

RELIGION IN EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: VALUES, IDENTITY, AND COEXISTENCE CAPACITY IN MULTI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This article examines religion in education at the intersection of education studies, cultural studies, the sociology of religion, and public governance in Southeast Asia. Instead of treating religion as a fixed curricular object, the article asks what forms of knowledge, rights awareness, digital media literacy, and coexistence capacity learners need in societies shaped by multiple religions and worldviews. Methodologically, the study combines a conceptual review with qualitative content analysis of a purposively selected documentary corpus, including scholarly literature, international guidance documents, legal-policy materials, regional reports, and selected official sources relating to the 11 current ASEAN member states, including Timor-Leste after its admission to ASEAN in October 2025. The analysis uses both deductive and inductive coding to identify thematic clusters and construct a country-level comparative matrix. The findings distinguish faith-transmission religious education from education about religion as an academic, non-coercive, and rights-respecting practice. They show that religion enters education through three interrelated dimensions: value formation, identity construction, and coexistence capacity. The regional comparison further indicates that Southeast Asian systems cannot be reduced to one model. Officially Islamic or Muslim-majority contexts, Theravada Buddhist contexts, Catholic-influenced contexts, and multi-religious or citizenship-governed contexts each raise different questions of fairness, representation, school governance, and policy implementation. The article proposes a coexistence-capacity framework with five interrelated elements: academic study of religion; recognition of lived faith without coercion; protection of freedom of religion or belief, including the right not to believe and minority rights; digital media literacy; and intercultural dialogue as a route toward responsible coexistence. Its contribution lies in shifting curriculum

design from the question of which religion should be taught to the question of how education can prepare learners to interpret religious difference responsibly, resist prejudice, evaluate digital religious discourse, and participate ethically in shared civic life.

Keywords: religion in education; education about religion; intercultural education; citizenship education; Southeast Asia; minority rights; digital citizenship.

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion has never stood entirely outside education. Even when modern schools are organized around scientific knowledge, professional competence, and the principles of public education, religion still appears in school life through history textbooks, moral and citizenship education, dress codes, food practices, holidays, rituals, faith-based schools, community service, and debates about gender, family, children's rights, minority rights, and national identity. The more important question, therefore, is not whether schools should address religion, but through what language, principles, and purposes religion is brought into education. The question has become more urgent under globalization, migration, urbanization, and digital media. Learners may grow up in families shaped by one faith tradition, study with classmates from other belief communities, encounter religious content on social media, read news about interreligious conflict in distant places, and still be expected to participate in shared civic life. Silence about religion may leave learners without the language to understand issues already present around them. Yet a one-sided or devotional approach may also turn education into a space where prejudice, majoritarianism, or exclusion is reproduced.

Southeast Asia is a particularly important setting for this problem, but it cannot be treated as a homogeneous bloc. This article operationalizes Southeast Asia as the 11 current ASEAN member states, following Timor-Leste's admission to ASEAN on 26 October 2025 (ASEAN, 2025). Islam holds a central or prominent social position in Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia; Theravada Buddhism is historically and symbolically important in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand; Catholicism has strong historical influence in the Philippines and Timor-Leste; and Singapore and Vietnam display complex intersections among Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, folk beliefs, indigenous practices, ancestor veneration, and non-religious worldviews (Bouma et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2023; Pew Research Center, 2025). These different configurations create different curricular and governance questions.

Existing studies have offered valuable insights into religious education, religious literacy, intercultural education, citizenship education, and freedom of religion or belief. However, there remains a need for an analysis that connects four dimensions at once: religion as a source of value formation; religion as an element of identity construction; religion as an issue of freedom of religion or belief and minority rights; and religion as content for developing coexistence capacity in the digital age. This gap is especially visible in Southeast Asia, where religion is connected not only with personal belief but also with state formation, nationhood, ethnicity, faith-based schooling, community life, and the mediatization of identity conflict.

From this point of departure, the article addresses four research questions.

Question 1: How should religious education and education about religion be distinguished in modern schooling?

Question 2: How does religion participate in value formation, identity construction, and coexistence capacity?

Question 3: What major religion-education configurations are visible across the 11 Southeast Asian countries?

Question 4: What pedagogical and policy principles should guide education about religion in order to protect fairness, minority rights, and civic coexistence in the age of digital media?

The main contribution of the article is to reposition religion in education not as a body of doctrine to be transmitted, nor as neutral cultural information detached from social life, but as a field where knowledge, identity, rights, and public coexistence are negotiated. The article therefore shifts curriculum design from the question of which religion should be taught to the question of what capacities learners need in order to live responsibly in multi-religious societies.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design and scope

The study uses a qualitative design combining conceptual review and interpretive documentary analysis. It does not claim to be a PRISMA-style¹ systematic review, nor does it use surveys, interviews, textbook coding, or classroom observation. Its purpose is more specific: to clarify key concepts, compare selected religion-education configurations in Southeast Asia, and construct a framework for education about religion that is academically grounded, rights-sensitive, and pedagogically usable.

The unit of analysis is not a single education system or textbook series. Rather, the article reads scholarly literature, international guidance documents, legal-policy materials, and selected official sources as a corpus for identifying recurring concepts, institutional patterns, and normative tensions. This design is appropriate because the article addresses a conceptually sensitive and regionally diverse issue where empirical comparison at school level would require a separate multi-country field study.

2.2. Source identification, verification, and selection

Sources were identified through purposive searches across academic databases and publisher platforms, Google Scholar, official websites of international organizations, ASEAN and regional education bodies, selected ministries or state agencies, and legal-policy repositories. Search terms combined the following keywords and their variants: religious education, education about religion, religious literacy, intercultural education, citizenship education,

¹ PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

freedom of religion or belief, minority rights, digital religion, media literacy, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and country names. Priority was given to sources that helped answer the research questions rather than to materials that merely described theology or religious doctrine.

Four inclusion criteria guided source selection. First, the source had to speak directly to religion in education, religious literacy, citizenship/intercultural education, freedom of religion or belief, minority rights, digital religion, or Southeast Asian education-policy contexts. Second, it had to have academic or institutional value, such as peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, university-press monographs, international guidance documents, official legal-policy documents, or reports by credible organizations. Third, country-level sources were included only when they helped clarify a religion-education configuration, not merely a demographic fact. Fourth, digital-media sources were used when they explained how online environments transform religious authority, discourse, representation, or identity.

