

The Role and Urgency of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Addressing Moral Decline among Millennials

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Abstract:

The rapid development of science and technology (IPTEK) in the era of globalization has had a significant impact on the moral values of the younger generation, especially among students. This paper explores the role and urgency of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) in addressing moral decadence and fostering ethical behavior in the millennial generation. By tracing the historical development of Islamic education in Indonesia, from the arrival of Islam to the modern educational system, this study emphasizes the strategic position of PAI in shaping noble character (akhlaq al-karimah). Strategies for revitalizing PAI include modeling exemplary behavior, strengthening religious education, early habit formation, integrated cross-disciplinary approaches, involving all teachers, support from family and society, utilizing modern technology, and nurturing moral conscience through spirituality. The findings indicate that PAI, when implemented holistically and collaboratively, can instill moral awareness, spiritual strength, and social responsibility in students, equipping them to face the challenges of modern life while maintaining ethical integrity.

Article Info:

Submitted:

30-09-2025

Revised:

29-10-2025

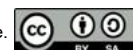
Accepted:

31-10-2025

Keywords:

Islamic religious education, moral decadence, millennial generation, character education, globalization

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INTRODUCTION

Moral education has become a crucial issue in contemporary society, as various forms of moral decline increasingly appear across communities, including within government institutions. Acts of criminality, injustice, corruption, child abuse, and violations of human rights reflect a serious moral crisis that weakens the ethical foundation of the nation. Traditional values, such as politeness, religiosity, and moral integrity, which were once deeply rooted in Indonesia's cultural identity, are now fading in everyday life. Without immediate and sustainable intervention, both in short-term and long-term programs, this condition may continue to deteriorate (Nur Ainiyah, 2013).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) offers a strategic approach to address these moral challenges. Schools, as primary institutions of education, play a key role in fostering moral development in students. PAI serves as a medium to transform religious knowledge (cognitive aspect), instill ethical norms and values (affective aspect), and guide behavior (psychomotor aspect), thereby shaping individuals with a sound moral foundation (Ministry of National Education, 2006, p.2).

Through Islamic Religious Education, students are expected to cultivate faith, piety, and noble moral conduct. Such moral development equips them to face challenges, obstacles, and societal

changes at local, national, regional, and global levels, ensuring that they make positive contributions to society.

METHOD

This research is a qualitative descriptive study employing a library research approach. The purpose of this study is to analyze and synthesize theoretical perspectives on the role and urgency of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in addressing moral decline among millennials. It seeks to explore the concepts, methods, and contributions of Islamic education in strengthening moral awareness and preventing ethical degradation in the younger generation.

The data used in this study comprises secondary sources, including books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and other scholarly works that discuss Islamic Religious Education, moral education, youth character development, and contemporary moral issues. These materials were collected from academic databases, libraries, and reputable online journals relevant to the research topic.

Data collection was conducted through systematic library research, involving the identification, review, and compilation of relevant academic literature. The data were analyzed descriptively using content analysis, aiming to describe, examine, and interpret the existing theories and findings.

The analysis process involves three main steps:

1. Data classification, by organizing literature based on its thematic relevance (Islamic education, morality, and millennial behavior).
2. Critical examination, by analyzing key arguments and perspectives from previous scholars.
3. Synthesis, by integrating various insights to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role and urgency of Islamic Religious Education in overcoming moral decline.

The results are presented descriptively to highlight how Islamic values and educational principles contribute to shaping moral character and guiding the moral consciousness of the millennial generation.

RESULT

Based on the literature review, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a crucial role in developing students' moral character. According to the Ministry of National Education (2006), PAI is expected to produce individuals who continuously enhance their faith and piety, possessing noble moral character, including ethics, manners, and moral values, as a manifestation of education (Ministry of National Education, 2006, p. 2).

Furthermore, Nur Ainiyah (2013) explains that religious education serves as a means to transform religious knowledge (cognitive), instill norms and moral values to shape attitudes (affective), and guide behavior (psychomotor), thereby developing a complete human personality.

