "other" and how they contribute to life together (Kennedy & Lee, 2020).

In this context, there is an urgent need to review the model of religious education that is able to balance between spiritual values and social sensitivity (Udemba, 2024). This is all the more important given that today's global society lives in a multicultural and multisectoral reality, where diversity is not only a reality, but also a moral challenge (Kanbara, 2025). Therefore, the thoughts of interfaith figures who offer a progressive view of religious education are very relevant to be studied, especially in efforts to build global ethics and social responsibility that crosses religious boundaries (Nafisah et al., 2024).

Religious education has a very important role in the formation of individual morality and social responsibility (Judrah et al., 2024, p. 33). As one of the essential elements in people's lives, religious education is not only a means of delivering religious teachings, but also a medium in instilling ethical values, justice, and social solidarity. In the midst of the complexity of the modern world that often confronts individuals with moral and social dilemmas, religious education serves as a moral guide that helps people live their lives with religious principles and values (Mariana, 2024, p. 51).

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr are three figures who have made major contributions to the thought of religious education from the perspective of the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian traditions. Despite coming from different religious backgrounds, all three offer important perspectives on how religious education can play a role in shaping the moral character of individuals as well as strengthening social responsibility in the context of a pluralistic society. Cross-faith studies that compare the thoughts of these three figures are relevant to enrich understanding of the role of religious education in building social justice and universal ethics.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish philosopher and theologian, emphasized the importance of religious experience as a means of understanding the existence of man and God. In his view, religious education should help individuals to feel God's presence in daily life as well as develop a sense of social responsibility based on religious values. Heschel emphasized that religion is not only ritualistic, but should also be an encouragement for individuals to engage in social action and justice (Heschel, 1955a, p. 45).

Meanwhile, Aminah Wadud, a contemporary Muslim scholar, introduced a gender perspective in the study of Islamic religion. She argued that religious education must be able to accommodate various dimensions of justice, including gender justice. According to Wadud, the Qur'an must be interpreted taking into account the historical and social context, so that religious education is not only normative, but also relevant to modern life that demands equality between men and women (Wadud, 1999a, p. 32). Wadud provides important insights on how Islamic religious education can strengthen the understanding of individual rights, especially in a social context that is often still gender-biased.

On the other hand, Reinhold Niebuhr, a Christian theologian, offers a different approach by bringing forward the concept of Christian Realism, which focuses on moral and ethical responsibility in a social context. Niebuhr saw that humans have a tendency to sin, but still have the capacity to exercise social justice. In the context of religious education, Niebuhr argues that education should equip individuals with the ability to understand the moral and social complexities of everyday life, as well as encourage them to be actively involved in the realization of social justice (Niebuhr, 1932a, p. 13).

Departing from the above, according to the author, this cross-religious approach is very relevant in the context of the modern world that is increasingly pluralistic and multicultural. Religious education can no longer be seen as exclusive to just one religious group, but must be able to respond to global challenges that require cooperation between religious communities. Therefore, a comparative study of the thoughts of Heschel, Wadud, and Niebuhr for the authors will offer valuable insights into how religious education can serve as a tool to strengthen interreligious dialogue, as well as to build more inclusive morality and social responsibility.

In moral education theory, Lawrence Kohlberg, a developmental psychologist, posits that moral education develops through complex stages along with the cognitive growth of the individual. Kohlberg divides moral development into stages, from the orientation of obedience to rules to the attainment of a more autonomous understanding of morality based on universal principles (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 45). As such, this theory is relevant in the context of religious education, where religious education can help individuals reach higher levels of morality by instilling ethical religious and social values. Thus, the three figures

discussed in this paper—Heschel, Wadud, and Niebuhr—can be seen as thinkers who contributed to a more mature moral development through religious education.