Materials were excluded when they were purely devotional or missionary, journalistic without analytical value, unverifiable, weakly connected to education, or too narrow to support regional comparison. Because the topic involves sensitive questions of religion and rights, factual claims that are easily misstated, such as Timor-Leste's ASEAN status, the legal entitlement to religious education in Indonesia, the structure of Singapore's racial and religious harmony education, or Brunei's integration of religious subjects into the general education timetable were checked against official or traceable sources before being retained.

2.3. Analytical corpus and use of sources

The final corpus was organized into five functional clusters. The purpose of this grouping was not to count sources mechanically, but to make transparent how different types of sources were used in the analysis. Peer-reviewed and scholarly sources were used for conceptual framing; international guidance documents for normative principles; official and legal-policy sources for institutional configurations; regional reports for comparative context; and digital-religion scholarship for the media dimension.

Table 1. Source clusters and analytical use

Source cluster	Main analytical function	Illustrative sources	Quality control concern
Conceptual and scholarly literature	Builds the distinction between faith-transmission religious education and education about religion; clarifies religious literacy, intercultural education, and citizenship education.	Moore (2007); Jackson (2014, 2016); Banks (2008); Nussbaum (2010); Hefner (2001); Bouma et al. (2010).	Avoid transferring Euro-American concepts mechanically into Southeast Asian contexts.
International guidance and rights documents	Establishes principles of academic treatment, non-coercion, freedom of religion or belief, and protection from discrimination.	American Academy of Religion (2010); OSCE/ODIHR (2007); UNESCO (2006); Council of Europe (2018); UN General Assembly (1981); UN	Use them as normative principles, not as descriptions of classroom practice.

Source cluster	Main analytical function	Illustrative sources	Quality control concern
		Human Rights Committee (1993).	
Country-level legal and official materials	Identifies how selected states position religion, values, citizenship, or harmony in education and public governance.	ASEAN (2025); Ministry of Education Brunei Darussalam (2013, 2023); Republic of Indonesia (2003); Ministry of Education Malaysia (2013); Department of Education Philippines (2023); Ministry of Education Singapore (2025); Government Committee for Religious Affairs Vietnam (2023).	Cross-check official claims with scholarship and regional reports where possible.
Regional and comparative reports	Provides broader evidence on religious composition, global citizenship education, and country-level religious-freedom contexts.	Evans et al. (2023); Pew Research Center (2025); UNICEF EAPRO, UNICEF Innocenti, & SEAMEO (2023); U.S. Department of State (2024a-k).	Avoid reducing complex countries to annual report summaries.
Digital religion and media scholarship	Explains how learners encounter religion through online authority, discourse, misinformation, symbolic conflict, and mediated identity.	Hoover (2006); Campbell & Tsuria (2022).	Connect media analysis to educational capacity, not only to technology use.

2.4. Analytical procedure

The analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis with a thematic orientation, drawing on established principles of documentary analysis and thematic coding (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2012). This approach was selected because the study does not aim to quantify the frequency of concepts across documents, but to identify recurring meanings, conceptual distinctions, policy tensions, and educational implications within a purposively selected documentary corpus. The procedure combined deductive coding, derived from the research questions and conceptual literature, with inductive coding, which allowed new themes to emerge from country-level policy materials, international guidance documents, and regional studies. The analysis proceeded in five stages. In the first stage, all selected sources were read closely to identify their relevance to the four research questions. Particular attention was given to whether a source clarified the distinction between faith-transmission religious education and education about religion, explained the position of religion in education or citizenship formation, addressed freedom of religion or belief, or illuminated the digital mediation of religious discourse. Sources that were purely devotional, weakly connected to education, or insufficiently verifiable were excluded at this stage.

In the second stage, an initial coding framework was developed. Deductive codes included “religious education,” “education about religion,” “religious literacy,” “value formation,” “identity construction,” “minority rights,” “freedom of religion or belief,” “symbolic fairness,” “citizenship education,” “intercultural dialogue,” and “digital media literacy.” These codes reflected the article’s conceptual concerns and research questions. During the same stage, inductive codes were also added when the documents revealed issues not fully captured by the initial framework, such as “policy-practice gap,” “minority-religion teacher shortage,” “parallel moral education,” “majoritarian representation,” “faith-based schooling,” “online religious misinformation,” and “digital majoritarianism.”

In the third stage, related codes were grouped into broader thematic clusters. For example, codes concerning legal entitlement, non-coercion, minority rights, teacher availability, and symbolic representation were synthesized into the theme of religious fairness. Codes concerning social media, online authority, manipulated images, hate speech, and misinformation were grouped under the theme of digital religious literacy. Codes concerning moral values, national belonging, civic identity, and school rituals were grouped under the theme of religion, values, and identity formation. This process generated the five findings presented in the article: the distinction between education about religion and faith-transmission religious education; the three functions of religion in education; the legal, organizational, and symbolic layers of religious fairness; the diversity of religion-education configurations across the 11 ASEAN member states; and the role of digital space in shaping religious understanding.

In the fourth stage, a comparative country matrix was constructed for the 11 ASEAN member states. Each country was examined through four analytical questions: What is the prominent religious-social configuration? How does religion, values education, or civic harmony appear in schooling or public education policy? What fairness or minority-rights issue is most relevant? What educational implication follows from that configuration? The resulting matrix was used as a heuristic tool rather than as a fixed classification. It was designed to make regional patterns visible while avoiding the reduction of complex national contexts to single religious labels.