The literature also indicates that, although the strategic role of PAI in moral development is well-recognized, studies specifically examining its impact on the millennial generation remain limited. Therefore, this review highlights the importance of analyzing relevant literature to understand the contribution of PAI in fostering moral development among millennials.

Definition

Moral decadence refers to a state of decline or deterioration in moral and ethical values within individuals and society. The term decadence derives from the Latin word *decadere*, meaning "to fall,"

“to decline,” or “to deteriorate,” and is generally used to describe a regression in social, cultural, moral, or spiritual aspects.

According to the Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), decadence is defined as the deterioration of morality or the decline of values in areas such as art and literature. Conceptually, the term denotes a shift or weakening of noble values that were once upheld, including honesty, justice, empathy, and responsibility.

Morality (akhlaq) refers to the principles that guide human behavior regarding right and wrong, good and bad, and what is considered proper or improper, derived from religion, culture, and social norms. In Islam, akhlaq is viewed as a reflection of one's faith and serves as the foundation for a virtuous life (akhlaqul karimah) (Iskarim, 2016).

Moral decadence occurs when moral values deteriorate or shift due to social, economic, cultural, or technological influences. It can be identified through increasing crime rates, deviant behavior, corruption, and the diminishing respect for ethical and moral norms.

Millennials (SWA.co.id, 2017), also known as Generation Y or “Generasi Langgas,” represent the demographic cohort following Generation X and preceding Generation Z. Researchers and popular media generally identify the early 1980s as the beginning and the mid-1990s as the end of this generation (Oxford Learner' Dictionaries, t,t; Merriam-Webster Dictionary,t,t), with most definitions referring to individuals born between 1981 and 1996 (The Guardian, 2021; BBC News, 2020; CNN,2019; Pew Research Center, 2019). Although the specific range may vary by country or source, this classification is widely accepted in global demographic studies.

In Indonesia, the millennial generation comprises individuals born between 1981 and 1996 and represents one of the largest demographic groups after Generation Z. According to national census data, millennials account for approximately 25.87% of the total Indonesian population. This generation is often characterized by technological literacy, openness to innovation, and a strong inclination toward freedom and self-expression; yet it also faces moral and cultural challenges amid rapid globalization and modernization.

DISCUSSION

Before discussing the role and urgency of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in addressing the moral decline among the millennial generation, it is essential to first understand the history and existence of Islamic education in Indonesia. Throughout its long historical journey, Islamic education has played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's character and instilling moral values that form the foundation of Indonesian society.

The history of Islamic education in Indonesia dates back to the arrival of Islam in the archipelago around the 7th century AD, facilitated by the development of trade routes. The spread of Islam occurred peacefully through trade, marriage, and missionary activities (dakwah). Islam was quickly accepted by the local population because its teachings emphasized monotheism (tawhid), human equality, and adaptability to local cultures (Novia Aisyah, 2022).

During the Dutch colonial period, Islamic education faced significant restrictions, as the colonial government provided access to education only for the upper class. Consequently, Muslims established their own educational institutions, such as surau in Minangkabau and pesantren in Java, which became centers for preaching and moral formation.

During the Japanese occupation, Islamic education gained greater space, although it remained politically driven. Many madrasahs were established, and religious education began to be introduced in public schools. In 1945, the Islamic Higher Education Institution (Sekolah Tinggi Islam) was

established in Jakarta, later becoming the precursor to Islamic universities in Indonesia (Muhammad Azmi, 2023).

After Indonesia gained independence, Islamic education was officially recognized as part of the national education system. During the Old Order era, institutions such as the PGA, PHIN, and Madrasah Wajib Belajar (Compulsory Learning Madrasah) were founded. In the New Order period, Law Number 2 of 1989 was enacted, officially positioning Islamic education within the national education system. Pesantren and madrasah began to undergo modernization, and various modern Islamic organizations, such as ICMI, Republika, and Bank Muamalat, emerged.