Religious education has a central role in shaping moral values that are relevant to the challenges of the increasingly complex and diverse modern world. In this context, a deeper understanding of religious education from a cross-faith perspective, as advocated by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr, offers a significant contribution to the development of moral education that is not only relevant but also contextual. These three figures represent the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian traditions, each of which has a unique view of the relationship between religion, morality, and education. This study aims to compare the three thoughts on religious education, while exploring the differences in perspectives that reflect the richness of their theological traditions. In addition, this research is also expected to enrich interfaith dialogue which is increasingly needed in the context of a global society, where diversity of beliefs demands a deeper understanding across cultures and faiths.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method (*Library Research*) to explore and analyze the thoughts of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr on religious education. The main data is taken from their main works, such as *Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man* by Heschel, *Qur'an and Woman* The work of Wadud, as well as *The Nature and Destiny of Man* by Niebuhr. In addition, supporting data is obtained from various relevant journal articles, books, and research. This research was conducted with a comparative approach to compare the views of the three on themes such as the purpose of religious education, the relationship between religion and morality, and the role of religious education in building social harmony in the midst of a diverse modern society. Each thought is analyzed in the context of their respective religious traditions—Jewish, Islamic, and Christian—to understand how their theological background influences the idea of education. The results are then interpreted to find similarities, differences, and relevance in encouraging interfaith dialogue and more inclusive educational development. Through this process, the research not only reveals the depth of thought of the three figures, but also provides a new perspective on the importance of religious education in the face of the complexity of the global world (Murdiyanto, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Brief Biography: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was a prominent Jewish scholar, philosopher, and theologian who made major contributions to 20th-century religious and social thought. Born in Warsaw, Poland, Heschel came from a respectable Hasidic family and was heavily influenced by the deep Jewish mystical heritage. After attending traditional Jewish schools, he continued his education at the University of Berlin, where he earned a doctorate in philosophy. During his youth, Heschel had shown a strong interest in the integration of philosophy, theology, and mystical experience in religious life (Heschel, 1955a, p. 22).

After obtaining a basic education in the Jewish tradition, Heschel continued his education at the University of Berlin, where he earned a doctorate in philosophy. During his studies, Heschel was interested in integrating philosophy, theology, and mystical experience in religious life. Heschel's view was based on the belief that religious life was not only about doctrinal teachings, but also involved an existential encounter between man and God, which was characterized by profound experience (Heschel, 1955a, p. 45).

One of Heschel's major contributions to the social world was his involvement in the civil rights movement in the United States. Along with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Heschel fought against racial and social injustice. He participated in the historic march in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, which was symbolic of his belief that religion was not only contemplative, but should also be embodied in concrete action. Heschel often said that when he walked with Dr. King, "*He felt he was praying with his feet*" (praying with his feet) (Kaplan, 2005, p. 152).

His involvement in social movements reflects his belief that faith and action must be intertwined, and that religious life should include an active commitment to fighting for justice in society. Heschel viewed

justice as an expression of living faith, and he repeatedly emphasized that religion should demand social responsibility from every individual (Heschel, 1966, p. 34).

In addition, Heschel's intellectual works included many profound theological writings, including his famous books *"The Prophets"* and *"God in Search of Man"*. In these works, Heschel explores the relationship between man and God, voicing the importance of meaningful religious experiences and spiritual depth. Heschel was also an influential educator, who always encouraged dialogue between different religions and cultures. He views interreligious dialogue as an important path to peace and understanding. Through his intellectual and moral contributions, Heschel became one of the most important voices in the world of theology of the 20th century, and his legacy lives on in religious thought and social activism around the world.

Meanwhile, Aminah Wadud was born in 1951 in Washington D.C., United States. He is known as a prominent Muslim scholar who has had a great influence on contemporary Islamic thought, particularly related to the interpretation of the Qur'an from a gender perspective. Wadud spent most of his childhood in the United States before continuing his higher education at various educational institutions in the field of Islamic and religious studies (Wadud, 1999a, p. 4). Wadud earned a Bachelor's degree from Alcorn State University, and then continued his studies at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, as well as at Princeton University.

Aminah Wadud completed her doctoral degree in Islamic studies at Princeton University in 1988. Her dissertation work focused on the interpretation of the Qur'an from a gender perspective, which later became the basis for several of her important publications. Her academic works often criticize traditional understandings of gender in Islam and offer new, more inclusive and egalitarian approaches (Wadud, 1999b, p. 9). Wadud's research and publications contribute to the academic debate and religious practice regarding the role of women in Islam.

One of the most famous works of Aminah Wadud is *"Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective"* published in 1999. In this book, Wadud criticizes conventional interpretations that are considered patriarchal and provides an alternative interpretation that emphasizes gender equality more (Wadud, 1999b, p. 16). In Wadud's view, many religious texts, when understood in a more equitable and egalitarian context, can show the principles of gender equality and justice. Wadud is also known for her contributions in discussing and practicing women's leadership in worship, which has been a controversial subject in traditional Muslim communities. Deep *"Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam"*, she writes about her struggles and the experiences of Muslim women in overcoming gender barriers in religious practice (Wadud, 2006a, p. 22).