In the fifth stage, the findings were synthesized into a coexistence-capacity framework for education about religion. In this final stage, the article distinguished between foundational principles, pedagogical mechanisms, contextual conditions, and expected educational outcomes. Academic study of religion and human-rights protection were treated as foundational principles; recognition of lived faith without coercion and intercultural dialogue were treated as pedagogical mechanisms; digital media literacy was treated as a contextual condition of contemporary religious learning; and coexistence capacity was treated as the expected educational outcome.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of interpretation, three safeguards were used. First, claims about country-level configurations were not based on a single source when the issue was sensitive; official sources were read alongside scholarly literature, international reports, or

regional studies where possible. Second, policy documents were treated as evidence of institutional orientation rather than as direct proof of classroom practice. This distinction was important because official statements may express normative commitments that are not always fully realized in school-level implementation. Third, the analysis avoided ranking countries or making evaluative claims beyond the available documentary evidence. The purpose was not to judge national systems, but to identify the educational tensions that arise when religion, schooling, rights, identity, and digital media intersect.

Source identification and verification

→ Inclusion and exclusion screening

→ Deductive and inductive coding

→ Formation of thematic clusters

→ Construction of the country-level comparative matrix

→ Synthesis into the coexistence-capacity framework

Figure 1. Analytical flow of the documentary study

Source: Authors' synthesis based on the study design and documentary analysis procedure.

2.5. Methodological limitations

The study has four methodological limitations. First, it does not test the proposed framework with classroom data, student surveys, teacher interviews, textbook coding, or school-level observation. The findings should therefore be read as a conceptual and documentary synthesis that can guide later empirical research, not as evidence of the actual effectiveness of education about religion in specific classrooms. Second, the country-level comparison remains broad. Southeast Asian countries contain substantial internal diversity by region, ethnicity, language, school type, legal arrangement, local religious history, and state-religion relationship. No fourfold grouping can capture all of that complexity. The country-level matrix is therefore used as a heuristic map rather than as a fixed typology or a ranking of national systems. Third, many official and legal-policy sources reflect institutional orientation or policy intention rather than classroom reality. This distinction is especially important in the field of religion and education. A law or policy may formally recognize freedom of religion or belief, minority rights, religious harmony, or the entitlement to religious instruction, but school-level implementation still depends on teacher availability, budget, curriculum time, learning materials, leadership capacity, local demographics, and the broader political climate. For example, a right to receive religious education according to one's own religion may remain difficult to realize where schools lack qualified teachers from minority traditions or where the number of minority students is too small to organize separate classes. Similarly, a policy of religious harmony may promote civic cohesion while leaving unresolved the question of whether students can critically discuss unequal representation, majority norms, or online hostility toward minority groups. Fourth, the study relies on documentary interpretation and therefore cannot fully capture how teachers, learners, parents, or minority communities

experience religion in everyday school life. The article treats policy documents as evidence of how states, institutions, or official agencies frame religion, values, citizenship, and rights. It does not treat them as proof that learners experience fairness, inclusion, or coexistence capacity in practice. These limitations do not invalidate the study, but they define the level of claim that can responsibly be made. The article proposes an analytical orientation and a curriculum-governance framework; it does not claim to measure implementation effectiveness across the region.

3. FINDINGS

The documentary synthesis shows that religion in education in Southeast Asia cannot be understood as a single curricular topic or as a matter of doctrine alone. Across the materials reviewed, five findings are most important: the need to distinguish education about religion from faith-transmission religious education; the three functions of religion in education; the multi-layered character of religious fairness; the diversity of religion-education configurations across the 11 ASEAN member states; and the growing significance of digital space for religious understanding and conflict. Taken together, these findings also reveal a recurring policy-practice tension: formal recognition of religious diversity, rights, or harmony does not automatically translate into fair classroom experience unless schools have the organizational capacity, teacher preparation, curricular materials, and governance procedures needed to implement such commitments.

Finding 1. Education about religion must be distinguished from faith-transmission religious education

The first finding is conceptual but foundational. Religious education, in the narrower sense, usually takes place within a faith tradition and aims to form or strengthen belief, identity, practice, and moral belonging. Such education may be appropriate in families, places of worship, faith-based schools, or internal community settings. Education about religion is different. It treats religion as an object of academic inquiry and public understanding. Its aim is not to convert, confirm, or reject belief, but to help learners understand religion as a historical, cultural, social, political, ethical, and lived phenomenon.

This distinction is consistent with the American Academy of Religion (2010) and OSCE/ODIHR (2007), both of which emphasize that teaching about religion in public schools should be non-devotional, accurate, fair, age-appropriate, and respectful of human rights. Moore's (2007) concept of religious literacy further deepens the distinction. Religious illiteracy is not simply ignorance of religious names or symbols; it is also the inability to see how religion intersects with power, culture, history, gender, ethnicity, class, and politics. Jackson (2014, 2016) similarly warns that religious traditions should not be presented as closed, homogeneous systems. In diverse classrooms, no student should be forced into the role of representing an entire religion or worldview.

For Southeast Asia, the distinction has particular importance because the same school system may be expected to transmit national values, protect cultural heritage, recognize majority

religious identities, and respect minority rights. Without conceptual clarity, education about religion can quickly slide into informal faith transmission, moral majoritarianism, or superficial descriptions of festivals and symbols.

Table 2. Distinguishing two approaches to religion in education

Criterion	Religious education	Education about religion
Primary aim	Forms or strengthens faith, identity, religious practice, and belonging within a tradition.	Develops academic understanding, interpretive capacity, and respect for religious and worldview diversity.
Teacher position	Often taught by someone belonging to or authorized by the faith tradition.	Taught by a teacher or facilitator using academic, fair, non-coercive, and rights-respecting principles.
Main content	Doctrine, scripture, ritual, devotional practice, and internal moral norms.	Religion as historical, cultural, social, political, ethical, and lived experience.
Main risk	Imposition of belief or exclusion of students outside the tradition.	Superficial, decontextualized, or biased representation if teacher preparation is weak.

Finding 2. Religion enters education through values, identity, and coexistence capacity

The second finding is that religion participates in education through three interrelated functions: value formation, identity construction, and the development of coexistence capacity.