Entering the Reform era, Law Number 20 of 2003 further strengthened the position of Islamic education. The government increased education budgets, improved curricula (such as KBK, KTSP, and K13), and enhanced teacher quality through certification programs. In this period, Islamic education continued to develop dynamically. Several State Islamic Institutes (IAIN) were transformed into State Islamic Universities (UIN), expanding their academic scope to include science and technology. Moreover, Law Number 18 of 2019 on Pesantren emphasized that pesantren have an equal status with general schools and are recognized as part of the national education system.

Overall, the journey of Islamic education in Indonesia has been a long and dynamic one. From the era of Islamic dissemination, colonialism, and independence to the modern period, Islamic education has continuously evolved, playing an essential role in shaping the moral character and building the civilization of the Indonesian nation.

The concept of character education has long been an integral part of Islamic teachings, dating back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The primary mission of the Prophet, as stated in the Hadith, was to perfect noble character (akhlaq). In Islamic understanding, character and morality (akhlaq) are inextricably linked to faith and knowledge. Al-Ghazali defines morality as a deep-rooted disposition in the soul from which good deeds naturally arise without the need for deliberation. This demonstrates that the primary objective of education in Islam is not only to transmit knowledge but also to shape the inner character of individuals, enabling them to act righteously with full awareness.

Character education in Islam, therefore, focuses on nurturing the totality of human potential, encompassing spiritual, moral, intellectual, and social aspects. As Ibn Miskawaih and Al-Ghazali explain, moral education should develop the intellect, purify the soul, and guide behavior toward goodness. This comprehensive concept of tarbiyah (education) integrates faith, knowledge, and action as a unified whole. A person who learns religious knowledge without internalizing moral values cannot achieve the essence of Islamic education, because the ultimate goal is to draw nearer to Allah and to reflect His attributes in human conduct.

In modern educational institutions, Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam or PAI) plays a crucial role in realizing this goal. PAI is not merely about delivering religious theories but about forming the moral personality (syakhsiyyah islamiyyah) of students. However, in practice, PAI in schools is often limited to cognitive learning and theoretical assessment. Many students understand religious texts but fail to apply them in their daily lives. One contributing factor to this issue is the perception that PAI is not one of the subjects determining graduation standards. Consequently, it is often treated as a secondary or supplementary subject compared to other academic disciplines. In most schools, PAI receives only two hours of instruction per week, and its evaluation is primarily based on written tests. This limited scope reduces the transformative potential of Islamic education, as moral and spiritual formation require continuous guidance and real-life application beyond classroom learning.

To achieve meaningful character formation, teachers must serve as role models (*uswah hasanah*). The Prophet Muhammad's method of teaching through example remains the most effective approach in shaping moral awareness. Abdullah Nasih Ulwan emphasizes several methods of moral education: through example, habituation, advice, attention, and discipline (reward and punishment). These approaches are essential for nurturing behavior through consistent practice and moral reinforcement. For instance, schools can cultivate good habits through religious activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitations, charity programs, and community service, all of which provide real opportunities for students to live out Islamic values.

The success of PAI also depends on collaboration between teachers, parents, and the wider community. Moral education is not the responsibility of one subject or teacher alone; it requires an ecosystem that consistently embodies religious values. This aligns with Ki Hajar Dewantara's principle of *ing ngarso sung tulodo, ing madyo mangun karso, tut wuri handayani*, where teachers and adults provide examples, guidance, and support. Schools should create a religious culture (*budaya religius*) that reflects faith and discipline in every aspect of the learning environment.

Furthermore, moral guidance through reward and punishment should aim to build self-awareness and responsibility rather than fear. Teachers must encourage positive behavior by recognizing students' good deeds and correcting their mistakes with compassion. The goal of PAI is not only to make students knowledgeable about religion, but also to ensure that this knowledge is reflected in their personality and conduct.