Aminah Wadud argues that conventional understandings of the role of women in Islam are often influenced by patriarchal interpretations that do not reflect the essence of Islamic teachings. Wadud emphasized the importance of understanding sacred texts in relevant historical and cultural contexts, as well as recognizing the role of women as agents of change in Islamic society (Wadud, 1999b, p. 40). She also emphasized that the interpretation of the Qur'an must take into account gender perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive and equitable understanding. Aminah Wadud is not only known as an academic, but also as an activist who seeks for gender reform in Islam. She is frequently involved in public discussions and seminars on women's rights, education, and reform in Islamic practice. Her courage and contributions have had a significant impact in encouraging dialogue on gender in the context of Islam, as well as broadening the horizons of religious thought within the Muslim community (Wadud, 2006a, p. 30). With a strong academic background and innovative works, he has contributed significantly to a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding and practice of Islamic religion. Her contributions and perspectives continue to influence debates on the role of women in Islam, as well as broadening insights into how sacred texts can be understood and applied in contemporary contexts

Another thinker is that Reinhold Niebuhr was born on June 21, 1892 in Wright City, Missouri, into a religious German Lutheran family. His father was a Lutheran minister who had a strong influence in shaping Niebuhr's theological understanding. After completing his undergraduate education at Elmhurst College and his Master of Divinity at Eden Theological Seminary, Niebuhr continued his education at Yale Divinity School, where he began to develop an interest in the relationship between religion, politics, and society (Niebuhr, 1941, p. 3).

Niebuhr began to gain widespread fame during his tenure at Bethel Evangelical Church, Detroit, which lasted from 1915 to 1928. In this city, he witnessed firsthand the social injustices that occurred among the

workers of the Ford Motor Company factory and other working-class society. This experience became the basis for his thinking about the relationship between religion, power, and social justice. He realized that religion could not only be a tool for maintaining individual morality, but should be an active force working against structural injustices in society (Niebuhr, 1932a, p. 9).

Niebuhr then joined Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1928, where he taught until his retirement in 1960. Here, he developed "*Christian Realism*," a theological approach that emphasizes the need for religion to face social and political realities critically. This thought became the theoretical basis of many of Niebuhr's works, including his famous book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), in which he outlined the view that individual morality is often different from the morality prevailing in society (Niebuhr, 1932b, p. 29).

During World War II and the Cold War, Niebuhr was also involved in debates about the role of the United States in the international world, advocating a realistic view of foreign policy. He believed that although human beings have the capacity for good, they are also prone to sin and injustice, so political power must always be checked and balanced with justice (Niebuhr, 1953, p. 47).

Niebuhr's theology focuses not only on the relationship between religion and personal morality, but also on how religion can play a role in redressing social injustice. One of his main concepts is "social sin", in which he states that societies often collectively commit sin through an unjust economic and political system, even though the individuals within it may have good intentions (Niebuhr, 1941, p. 91). Niebuhr also wrote many other highly influential works, such as *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941) and *The Irony of American History* (1952), which deepened his analysis of the moral limitations of human beings and the role of religion in public life. His views on sin and justice have been adopted by many contemporary political thinkers and theologians, who recognize the moral complexity of modern life (Niebuhr, 1941, p. 183). Niebuhr died on June 1, 1971, but his thoughts remain relevant in discussions of religion, morality, and social justice in the modern world. His contributions in bridging theology with socio-political realities made him one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century (Niebuhr, 1953, p. 101).

The Concept of Religious Education

1) Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel offers a profound and transformative view of the relationship between religion, spirituality, and education. With a holistic approach, Heschel integrated aspects of theology, morality, and life experience into his approach to religious education. His famous thinking includes three main elements, namely the concept "*Wonder*" or admiration, relationship with God, and social responsibility (Iyadurai, 2020). In Heschel's view, religious education aims not only to impart doctrine or theological knowledge, but also to form individuals who are able to experience closeness to God, be inspired by the wonders of the world, and be socially responsible (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2022).

Concept "*Wonder*" or admiration became one of the core of Heschel's thought in religious education. He believed that admiration was the first gateway to a deeper understanding of God and the world. In his view, the experience of awe not only leads one to the wonders of life, but also opens up a higher spiritual consciousness. Heschel writes, "*Admiration is the most profound and fundamental attitude to understand the meaning of life; it is a form of acknowledgment of God's presence in every aspect of the world* (Heschel, 1976, p. 79)." For him, admiration is the foundation for all forms of spiritual learning, because admiration leads man to reflect on the origins of existence and the mystery behind life.

