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## Islamic Educational Thought in the Contemporary Era According to K.H. Ahmad Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus)

Iffa Hulawalia<sup>1\*</sup>, Mahariani<sup>2</sup>, Muh. Khaidir Nahsyam<sup>3</sup>, Nur Rahmah Al Haqq<sup>4</sup>, Ahmad Hariyadi<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1234</sup> STAI Wakatobi, Indonesia

<sup>5</sup> Universitas Muria Kudus, Indonesia

<sup>1\*</sup>[iffahulawaliastaiwakatobi@gmail.com](mailto:iffahulawaliastaiwakatobi@gmail.com); <sup>2</sup>[maharianistaiwakatobi@gmail.com](mailto:maharianistaiwakatobi@gmail.com);

<sup>3</sup>[muh.khaidirnahsyamstaiwakatobi@gmail.com](mailto:muh.khaidirnahsyamstaiwakatobi@gmail.com); <sup>4</sup>[nurrahmahalhaqq91@gmail.com](mailto:nurrahmahalhaqq91@gmail.com);

<sup>5</sup>[ahmad.hariyadi@umk.ac.id](mailto:ahmad.hariyadi@umk.ac.id)

\*[iffahulawaliastaiwakatobi@gmail.com](mailto:iffahulawaliastaiwakatobi@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This article examines the thoughts of KH. Ahmad Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus) on Islamic education in the contemporary era, emphasizing the importance of the process of humanizing individuals, shaping socially devout beings, and fostering self and environmental reflection. The background of this study stems from concerns over educational practices increasingly trapped in formality and material achievement orientation, thereby neglecting humanitarian values and spirituality. The aim of this study is to explore the humanistic Islamic educational ideas proposed by Gus Mus as a response to the challenges of the times. This research employs a qualitative method using a literature study approach, analyzing Gus Mus's sermons and poems rich in moral and educational messages. The findings indicate that Gus Mus stresses the importance of education not merely as a means of producing intelligent individuals, but more crucially, as a means of shaping humans with social sensitivity, self-awareness, and spiritual depth. According to him, Islamic education should serve as a medium for "self-reflection," recognizing one's identity as both a servant of God and a responsible social being. Thus, Gus Mus's thought offers an Islamic educational paradigm that is both relevant to contemporary needs and a critique of an education system that has lost its humanistic spirit.

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## Introduction

Education is an effort to improve the quality of behavior in life, both for individuals and for groups within society (Fuadi, 2016). Education is a process, not a short-term, pragmatically oriented activity. According to Syed Naquib, education is the process of instilling or inputting values into human beings so that these values become embedded and manifest as positive aspects of life (Bambang, 2023). One prominent figure in Indonesia who strongly advocates for the importance of education is K.H. A. Mustofa Bisri, better known as Gus Mus.

In addition to being a religious leader, Gus Mus is also known for consistently voicing concerns about education, justice, and humanity. He gives special attention to these three values because he believes that the Prophet Muhammad—his role model—was a person of noble character who deeply cared about others (Ulistiani et al., 2018).

Gus Mus is also renowned as a poet. Themes of humanity, justice, and morality often appear in his poetry. In a poem titled "*Tuhan*" ("God"), Gus Mus writes:

"In the past, religion destroyed idols / now religion has become the idol / unaware of the God, as long as the religion is upheld."

This poem conveys a moral message: that one should not become arrogant or self-righteous in the name of religion, and that religious adherence must not come at the expense of recognizing the existence of God (Syarifah & Turahmat, 2019).

As a religious figure who studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, Gus Mus is well-versed in speaking about humanitarian values. He was a close companion of K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) and learned much from him about moderation and compassion (Syarifah & Turahmat, 2019; Taufani, 2018). According to Gus Mus, one of the key factors that enable people to develop a noble sense of humanity is education.

For Gus Mus, education is inseparable from honesty. This can be seen in a stanza of his poem "*Misteri*" ("Mystery"):

"How can you hide love / when your eyes are open mirrors / and your mouth keeps weaving words / to guard what is in your heart?"

This fragment portrays someone hiding many secrets within themselves. Implicitly, the poem underscores the importance of internalizing honesty (Ulya & Wardani, 2020).

Several studies have revealed that Gus Mus is highly vocal in advocating for the importance of education. Some link his ideas to the development of the Society 5.0 era (Almarzuqi, 2023), others highlight his perspectives on multicultural education (Miskan, 2018), and anti-corruption education (Ulya & Wardani, 2020). These various perspectives indicate that Gus Mus, through his poetry and religious sermons, consistently emphasizes the significance of education from multiple dimensions.

In other words, Gus Mus's Islamic educational thought is highly relevant to developments in the contemporary world. The contemporary era is characterized by unlimited access to information, yet it is often devoid of values. Islamic education seeks to instill spiritual, ethical, and moral values derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah. It also aims to strengthen students' character so they are not swept away by the currents of materialism, hedonism, and moral relativism.