Ultimately, Islamic education aspires to create individuals who are intellectually capable, emotionally stable, spiritually strong, and socially responsible. By integrating character formation into PAI, schools can help students internalize Islamic values and apply them in modern life. In the face of moral decline among millennials, revitalizing PAI as a foundation of moral and character education is essential to rebuild the ethical and spiritual strength of the younger generation.

In this regard, it is essential to highlight the role of Islamic Religious Education within the National Education System. The curriculum is a crucial component of the learning process, serving to achieve the goals of national education. According to Law No. 20 of 2003, Article 36, the Indonesian curriculum is developed within the framework of strengthening faith and piety, cultivating noble character, and enhancing the potential, intelligence, and interests of students while considering regional diversity, environmental needs, development demands, and the dynamics of global change.

To support the implementation of this framework, Article 37 of the same law stipulates that the curriculum must include several compulsory subjects, among them religious education. Religious education serves to strengthen moral character and spiritual values in students, underscoring its crucial role in shaping the national character. Thus, religious education is a compulsory subject at every level of schooling, from elementary to secondary and higher education.

Schools are therefore expected to implement religious education optimally by integrating religious values throughout the learning environment, involving all teachers and students collaboratively and continuously. Ideally, religious principles should be reflected not only in PAI classes but across all subjects. The inculcation of spiritual and ethical values must become the shared responsibility of every educator.

The content of religious education, as stated in the appendix to Law No. 22 of 2006, includes the curriculum of Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam*). Its objectives are to develop individuals who continuously strive to perfect faith (*iman*), piety (*taqwa*), and morality (*akhlak*), while actively contributing to the advancement of civilization and social harmony—

particularly in building a dignified national character. Such individuals are expected to be resilient in facing challenges and changes in local, national, regional, and global contexts.

The scope of PAI encompasses several areas, including the Qur'an and Hadith, Aqidah (faith), Akhlaq (ethics), Fiqh (jurisprudence), and Islamic history and culture. As part of the National Education System, Islamic Religious Education thus holds a central position in shaping spiritually strong, intellectually capable, and morally upright citizens. The implementation of PAI should be internalized through both intra- and extracurricular activities, emphasizing the practical application of Islamic values in daily life.

Ultimately, strengthening the role of PAI within the national education system is a strategic effort to address moral decline among the younger generation. By integrating religious and character education through curriculum and practice, schools can nurture students who embody Islamic values, intellectually competent, ethically grounded, and socially responsible individuals capable of facing the challenges of modern life.

Technological advancement is one of the impacts of globalization. According to Asyari & Dewi (2021), globalization essentially involves the dissemination of ideas from one nation that are then adopted by other nations, marked by the rapid progress of technology. This advancement has positive effects, including increased digital literacy in society. Safitri defines digital literacy as an individual's proficiency in understanding and interacting with digital content. When digital literacy is effectively leveraged for the public good, technological advancements can bring significant benefits to daily life.

However, technological advancement also carries negative consequences. The massive dissemination of information within seconds can pose various risks, including the moral decadence of the younger generation. This decadence is reflected in the decline of manners, courtesy, and tolerance, particularly among students. Such behavioral decline is influenced by unrestricted internet access and social interactions that are not always properly supervised. Rosita (2015), as cited in Putri et al. (2021), notes that a child's social environment can influence their manners if it is not adequately monitored by parents. In other words, children may adopt impolite behaviors from their social circles and incorporate them into their daily activities.

In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a crucial role as a moral safeguard guiding the millennial generation. The substance of PAI extends beyond religious knowledge; it instills values of faith, piety, noble character, and social responsibility. These values equip students with the ethical judgment and ability to act correctly in the face of globalization and technological advancement. The implementation of PAI can be achieved through the integration of Islamic values across all subjects, as well as intra- and extracurricular activities, and project-based character education, emphasizing the practical application of moral and ethical values in daily life.