In the context of religious education, admiration serves as an effective pedagogical tool to build interest in and respect for religious teachings. Heschel emphasized that teachers must be able to awaken a sense of awe in the hearts of students, so that they are encouraged to explore spiritual and moral values in depth. This concept resonates with Jean Piaget's theory of developmental psychology, which emphasizes that curiosity is a major motivator in learning (Jindo, 2024). Piaget (1970) explained that curiosity and environmental exploration play an important role in children's cognitive development (Piaget, 1970). In this respect, the admiration that Heschel refers to is similar to the curiosity that Piaget understands, that is, as a driver to understand the world more deeply.

Heschel also believed that admiration was the antidote to what he called "*loss of respect*" in modern life. In an increasingly secular and materialistic society, the experience of admiration is often replaced by apathy or cynicism. Heschel argued that religious education should restore this respect by showing miracles in everyday life. "*The world is not just a collection of usable objects; the world is a revelation from God*

(Heschel, 1976, p. 34)." Thus, religious education based on admiration not only shapes religious individuals, but also individuals who have a deep appreciation for life and the world.

In addition to the concept of admiration, Heschel also emphasized the importance of personal relationship with God in religious education (Jindo, 2024). He believed that religious education should help individuals develop a deep and intimate relationship with God. *"Religious education must involve not only knowledge of God but also direct experience with Him. This relationship is at the heart of the religious experience"* (Heschel, 1966, p. 53)." In his view, authentic religious experiences cannot be taught through lectures or books alone; It must be experienced directly through prayer, meditation, and spiritual reflection.

Heschel criticized the approach of religious education that focused too much on doctrinal teaching without making room for spiritual experience. He emphasized that religious education should create an environment where students can feel God's presence directly. *"God is not an abstract concept that exists only in theological books. God is a living reality and is present in every aspect of our lives"* (Heschel, 1966, p. 57)." In this context, religious education is not only a means to impart knowledge, but also a tool to facilitate spiritual transformation.

Heschel's view of the relationship with God has similarities with Viktor Frankl's concept of existentialism, which emphasizes the importance of finding meaning in life. Frankl (1963) argues that the search for meaning is a fundamental human need, and spiritual relationships are one way to fulfill that need (Frankl, 1963). In this perspective, religious education that emphasizes a relationship with God can help individuals find meaning in life and live a more meaningful life.

Another important aspect of Heschel's thought was social responsibility. Heschel believed that religious education should include teaching about justice, compassion, and moral responsibility to others. For Heschel the true Faith must be demonstrated through social actions that defend justice and humanity. Social responsibility is a manifestation of spiritual power (Heschel, 1976, p. 87). In Heschel's view, religion is not only about personal spiritual development, but also about contributing to the well-being of society.

Heschel himself is a clear example of a commitment to social responsibility. He was active in the civil rights movement in the United States and collaborated with figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. to fight for racial justice. This experience influenced his view that religious education should prepare individuals to take an active role in the fight for social justice. According to Heschel, effective religious education should teach students to see their faith as a call to action for the common good (Tiefel, 2024).

Heschel's view of social responsibility is in line with John Rawls's theory of social ethics, which emphasizes the importance of creating a just society through individual participation. Rawls (1971) argues that every individual has a moral responsibility to contribute to a just social structure (Rawls, 1971). In this sense, religious education based on social responsibility produces not only religious individuals, but also responsible citizens.

Heschel views religious education as a transformational process that involves the spiritual and moral growth of students. In his book *The Sabbath*, he describes how special times can provide opportunities for individuals to experience spiritual transformation. According to Heschel, rituals and special times are moments in which we can experience God's presence deeply and feel the transformation in our souls (Heschel, 1951, p. 61). Religious education, according to him, should provide opportunities for students to experience these moments through rituals, reflection, and community activities.

This theory can be applied in educational practice by creating a curriculum that integrates spiritual elements, such as meditation, prayer, and personal reflection. Schools that adopt this approach can hold regular spiritual reflection sessions, develop community projects that emphasize ethical values, and utilize moments in the religious calendar to reflect on religious teachings (Sims, 2021).

In practical application, Heschel's thinking has important implications for the design of the religious education curriculum. The curriculum should be designed to allow students to experience religious values directly through activities that touch on their spiritual and moral aspects (Benjamins, 2024). Heschel argues that effective religious education should engage students in hands-on experiences that encourage them to understand and live religious values in their daily lives. True education is education that is able to change the way we see the world and the way we interact with others, (Heschel, 1955b, p. 124).