First, religion functions as a source of value formation. In many Southeast Asian societies, children encounter religious and belief traditions through festivals, family rituals, ancestor veneration, ideas of merit and karma, filial respect, charity, spiritual discipline, community service, and care for vulnerable people. Such values may become moral resources in education. Yet the analysis also shows a necessary caution: religion should not be presented as the only source of morality, nor should any tradition be treated as proof of the moral superiority of one community over another. Second, religion participates in identity construction and identity governance. Decisions about whether religion appears in textbooks, school rituals, public holidays, moral education, or images of the “good citizen” are not neutral. They shape who is imagined as belonging naturally to the national community and who may appear as peripheral. In majority-religion contexts, schools can strengthen social cohesion, but they can also reproduce the sense that minority or non-religious learners stand outside the shared story. Third, religion can be used to develop coexistence capacity. This capacity includes basic knowledge of religions and worldviews; the skill of interpreting symbols, rituals, narratives, and media representations in context; the ability to listen and speak across difference; epistemic humility; and civic responsibility when facing discrimination, misinformation, hate speech, or symbolic conflict. Banks (2008) argues that citizenship education in a global age should help learners negotiate cultural, national, and global identities. Applied to education about religion, this means learners should not be

forced to choose between faith identity and shared citizenship.

These three functions are inseparable. Values may nurture compassion, but they may also be used to divide “us” from “them.” Religious identity may support belonging, but it may also become majoritarian. Coexistence capacity develops only when education treats this complexity as a guided object of learning rather than as a problem to avoid.

Finding 3. Religious fairness has legal, organizational, and symbolic layers

The third finding is that religious fairness in schools is not limited to equal access to curriculum. It also involves protection from coercion, discrimination, misrecognition, and symbolic exclusion. International instruments on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion provide the legal foundation for this approach (United Nations General Assembly, 1981; United Nations Human Rights Committee, 1993). Yet the documentary analysis also shows that legal recognition alone is insufficient. Religious fairness becomes educationally meaningful only when legal principles are supported by organizational capacity and symbolic inclusion.

The analysis suggests three layers of religious fairness. The first is legal fairness: learners should not be coerced into following, studying, or practising a faith that is not their own, and they should have protection for belief, non-belief, and change of belief. The second is organizational fairness: schools need workable arrangements for timetables, teachers, learning materials, food, clothing, holidays, rituals, and spaces of school life. The third is symbolic fairness: textbooks, school events, classroom examples, and public narratives should not present minority groups as problems, curiosities, or stereotypes, but as legitimate parts of the shared social story.

Indonesia illustrates the gap between legal entitlement and organizational capacity. The National Education System Law provides that learners are entitled to religious education according to their own religion, taught by an educator of the same religion (Republic of Indonesia, 2003). Raihani (2015), however, shows that minority students may still face practical difficulties when schools lack qualified teachers, when minority numbers are small, or when separate classes are difficult to organize. This case shows that rights recognized in law do not automatically become fair educational experience unless management conditions are in place.

This gap is not only administrative; it is also curricular and symbolic. A school system may formally recognize religious diversity while textbooks, rituals, holiday calendars, moral narratives, or examples of the “good citizen” continue to privilege the majority tradition as the natural center of national belonging. In such cases, minority and non-religious learners may be included legally but remain marginal in the symbolic life of the school. Religious fairness should therefore be understood as a matter of educational governance. Questions about dress, food, holidays, rituals, offensive speech, textbooks, digital content, and classroom discussion require procedures grounded in consultation, non-discrimination,

protection of vulnerable learners, and respect for dignity.

Finding 4. The 11 ASEAN member states show different religion-education configurations

The fourth finding is that Southeast Asia cannot be approached through a single model of religion in education. The region displays different configurations of majority religion, minority rights, civic education, faith-based schooling, state law, and cultural heritage. For analytical clarity, the countries may be grouped into four broad clusters: officially Islamic or Muslim-majority contexts; Theravada Buddhist contexts linked to heritage and national symbolism; Catholic-influenced contexts; and multi-religious or citizenship-governed contexts. These clusters are heuristic rather than fixed. They clarify dominant patterns, but they should not hide internal diversity.

The comparison below expands the earlier broad map into a country-level matrix. The matrix is intentionally cautious. It identifies salient educational issues without claiming that one source can capture the full complexity of any country.

Table 3. Country-level map of religion-education configurations in Southeast Asia

Country	Prominent configuration	Religion, values, or harmony in schooling/public education	Educational issue requiring attention	Indicative sources
Brunei	Officially Islamic monarchy; Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) is central to national identity.	Islamic Religious Knowledge and MIB appear as key learning areas; religious subjects were integrated into the general education system from November 2023.	Clarify how national-religious identity is taught while protecting non-Muslim learners and minority participation.	Ministry of Education Brunei Darussalam (2013, 2023); U.S. Department of State (2024a).
Indonesia	Muslim-majority society with state recognition of several religions.	Learners are legally entitled to religious education according to their own religion and by a teacher of the same religion.	The main tension lies between legal entitlement and uneven school capacity to provide minority religious instruction.	Republic of Indonesia (2003); Raihani (2015); Yusuf (2016); U.S. Department of State (2024d).
Malaysia	Islam closely tied to Malay identity within a multi-religious society.	The national blueprint distinguishes Islamic Education for Muslim students and Moral Education for non-Muslim students.	Curriculum must avoid parallel moral worlds and strengthen shared civic understanding across communities.	Ministry of Education Malaysia (2013); Hefner (2001); U.S. Department of State (2024f).
Cambodia	Theravada Buddhism strongly linked to heritage, ritual life, and	Religion often appears through moral culture,	Education about religion should recognize Buddhist	Bouma et al. (2010); Evans et al. (2023); U.S.