Thus, the substance of PAI remains highly relevant for modern millennials, providing moral and spiritual guidance to maintain integrity, manners, and courtesy amidst the challenges of the digital and global era. This foundation naturally leads to the discussion of the urgency of PAI in addressing moral decadence among the millennial generation, which will be elaborated in the next section.

Facing the era of globalization is not about avoiding or opposing it but rather leveraging its positive influences while mitigating the negative impacts. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in instilling religious and moral values in daily life. According to Mochamad Iskirim (2016), revitalizing PAI strategies is necessary to nurture morality (akhlaq al-karimah) among the nation's younger generation, especially students. This strategy will be effective if it is supported

by collective awareness and responsibility from all parties involved in the moral formation of children and future generations.

Several revitalization strategies of PAI include:

1. Modeling and Exemplary Approach – Teachers, staff, and the entire school environment should serve as “living role models” (uswah al-khasanah), openly discussing moral values to facilitate intellectual internalization among students.
2. Strengthening Religious Education – Religious education should aim to develop behavior in accordance with religious teachings, not merely transfer knowledge (transfer of knowledge). Education that integrates intellectual and moral development is more effective (Ki Butarsono in Yulianingsih, 2002).
3. Early Habit Formation, Children should be habituated to good behavior, politeness, and religious practices in their daily activities, including eating, sleeping, walking, speaking, and social interaction. Values such as humility, honesty, patience, sincerity, fairness, and forgiveness should become habitual.
4. Integrated Approach, Moral education should be incorporated across all disciplines, not only PAI. Each subject contributes to character development: language cultivates systematic communication; mathematics fosters logical, objective, and diligent thinking; physics encourages gratitude for God’s creations; biology promotes orderly work; history develops a commitment to truth.
5. Involvement of All Teachers, Moral education is a collective responsibility and not solely the duty of religious teachers. Every teacher has a role in instilling ethical and moral values in their teaching.
6. Support from Family, School, and Community, Parents should guide and model good behavior, schools should cultivate a religious and disciplined environment, and the community should provide a conducive environment, facilities for talent and skill development, and supervision of negative behaviors.
7. Utilizing Opportunities and Modern Technology – All opportunities and media, including digital technology, should be used for moral development, such as recreation, exhibitions, field visits, mosques, magazines, radio, television, and the internet.
8. Strengthening Moral Conscience through Spirituality, Education should aim to touch the heart (touching) rather than merely teach. Spirituality is the core of moral conscience (moral consequence) that motivates students to act virtuously (good character) and prevents them from doing wrong (bad character). Faith in the heart produces moral consequences in the form of moral judgment, moral responsibility, and moral rewards, which serve as the foundation for ethical actions in daily life.

By implementing these strategies, PAI can counter moral decadence and prepare millennial generations to be intellectually competent, ethical, responsible, and spiritually grounded, thereby equipping them to face the challenges of globalization and technological advancement without compromising their moral integrity.

CONCLUSION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a vital role in shaping the moral, spiritual, and ethical character of the millennial generation. Beyond transmitting religious knowledge, PAI internalizes values that guide behavior and decision-making. In the era of globalization and technological advancement, PAI serves as a moral safeguard, helping students utilize positive influences while

mitigating negative impacts such as moral decadence and social irresponsibility. Revitalizing PAI strategies, including exemplary role modeling, habituation, integrated education across subjects, teacher and community involvement, and spiritual development, is essential to produce intellectually capable, ethically grounded, and socially responsible individuals ready to face modern challenges.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Tarbiyah at the Islamic University of Jember for the continuous guidance and academic support provided during the preparation of this article. Appreciation is also extended to the lecturers and colleagues whose constructive feedback and valuable insights significantly contributed to the completion of this study.

The author would also like to express her heartfelt thanks to her beloved parents and family for their endless prayers, encouragement, and moral support throughout the writing process. Their love and motivation have been an invaluable source of strength and inspiration in completing this work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, without any financial or personal relationships that could influence the results or interpretations presented in this study.

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