Schools that adopt this approach can integrate activities such as meditation, prayer, textual study, and community projects that encourage empathy and solidarity. Thus, religious education is not only a process

of knowledge transfer, but also an experience that shapes the character, soul, and social commitment of students. Heschel believed that religious education should be a tool to create individuals who not only possess spiritual depth, but also have the capacity to contribute to social transformation (Benjamins, 2024). Through his thinking, Heschel offered a holistic and transformative vision of religious education. By integrating elements of admiration, a relationship with God, and social responsibility, religious education can be an effective means of forming individuals who are not only religious but also contribute to the common good (Chamiel, 2020). Heschel's thought remains relevant in the context of a complex modern world that requires an approach.

2) Aminah Wadud

Aminah Wadud, a contemporary Muslim scholar, is widely known for her significant contributions to the interpretation of the Qur'an from a gender perspective. The main concepts in Wadud's religious education thought centered on inclusivity and gender justice, which he integrated in the interpretation and application of Islamic teachings in the context of education (Wadud, 1999b). His thinking has become the cornerstone for a more inclusive, egalitarian approach to religious education that is relevant to modern social realities.

Wadud believes that Islamic religious education must accommodate women's views and experiences, as well as fight for inclusivity in religious learning. In his book *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Rights and Islamic Masculinities*, Wadud emphasized that religious education must provide an equal place for women to participate in religious learning and discussions. According to Wadud, religious education should not only reflect a male perspective, but must include women's experiences equally to be more fair and comprehensive (Wadud, 2006a, p. 45).

In the context of education, this means creating a curriculum that not only includes material on the role of women, but also ensures that women have an equal voice in determining how religious teachings are interpreted and applied. Thus, religious education is not only a means of transmitting theological knowledge but also a means to build social awareness and inclusive participation. Wadud emphasized that women must be involved not only as students but also as teachers and interpreters of religious teachings (Wadud, 2006b, p. 58).

Wadud sees religious education as a tool for social reform that promotes gender justice. She believes that religious education should provide students with an understanding of gender rights, equality, and social responsibility. Deep *Inside the Gender Jihad*, for Wadud, awareness of gender justice must be an integral part of the religious education curriculum to overcome long-standing inequality in society (Wadud, 2006b, p. 73).

Religious education, according to Wadud, must not be separated from the broader values of social justice. He argues that religious learning should include this dimension so that students can understand and apply the principles of justice in their daily lives. This perspective is supported by the study of feminism in the study of religion, such as those developed by Judith Plaskow and R. Marie Griffith, which highlight the importance of gender analysis in understanding religious texts. Religious texts cannot be separated from the social context in which they are interpreted, and patriarchal structures often shape such interpretations (Plaskow, 1990, p. 22).

Wadud emphasized that most of the dominant interpretations of the Qur'an over the centuries tended to be dominated by a male perspective, which often placed women in a subordinate position. He stated that this interpretation did not necessarily reflect the egalitarian message in the Qur'an, but rather reflected the social and cultural norms of the time (Wadud, 1999a, p. 3). In the context of religious education, this view demands a more critical approach to teaching the interpretation of the Qur'an.

In religious education, Wadud called for curriculum reform that often reflects gender bias. He argues that religious education must open up space for dialogue and diversity of understanding. Religious education must go beyond dogmatic and rigid interpretations, and create space for inclusivity and cross-cultural dialogue (Wadud, 2006b, p. 123). In this way, religious education becomes more relevant for various groups in society, especially for women and minority groups who are often marginalized in religious discourse.

One of the main applications of Wadud's view is the importance of empowering women in religious education spaces. According to her, this empowerment must involve equal access for women to religious education at all levels, including in leadership and authority roles. Wadud stated that inclusive religious

education must provide women with the opportunity to become leaders in religious discourse and not just as passive participants (Wadud, 2006b, p. 109).

Women's empowerment in religious education is not only about providing equal access to education, but also includes liberation from patriarchal structures that have long prevented women from playing an active role in religious discourse. Wadud added that religious education can function as a tool for social transformation by empowering women to demand their rights and participate fully in religious and social life (Wadud, 1999b, p. 50). Wadud also emphasized the importance of educating the younger generation to understand the principles of social justice and gender. Thus, religious education becomes a means to create a more egalitarian society. Religious education should prepare students not only to understand religious teachings but also to apply the principles of justice in their daily lives (Wadud, 2006a, p. 87).