Country	Prominent configuration	Religion, values, or harmony in schooling/public education	Educational issue requiring attention	Indicative sources
	public culture.	heritage, monastic presence, and public symbols rather than only as a school subject.	heritage while making minority Christian, Muslim, and local belief communities visible.	Department of State (2024c).
Laos	Theravada Buddhist heritage coexists with socialist state governance and ethnic-religious diversity.	Religion may appear through cultural heritage and community life more than through pluralist comparative religious education.	Minority ethnic beliefs and Christian communities require careful representation within civic and cultural education.	Bouma et al. (2010); Evans et al. (2023); U.S. Department of State (2024e).
Myanmar	Buddhism is deeply tied to majority identity, but the country has severe ethnic and religious tensions.	Religion and national identity are highly sensitive in education, especially where Buddhist-majority narratives intersect with minority exclusion.	Education about religion must avoid reproducing majoritarian narratives and must attend to conflict, displacement, and minority dignity.	Evans et al. (2023); U.S. Department of State (2024b).
Thailand	Theravada Buddhism is associated with national culture and public morality, while the country contains important Muslim and other minorities.	Buddhist symbols and values are visible in public life and schooling; civic education is closely linked to national belonging.	Curriculum should recognize Buddhist heritage without treating it as the only legitimate form of national identity.	Bouma et al. (2010); Evans et al. (2023); U.S. Department of State (2024i).
Philippines	Catholicism has a strong historical and institutional presence, alongside religious pluralism.	Good Manners and Right Conduct and Values Education are institutionalized in the K to 12 curriculum; faith-based schools remain important.	Values education should protect plural religious and non-religious learners while recognizing the historical role of Catholic institutions.	Republic Act No. 11476 (2020); Department of Education Philippines (2023); U.S. Department of State (2024g).
Timor-Leste	Catholicism is historically prominent and connected with national memory, education, and post-conflict social recovery.	Faith-based educational institutions have public significance in a young state now integrated into ASEAN.	Curriculum and school governance need to balance Catholic institutional identity with plural citizenship and minority rights.	ASEAN (2025); D'Agostino & Asadullah (2025); U.S. Department of State (2024j).
Singapore	Highly plural society governed through racial and religious harmony,	Schools teach the importance of racial and religious	Harmony education should combine respect and trust	Ministry of Education Singapore (2025);

Country	Prominent configuration	Religion, values, or harmony in schooling/public education	Educational issue requiring attention	Indicative sources
	citizenship education, and public regulation of diversity.	harmony through Character and Citizenship Education and related programmes.	with the ability to discuss difficult differences critically and safely.	Hefner (2001); U.S. Department of State (2024h).
Vietnam	Multi-belief setting where religion, folk belief, ancestor veneration, cultural heritage, and law intersect.	Religion is encountered through heritage, community life, moral culture, law, and public policy rather than through a single confessional curriculum.	Education about religion should help learners read symbols, heritage, belief, and legal rights without reducing religion to folklore or politics.	Government Committee for Religious Affairs Vietnam (2023); Pew Research Center (2025); U.S. Department of State (2024k).

Several patterns emerge from the matrix. In officially Islamic or Muslim-majority contexts, the key issue is not whether Islam has historical and social significance; it clearly does. The educational question is how to recognize that significance while ensuring the rights of students outside the majority tradition and maintaining a shared civic space. In Theravada Buddhist contexts, the key issue is how to respect Buddhist heritage without equating national identity with a single religious identity. In Catholic-influenced contexts, the issue is how to balance the institutional role of faith-based education with the rights of learners from other traditions or no religion. In Singapore and Vietnam, where religion is strongly tied to civic governance, heritage, or community life, education about religion needs to move beyond descriptive knowledge toward interpretive and dialogical capacity. The comparison also shows that policy categories alone cannot capture educational reality. Legal recognition, civic harmony discourse, faith-based schooling, or values education may all serve constructive purposes, but their effects depend on how they are implemented in schools. A curriculum may affirm diversity while providing little room for difficult dialogue. A legal framework may protect minority rights while schools struggle to provide appropriate teachers, materials, or safe procedures for religiously sensitive issues. A harmony-oriented approach may reduce open conflict while leaving some tensions under-discussed. For this reason, the country-level matrix should be read not as a fixed classification of national systems, but as a heuristic map of the educational tensions that arise when religion, identity, rights, and governance intersect.

Finding 5. Digital space changes how learners receive and interpret religious discourse

The fifth finding concerns digital space. Young people no longer encounter religion only through family, local community, schools, and places of worship. They also meet sermons, rituals, images, debates, apologetics, satire, extremist narratives, counter-extremist

responses, and interreligious content through social media and platformed communication. Digital media are not neutral channels. They reshape religious authority, practice, community, visibility, and identity (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022; Hoover, 2006). For education, this means that religious literacy now requires media literacy. Learners need to ask: Who produced this religious message? What authority is being claimed? Does the speaker represent a whole community or a narrow group? Has an image been removed from context? Does the language invite understanding or provoke fear and hatred? What alternative sources can verify the claim? What would a more humane interpretation look like? These are not merely technical questions. They are civic questions in an environment where religion, identity, and media circulate together.

Digital space also raises the stakes of school-based education. A manipulated image can spread faster than a teacher can explain it. A hostile post can transform symbolic difference into conflict. An extremist or exclusionary discourse can use moral language to attract young people who feel anxious, excluded, or humiliated. Education about religion therefore cannot stop at names, scriptures, rituals, and festivals. It must include source evaluation, contextual reading, recognition of dehumanizing language, and responsible response to discriminatory content. This digital dimension also reinforces the policy-practice gap: schools may officially promote harmony and respect, while learners encounter online environments that normalize suspicion, mockery, or hostility toward religious others. Religious literacy in the digital age must therefore prepare learners not only to know about religion, but to interpret and respond to mediated religious discourse ethically.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. From content delivery to governance of religious difference

The findings suggest that religion in education should be understood less as a discrete subject area and more as a problem of governing knowledge, identity, rights, and coexistence. If religion is approached only as doctrine, education easily becomes faith transmission or internal theological instruction. If religion is treated only as heritage, education may miss living belief, freedom of conscience, and the experience of learners for whom religion is not merely cultural background. If religion is framed only as a risk, education can reproduce suspicion and securitized views of religious communities. A balanced approach must therefore recognize religion simultaneously as a source of values, an element of identity, a rights issue, a citizenship question, and a media phenomenon. This balance, however, cannot be achieved through policy language alone. One of the most important implications of the findings is the persistent gap between formal recognition and educational implementation. Many systems can affirm religious harmony, moral education, minority rights, or freedom of religion or belief at the level of law and curriculum. Yet these commitments may become fragile when they enter the everyday conditions of schools. Implementation depends on whether teachers are prepared to handle sensitive religious questions, whether minority learners have access to appropriate instruction, whether textbooks represent religious communities fairly, whether school rituals implicitly privilege a majority tradition, and

whether administrators have procedures for responding to conflict or discrimination.