However, challenges remain in the application of Wadud's views in various educational institutions. Many religious educational institutions still adhere to traditional interpretations that marginalize women and maintain patriarchal structures. Reforms in religious education, such as Wadud's proposal, require a fundamental change in the way we view religious authority and gender in Muslim communities. These changes are important to ensure that religious education remains relevant to the needs of an increasingly pluralistic and inclusive modern society (Wadud, 2006a, p. 157).

Aminah Wadud's views on inclusivity and gender justice have had a significant impact on religious education, especially in women's empowerment and creating inclusive spaces for dialogue. Her thinking demanded a fundamental change in the way religious education was taught, emphasizing the importance of a more critical and inclusive interpretation that reflected women's experiences. With this approach, religious education can serve as a tool for a more just and equal social transformation. As stated by Wadud, gender equality is not only a goal, but a way to achieve a more authentic and relevant understanding of religion for all (Wadud, 2006b, p. 157).

3) Reinhold Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr developed a thought about religious education based on a realistic view of the human condition. He argues that although human beings have the potential to act ethically, they often fail to meet high moral standards due to their own moral limitations (Castellin, 2021). In Niebuhr's view, religious education not only teaches ideal morality, but must also take into account the reality of a world full of imperfections. Therefore, religious education needs to equip individuals with moral awareness that can be applied in the face of complex social challenges, without ignoring these realities (Steele, 2021).

One of the important foundations of Niebuhr's thought was the concept of Christian realism, which integrated religion with existing social conditions. In his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932a), Niebuhr asserted that ideal moral virtue is difficult to realize in the real world because of human weakness and sin (Niebuhr, 1932a). Therefore, religious education cannot focus only on abstract moral doctrines or ideals, but must provide a realistic understanding of how religion can help one overcome conflicts and injustices in society. Religion, for Niebuhr, is not only a spiritual guideline, but also a tool for fighting for social justice, as he writes in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941), in which he stated that religion has a role to fight for social justice, not just to cultivate individual morality (Niebuhr, 1941).

Religious education, according to Niebuhr, has a responsibility to shape students' moral consciousness. However, such awareness must be based on a realistic understanding of human limitations and social dynamics. As he expressed in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932a), human beings as individuals are capable of acting ethically, but in groups, they are often caught up in immoral behavior due to power and collective egoism (Niebuhr, 1932b). Therefore, religious education must teach the importance of moral responsibility that includes not only personal good but also contribution to social welfare. This thinking is in line with the liberation theory in Christian religious education, which emphasizes that religious education must prepare the individual to become agents of social change, as put forward by theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez.

The concept of social sin became an important contribution to Niebuhr's thought on religious education. He argues that sin is not only individual, but also social, especially in the context of structural injustice in society. Deep *The Irony of American History* (1957), Niebuhr explained that religious education should help students understand that social sins, such as oppression and injustice, are not only related to individual

actions but also to unjust social structures (Niebuhr, 1952). Therefore, religious education must teach students to fight against social injustice and fight for changes in the social structure.

Niebuhr also introduced the concept of "historical irony", which taught that there is often a tension between moral ideals and the tangible results of human actions. In the context of religious education, it teaches students to understand moral complexity and awareness of human limitations in realizing moral ideals. Religious education, therefore, must equip students with humility and perseverance in the face of moral challenges that do not always lead to the desired outcome (Castellin, 2021).

Finally, Niebuhr highlights the tension between justice and love in religious education. In his book *Love and Justice* (1957), he revealed that justice without love can be harsh and inhumane, while love without justice tends to be sentimental and ineffective (Niebuhr, 1957). Therefore, religious education must teach how to balance these two principles, teaching students to fight for social justice with a spirit of love that prioritizes humanity.

Overall, Niebuhr's thinking provides a solid foundation for religious education that is relevant to social challenges in the modern world. Through an approach that combines morality with social reality, religious education according to Niebuhr teaches not only personal moral values but also broader social responsibility. As he writes in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941), "*Religious education must create individuals who are not only personally pious but also committed to fighting for justice in society* (Niebuhr, 1941)." Thus, religious education oriented towards Christian realism can be a significant force for social transformation.

Comparative Religious Education Thought: Heschel, Wadud, and Niebuhr

Religious education has long been considered one of the important tools in shaping the moral character of individuals and strengthening social cohesion in society. In this context, the thinking of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr make significant contributions to understanding the role of religious education, even though they come from different religious backgrounds, namely Jewish, Islamic, and Christian. These three figures have a consistent view of the importance of religious education that prioritizes morality, social responsibility, and ethical values. They agreed that religious education should focus not only on rituals or doctrines, but also on the formation of individual character that can contribute to creating a more just and humane society.

In the view of these three thinkers, religious education should direct individuals to become individuals who are not only obedient in the aspects of religious rituals, but also sensitive to the social issues that exist around them. Heschel, for example, proposes that social morality and justice should be an integral part of religious education. He believes that religious education should teach that active social action against injustice is part of the understanding of religion itself (Heschel, 1966, p. 124). Similarly, Wadud sees religious education as a means to empower women and create gender equality in Muslim society. Wadud criticized patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, especially the Qur'an, and advocated for a change in interpretation that is more inclusive of women (Wadud, 1999a, p. 89). Meanwhile, Niebuhr teaches that in complex social contexts, the struggle for justice often involves compromise and conflict. In his view, religious education should instill an understanding that social responsibility is often fraught with moral tension and challenges (Niebuhr, 1932a, p. 56).

Despite the similarities of views among these three thinkers, the differences in their approaches to religious education are also striking. Heschel, with his personal experience and experience as a victim of the Holocaust, emphasized that social morality should be the main cornerstone of religious education, which should lead to concrete action in the fight against injustice (Witte Jr & Green, 2011). He sees a direct connection between religious experience and a commitment to improving oppressed social conditions. In contrast, Wadud, who focuses more on gender issues, argues that religious education should empower women and challenge patriarchal structures in Muslim societies. She considers that traditional interpretations of religious texts need to be revised to provide a fairer space for women in social and religious contexts (Lewis, 2020). On the other hand, Niebuhr considers that human morality is inseparable from the awareness of the complexity of the conflict-fraught social world. Therefore, he argues that in achieving social justice, compromise and confrontation are inevitable.

To understand more deeply these differences, we can borrow the perspective of genetic structuralism from Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, these thoughts can be understood as the product of the social and cultural structures that shape the religious experience of each thinker. Each individual or group

is influenced not only by religious doctrine, but also by the social, political, and economic structures that exist around it (Bourdieu, 1990). Heschel's view of social morality was heavily influenced by the bitter experiences he faced as part of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe, which was influenced by the trauma of the Holocaust and the experience of discrimination (Szczerbiński, 2023). This experience certainly gave color to his thinking about social morality and responsibility to others. In this context, Heschel emphasized the importance of concrete social action to confront injustice, which may be difficult to implement outside the context of the Jewish community or in societies with different historical experiences.

Similarly, Wadud's thoughts on gender equality in religious education are inseparable from the social experience that exists in Muslim societies which tend to be patriarchal (Dzukroni & Isnaini, 2023). Although she advocates for a change in interpretation and women's empowerment, her views remain within the framework of the social structures faced by Muslims, especially in societies that are heavily influenced by patriarchal norms. Nonetheless, Wadud's thinking offers a more inclusive and progressive perspective that can be applied to create a more just and equal Muslim society. On the other hand, Niebuhr, with his background in America heavily influenced by capitalism and liberal democracy, teaches that social responsibility in the modern world is not only about absolute justice, but also about the ability to compromise and adapt to existing social realities. He realized that in a world full of injustice, sometimes an individual or group has to sacrifice some of his idealism to achieve it (Lestari & Alimni, 2023).

Heschel's view of social morality was heavily influenced by tragic experiences in Jewish history, which may not be entirely relevant outside of that context (Robin & Marchella, 2024). The same is true of Wadud, whose thinking on gender equality may be more appropriate in a social context that is more open to changing interpretations, but may be at odds with more conservative views in certain Muslim societies. Niebuhr, with his realist views, emphasized the importance of compromise, but this view was perhaps more relevant in the context of countries with similar political and economic structures to those of the United States at the time, and not easily applied in societies with different political systems (Krisdinanto, 2014). Their thinking teaches that religious education is not only about understanding religious doctrine, but also about how religion can be a source of strength to improve existing social conditions, while still paying attention to the relevant social and cultural contexts.