Indonesia illustrates this policy-practice tension clearly. The legal entitlement to receive religious education according to one's own religion, and to be taught by an educator of the same religion, appears rights-sensitive in principle. Yet this entitlement becomes difficult to implement when schools lack qualified teachers for minority religious groups, when minority students are scattered across schools, or when institutional resources do not allow separate provision. In such cases, the challenge is not simply whether the law recognizes difference, but whether the school system has the organizational capacity to make recognition educationally meaningful. A comparable tension can be seen in settings where moral or religious education is organized along majority-minority lines. In Malaysia, for instance, the distinction between Islamic Education for Muslim students and Moral Education for non-Muslim students may provide institutional clarity, but it also raises a deeper educational question: how can separate moral pathways avoid producing parallel moral worlds? If students are educated into different moral-civic tracks without sufficient shared space for dialogue, mutual understanding, and common citizenship, schooling may protect difference administratively while doing less to cultivate coexistence across difference. The problem is not the existence of differentiated provision itself, but the absence of bridging pedagogies that help learners encounter one another as members of a shared civic community.

The policy-practice gap is also symbolic. Even where students from minority or non-religious backgrounds are formally included, they may still experience marginalization if textbooks, examples, public ceremonies, holiday calendars, school symbols, or classroom narratives repeatedly position the majority tradition as the natural core of national identity. Symbolic fairness therefore requires more than tolerance. It requires careful attention to whose beliefs, rituals, histories, and moral vocabularies are made visible as part of the shared social story, and whose are treated as secondary, exceptional, or merely peripheral. Digital space further complicates this gap. Schools may promote respect and harmony within the curriculum, while students encounter online content that amplifies religious stereotyping, conspiracy narratives, manipulated images, sectarian hostility, or digital majoritarianism. In this context, education about religion cannot be limited to accurate information about scriptures, rituals, founders, or festivals. Learners also need to understand how religious identities are represented, distorted, politicized, and circulated through digital media. Without this dimension, school-based religious literacy may remain disconnected from the actual environments in which young people form impressions of religious others. For this reason, the educational task is not simply to include more religion-related content in the curriculum. The deeper task is to build the conditions under which religious difference can be studied accurately, discussed safely, represented fairly, and negotiated ethically. This requires a shift from content delivery to governance of religious difference. Such governance is not only a matter for ministries or national policy; it also operates through curriculum design, textbook selection, teacher preparation, classroom dialogue, school rituals, and digital-media education. The coexistence-capacity framework proposed in this article should therefore be

understood as both a conceptual model and a governance tool: it links knowledge, rights, representation, media literacy, and dialogue to the practical question of how schools can prepare learners to live responsibly with religious and worldview diversity.

4.2. Theoretical contribution: a coexistence-capacity framework

The article builds on Moore's (2007) view of religious literacy as contextual and power-sensitive, Jackson's (2014, 2016) work on the inclusive study of religions and worldviews, Banks's (2008) argument about multiple identities in citizenship education, and Nussbaum's (2010) defense of humanistic education and moral imagination. These perspectives are useful because they move education about religion beyond the memorization of doctrines, symbols, rituals, and festivals. They also show that religious understanding is inseparable from questions of culture, power, identity, and civic life.

The contribution of this article is to integrate these insights into a Southeast Asia-sensitive coexistence-capacity framework. The framework brings together elements that are often discussed separately: academic study of religion, recognition of lived faith, protection of freedom of religion or belief, symbolic fairness for minorities, digital media literacy, and intercultural dialogue. By connecting these elements, the framework treats education about religion not merely as content knowledge, but as a form of civic and intercultural preparation. This contribution is not a claim that Southeast Asia needs a completely separate theory of education about religion. Rather, the region shows why existing theories must be adapted with greater attention to context. In Southeast Asia, religion is frequently intertwined with monarchy, state formation, ethnicity, village life, colonial memory, post-conflict recovery, faith-based schooling, folk belief, and civic harmony policy. These conditions require a framework that can handle both recognition and restraint: recognition of religion's cultural, ethical, and historical importance, and restraint against coercion, essentialism, symbolic exclusion, and majoritarian dominance.

The coexistence-capacity framework therefore contributes to theory in two ways. First, it links religious literacy with rights awareness and school governance. Understanding religion is not only a matter of knowing what traditions believe or practice; it also requires understanding how religious difference is represented, protected, negotiated, and sometimes marginalized in educational settings. Second, the framework places digital media literacy within education about religion. This is important because learners increasingly encounter religion through online images, influencers, short videos, algorithmic recommendations, misinformation, and identity-based conflict. In this sense, religious literacy in contemporary schooling must also be media-aware and civic-oriented.

4.3. A revised framework for education about religion in multi-religious contexts

The proposed framework should be read as a structure for educational decision-making rather than as a checklist of ideal values. It identifies five interrelated elements that together support education about religion in multi-religious contexts: academic study of religion,

recognition of lived faith without coercion, protection of freedom of religion or belief and minority rights, digital media literacy, and intercultural dialogue directed toward coexistence capacity.

The first element is the academic study of religion. Religion should be taught as a historical, cultural, social, political, ethical, and lived phenomenon, not as content for propagating or rejecting belief. This element protects inquiry. It enables learners to understand religions and worldviews in context, including their internal diversity, historical development, social meanings, and changing interpretations. It also helps prevent the classroom from becoming either a devotional space or a space of anti-religious dismissal.

The second element is recognition of lived faith without coercion. Education about religion should not flatten religion into detached information. For many communities, religion is lived through memory, ritual, emotion, family, discipline, moral vocabulary, and community belonging. At the same time, recognition must not become pressure. Students should not be required to disclose, defend, perform, or represent their personal beliefs before the class. This distinction is especially important in multi-religious classrooms, where learners from minority or non-religious backgrounds may otherwise feel exposed or burdened.

The third element is protection of freedom of religion or belief, including the right not to believe and the rights of minorities. Without this element, religious diversity may be celebrated rhetorically while majority norms continue to define what counts as normal, moral, or nationally authentic. Rights awareness therefore gives education about religion its ethical and civic boundary. It reminds schools that fairness involves not only legal recognition, but also organizational arrangements and symbolic representation.

The fourth element is digital media literacy. Because students now encounter religion through social media, online controversy, platformed preaching, manipulated images, hate speech, and transnational identity debates, religious understanding can no longer be separated from media interpretation. Learners need to evaluate sources, identify decontextualized claims, recognize discriminatory language, and respond responsibly to harmful digital content. Digital media literacy is therefore not an optional addition to religious literacy; it is one of its contemporary conditions.

The fifth element is intercultural dialogue directed toward coexistence capacity. Dialogue is not simply polite conversation or the celebration of diversity. It requires structured listening, interpretive humility, classroom safety, and the ability to discuss disagreement without humiliating others. The expected outcome is coexistence capacity: the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and civic responsibility needed to live with religious and worldview difference in shared social spaces.

Figure 2 presents the conceptual relationship among these elements. Academic study and rights protection function as foundational principles. Recognition of lived faith and intercultural dialogue operate as pedagogical mechanisms. Digital media literacy functions as

a contextual condition of contemporary religious learning. Coexistence capacity is the expected educational outcome. This structure clarifies that the framework is not merely normative; it is intended to guide curriculum design, teacher preparation, school governance, and future empirical research.

BALANCED MODEL FOR EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGION

Academic knowledge - human rights - lived faith experience - dialogue - digital literacy
Southeast Asia context: religious diversity - multiple identities - mediatized life

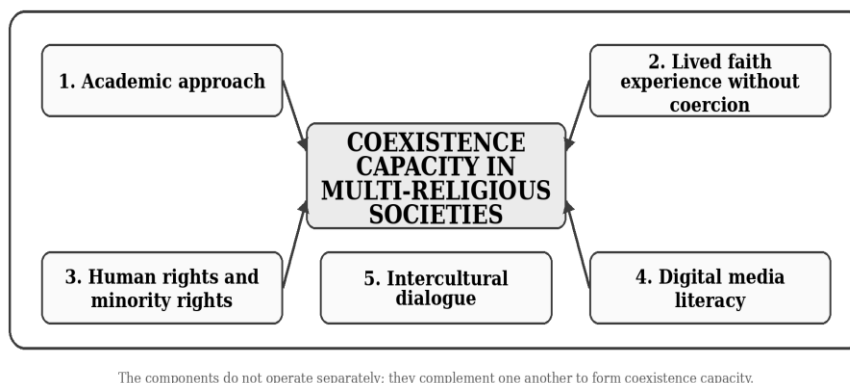


Figure 2. Coexistence-capacity framework for education about religion
in multi-religious Southeast Asia

Source: Authors' synthesis based on the conceptual framework and regional comparative analysis.

4.4. Implications for curriculum, school governance, and teacher professional development

The coexistence-capacity framework should not be understood as a proposal to add another separate subject to already crowded school systems. In many Southeast Asian contexts, schools are under pressure from examination requirements, curriculum reforms, limited instructional time, teacher workload, and uneven resources. A more realistic pathway is therefore cross-curricular integration. Religious literacy, rights awareness, intercultural dialogue, and digital media literacy can be embedded in existing subjects such as History, Civics or Citizenship Education, Literature, Geography, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Language Studies, Ethics, and World Religions or Belief Systems where such subjects already exist. This approach allows the framework to be operationalized without requiring schools to create an entirely new curricular space.

The first pathway is curriculum integration. The element of academic study of religion can be incorporated into History, Cultural Studies, Literature, or Social Studies through lessons on religious traditions as historical, cultural, and social phenomena. The purpose is not to transmit belief, but to help learners understand how religion has shaped communities, moral vocabularies, institutions, and cultural memory. The element of lived faith without coercion can be introduced through carefully selected narratives, case studies, documentaries, community materials, or guided visits. Such activities should help students understand religion as lived experience, but they should not require learners to disclose, defend, or represent their own beliefs. Human rights and minority rights can be addressed through

Civics, Citizenship Education, Law-related Education, or Ethics, especially in topics concerning freedom of religion or belief, non-discrimination, children's rights, and the right not to believe. Digital media literacy can be incorporated into Media Studies, Language Studies, Citizenship Education, or classroom projects that ask learners to evaluate online religious messages, manipulated images, hate speech, conspiracy narratives, and decontextualized claims. Intercultural dialogue can then be developed through structured discussion, role-sensitive classroom activities, collaborative projects, and reflective writing.

The second pathway is staged school-level implementation. Schools do not need to implement all five elements at the same level of intensity at once. A feasible first step is to audit where religion already appears in school life: textbooks, lessons on history or culture, moral education, public holidays, rituals, dress codes, food arrangements, school ceremonies, student interactions, and digital incidents. A second step is to identify points where representation may be unbalanced or where minority and non-religious learners may be unintentionally marginalized. A third step is to develop basic school guidelines for discussing religion-related topics. These guidelines should include non-coercion, respect for privacy, avoidance of stereotyping, protection of vulnerable learners, and procedures for responding to offensive speech or discriminatory online content. A fourth step is to connect these guidelines with teacher professional development, rather than leaving individual teachers to handle sensitive issues alone.

The third pathway is teacher preparation. Teachers are the main actors who translate policy and curriculum into classroom practice. They do not need to become specialists in theology or comparative religion, but they need sufficient professional capacity to teach about religion accurately, fairly, and safely. Teacher professional development should therefore cover four areas: basic knowledge of major religious and non-religious worldviews; methods for contextualizing religious symbols, rituals, texts, and practices; strategies for facilitating dialogue about sensitive issues; and skills for guiding students in digital source evaluation. Training should also help teachers recognize the difference between inviting students to learn about religion and pressuring students to speak for their religion. This distinction is crucial in multi-religious classrooms, where a student from a minority background may otherwise be placed in the uncomfortable position of representing an entire community.