Table 1
Comparative Thought of Religious Education: Heschel, Wadud, and Niebuhr

Analysis Aspect	Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel	Aminah Wadud	Reinhold Niebuhr
<i>Religious Traditions</i>	Jew	Islam	Christian (Protestant)
<i>Main Focus of Religious Education</i>	Social morality and religious experience	Gender justice and text reinterpretation	Social ethics and moral realism
<i>Purpose of Religious Education</i>	Cultivate awareness of God's presence and social responsibility	Empowering women and creating equality	Encourage an understanding of moral complexity and the need for compromise
<i>Criticism of Conventional Religious Practices</i>	Reject empty ritualism; Encourage social engagement	Against patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an	Criticizing utopian idealism in a religion that ignores the reality of social conflict
<i>Relevance of Social Context</i>	Holocaust trauma; Solidarity with the oppressed	Patriarchal structures in contemporary Muslim societies	Liberal democracy and American political reality
<i>Unique Contributions</i>	Linking spirituality to social action	Opening up a space for gender-inclusive interpretation	Offers an ethical approach based on social realism
<i>Conceptual Tension</i>	Transcendence vs. social action	Sacred texts vs. historical context	Moral ideals vs. political compromises
<i>Additional Theoretical Framework</i>	Post-Holocaust Jewish social habitus (Bourdieu)	Patriarchal structures in Islamic societies (Intersectional Feminism)	Ethics of responsibility in a capitalistic democratic system

<i>Excess</i>	Uniting spirituality and social justice powerfully	Offering reform of interpretation in Islamic education	Able to understand moral ambiguity in modern social life
<i>Limitations</i>	Less relevant outside the context of post-traumatic Jews	Need the support of a social structure that is open to change	Difficult to implement outside of established liberal democratic systems

In rereading the thoughts of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr on religious education, it is important to look at it through the lens of contemporary theories that are more reflective of global dynamics. In the context of a world that has entered a postsecular phase, as stated by , religion is no longer positioned solely as a private affair, but has an ethical role in the public sphere. At (Habermas, 2010) This is where the relevance of the three thinkers looks strong. Heschel, for example, brought spirituality into the arena of social justice struggle by emphasizing that true religious experience must give birth to partiality toward the oppressed. Meanwhile, Wadud revived the space of interpretation in Islamic education to be more open to gender equality, which is in line with the spirit of intersectionality developed by Crenshaw (Cho et al., 2013). On the other hand, Niebuhr offers a sharp moral realism: that the social world is full of conflict and ambiguity, so religious education needs to equip the individual with a realistic ethics of compromise and responsibility.

Therefore, this comparison is not only juxtaposed with three figures from different religious traditions, but also opens up space for deep reflection on how religious education in today's global era should be formulated. Religious education is not enough to teach obedience to rites, but must be an ethical tool to form individuals capable of dialogue, empathy, and action in the face of moral challenges in a pluralistic global society. In a world that continues to be shaken by identity conflicts, structural inequality, and humanitarian crises, the legacy of Heschel, Wadud, and Niebuhr's thought offers a solid intellectual foundation for building inclusive, equitable, and transformative religious education globally.

CONCLUSION

The thought of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Aminah Wadud, and Reinhold Niebuhr made important contributions to the development of religious education, each from the perspective of their religious traditions. Heschel, a Jewish philosopher, emphasized the importance of religious experience and spirituality as the basis of religious education. He believed that religious education should build awareness of God's presence and guide responses to spiritual calls. Meanwhile, Aminah Wadud, known for her innovative approach to interpreting the Qur'an from a gender perspective, reminds us of the need for inclusive and gender-equitable religious education. He also emphasized the importance of interpreting sacred texts taking into account the social and cultural context. On the other hand, Reinhold Niebuhr, with his theory of Christian realism, proposed that religious education should integrate moral values with complex and often unjust social realities. These three thinkers agree that religious education should be more than just doctrinal teaching, but it should also be relevant to real-life experiences, aware of social injustices, and take into account the gender dimension in religious interpretation. They emphasize that religious education must equip individuals to act ethically in a world full of challenges and imperfections.

Based on their thinking, some suggestions for the development of religious education include: *First*, the religious education curriculum needs to be designed to not only teach religious teachings but also integrate practical and social dimensions, such as social responsibility, gender justice, and personal religious experiences. *Second*, it is important to develop an inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to religious education, as taught by Aminah Wadud, to create a fair and inclusive environment for all students. *Third*, religious education needs to teach the application of social realism, as Niebuhr put it, by introducing concepts such as social sin, repentance, and moral responsibility. *Finally*, in line with Heschel's view, religious education should make room for religious experience and personal reflection, through spiritual practice, in-depth discussion, and experiential learning.

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