The fourth pathway is school governance. Education about religion cannot depend only on individual classroom practice. Schools need procedures for handling concrete issues such as dress, food, holidays, prayer or ritual requests, religiously offensive language, classroom conflict, and digital content that circulates among students. Such procedures should be consultative, rights-sensitive, and proportionate. They should protect learners from coercion and humiliation while allowing legitimate discussion of religious and worldview difference. School leaders also need to ensure that public ceremonies, displays, examples, and extracurricular activities do not repeatedly position one tradition as the natural center of school identity while leaving other learners symbolically invisible.

The fifth pathway is context-sensitive adaptation. The five elements of the framework will not carry the same weight in every country. In officially Islamic or Muslim-majority contexts, the challenge is often to recognize the historical and civic importance of Islam while protecting minority rights and shared citizenship. In Theravada Buddhist contexts, education needs to respect Buddhist heritage without equating national identity with a single religious identity. In Catholic-influenced contexts, the task is to balance the public role of faith-based education with plural citizenship and the rights of learners from other traditions or no religion. In multi-religious or citizenship-governed contexts, the emphasis may fall more strongly on civic harmony, symbolic fairness, and the ability to discuss difference critically and safely. In all cases, the framework should be treated as a flexible guide, not as a uniform model imposed on diverse systems.

Table 4 translates the framework into possible school-level actions. Its purpose is not to prescribe a single reform package, but to show how the five elements can be connected to existing curricular spaces, school responsibilities, and expected learner capacities.

Table 4. Operationalizing the coexistence-capacity framework in school systems

Framework element	Possible integration pathway	School-level action	Expected learner capacity
Academic study of religion	History, Cultural Studies, Literature, Social Studies, World Religions or Belief Systems	Teach religion as historical, cultural, social, ethical, and lived phenomenon; avoid devotional or anti-religious framing	Understand religion contextually and distinguish academic study from faith transmission
Lived faith without coercion	Case studies, narratives, documentaries, guided community materials, reflective tasks	Use lived examples without requiring students to disclose, defend, or represent personal belief	Recognize religious experience with empathy while respecting privacy and conscience
Freedom of religion or belief and minority rights	Civics, Citizenship Education, Ethics, Law-related Education	Discuss non-discrimination, minority rights, right not to believe, and school responsibilities toward vulnerable learners	Understand rights, fairness, and the ethical limits of majority power
Digital media literacy	Media Studies, Language Studies, Citizenship Education, project-based learning	Analyze online religious messages, manipulated images, hate speech, misinformation, and digital majoritarianism	Evaluate sources, identify prejudice, and respond responsibly to harmful digital content
Intercultural dialogue and coexistence capacity	Structured classroom dialogue, collaborative projects, service learning, reflective writing	Facilitate safe dialogue, prevent stereotyping, and connect learning with shared civic life	Listen across difference, interpret disagreement constructively, and participate ethically in plural societies

This operational reading clarifies how Figure 2 can be translated into educational practice. While Figure 2 presents the conceptual structure of the framework, Table 4 shows how that

structure can inform curricular integration, teacher preparation, school procedures, and learner outcomes. In this sense, the framework is not merely a normative statement that schools should respect religious diversity. It is a practical orientation for connecting knowledge, rights, representation, digital literacy, and dialogue in ways that can be adapted to different Southeast Asian education systems.

4.5. Regional significance and future research

The regional significance of the article lies in treating Southeast Asia not merely as a site where theories developed elsewhere are applied, but as a setting that can extend theory. The relationship between religion and education in the region is shaped by monarchy, nation-building, colonial history, post-conflict recovery, ethnic plurality, faith-based schooling, folk belief, and civic harmony policies. These conditions show why education about religion must be simultaneously academic, intercultural, rights-based, and media-aware.

Future research should move beyond documentary synthesis. Comparative textbook analysis could examine how religions and minorities are represented in official materials. Teacher interviews could identify how sensitive religious topics are handled in real classrooms. Student surveys could measure religious literacy, attitudes toward difference, and vulnerability to online misinformation. Country case studies could also examine how legal commitments to religious freedom become, or fail to become, everyday educational practice.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has examined religion in education in Southeast Asia through a conceptual review and qualitative content analysis of a purposively selected documentary corpus. It argues that religion in education should not be reduced either to the transmission of doctrine or to neutral information about religious traditions. Religion needs to be approached as a historical, cultural, social, ethical, political, and media-mediated phenomenon that shapes values, identities, rights, and civic relations. The article's central argument is that education about religion must be distinguished from faith-transmission religious education. In diverse modern schooling, especially public and multi-belief settings, education about religion has educational value only when it is academic, non-coercive, and attentive to freedom of religion or belief, the right not to believe, and minority rights. The country-level map of the 11 ASEAN member states shows that Southeast Asia cannot be explained through one religion-education model. Officially Islamic or Muslim-majority contexts, Theravada Buddhist contexts, Catholic-influenced contexts, and multi-religious or citizenship-governed contexts each require attention to their own historical, legal, institutional, and social conditions. The article contributes a coexistence-capacity framework for education about religion. The framework links academic inquiry, lived faith recognition without coercion, human-rights protection, digital media literacy, and intercultural dialogue to the expected outcome of responsible coexistence. Its practical implication is a shift in curriculum design: from asking which religion should be taught to asking how education can prepare learners to understand religious difference, resist prejudice, evaluate digital discourse, and participate ethically in shared

social life. More specifically, the framework can be operationalized through cross-curricular integration, staged school-level implementation, teacher professional development, rights-sensitive school governance, and context-sensitive adaptation across different Southeast Asian settings. Because the study is documentary and conceptual, its framework should be tested through future empirical research on curricula, textbooks, teacher preparation, student attitudes, school governance, and minority learners' experiences. Such work would show more precisely how education about religion can be implemented in ways that are intellectually serious, culturally grounded, pedagogically realistic, and fair to learners across religious and non-religious positions.

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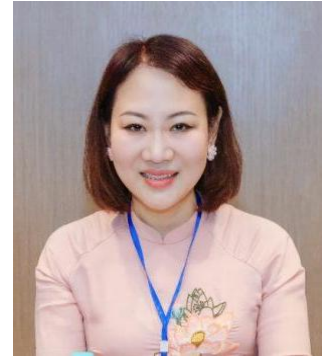
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