Islamic education helps learners fully and moderately (*wasathiyah*) recognize their Islamic identity so that they can live harmoniously in a pluralistic society with tolerance, justice, and inclusivity. This is especially crucial in the face of rising extremism and social polarization. Moreover, Islamic education is expected to be adaptive to digital technology—both in teaching methods (such as e-learning, digital da’wah applications, etc.) and in equipping students with critical and ethical digital literacy skills grounded in Islamic values.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative research method. Qualitative research prioritizes argumentation based on interpretation and is often considered an art form due to its high degree of subjectivity (Harahap, 2020; Sugiyono, 2019). Furthermore, Creswell (2015) explains that the qualitative research process involves key efforts such as formulating questions and procedures, collecting specific data, and conducting inductive analysis—from specific themes to broader generalizations.

This study also combines both library research and field study approaches. The researcher reviews primary literature, including journal articles, books, and research reports discussing the thoughts of Gus Mus (Adlini et al., 2022). Additionally, the study adopts a critical paradigm, which defines social science as a critical process aimed at uncovering the “real structures” behind the illusion of false needs, as manifested in the material world. The purpose is to help individuals enhance their awareness and achieve social transformation to improve their quality of life (Halik, 2018).

## Results and Discussion

### Gus Mus’s Contemporary Islamic Educational Thought: The Spirit of Humanity

For Gus Mus, education is a key factor in enhancing the spirit of humanity—particularly through an Islamic perspective on education. He strongly believes that true education must nurture both the intellect and the soul. He explains:

*“In my opinion, the national education system should be a combination of the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) system and the formal school teaching system. Here, there is often confusion between ‘education,’ which in Arabic is tarbiyah, and ‘instruction’ or ‘teaching,’ which is ta’lim. There should be both tarbiyah and ta’lim. Students should be both taught and educated. The strength of education like this exists in the pesantren—but its instructional method is lacking. It doesn’t use deductive methods and such. Meanwhile, formal schools offer good instruction—starting from elementary school, middle school, and so on. They follow a well-organized curriculum. But unfortunately, in formal schools, there’s only instruction, no real education. It’s strange to call it education when there’s no actual educating. So ideally, we should combine the pesantren system with the formal school system. That’s what needs to be done. We should eliminate the dichotomy of ‘religious school’ and ‘general school.’ That dichotomy was created by the Dutch. We must break it, challenge it, and propose a*

*concrete alternative to the government—this is the most ideal concept for our national education system.”*

This statement reveals Gus Mus's vision of holistic education—one that integrates moral and spiritual formation (*tarbiyah*) with intellectual and academic instruction (*ta'lim*). He critiques the artificial dichotomy between religious and secular schools, which he views as a colonial legacy, and calls for an integrated educational model that reflects Indonesia's cultural and spiritual heritage. His emphasis on unity, human values, and moral clarity underscores his broader educational philosophy: that education must ultimately serve to humanize, not just to instruct.

This is precisely why Gus Mus criticizes the style of education in Indonesia, which remains heavily oriented toward the concept of *ta'lim*—focusing on instruction and academic achievement—while neglecting the concept of *tarbiyah*, which is fundamentally aimed at shaping good character and cultivating moral values (Pramita et al., 2023). The *tarbiyah* concept, as presented in the interview statement above, is further developed by Gus Mus into four core character values, as follows:

#### *Nguwongke* (Humanizing the Human Being)

In developing his educational concept, Gus Mus introduced a core principle of character education through the term "*nguwongke*", a Javanese word meaning to humanize the human being. This concept encompasses several elements: understanding (as content), method, and steps for practical application. He states: "*Nguwongke* means to humanize human beings. Just because we are rich, doesn't mean we should consider the poor as less than human. Just because we are smart, doesn't mean the ignorant are not human. Just because we hold high positions, doesn't mean ordinary people aren't worthy of dignity." (A.M., 2019)

The concept of *Nguwongke* developed by Gus Mus underscores that the act of humanizing others cannot be limited or conditioned by any kind of social status—whether financial, economic, social, or hierarchical. At its core, this concept is a rejection of arrogance and superiority based on achievements such as wealth or rank, which often lead people to overlook essential human values.

The method Gus Mus uses to implement this character education value is *suritauladan*—the method of role modeling (Hasan & Zubairi, 2023). As stated by Zainuddin, one of his students: "He first exemplified what '*Nguwongke*' means before teaching it to the *santri*." (A.M., 2019)

In addition to the role model method, Gus Mus also uses a humanistic approach. The humanistic approach views humans as human beings, that is, creatures created by Allah with certain innate dispositions (Fahmi, 2013). As stated by Zainuddin, one of Gus Mus's students, he said, "When Gus Mus speaks with young people, he adjusts to the language of young people, using slightly intellectual language. When he speaks with the elderly, he also adjusts to their way of speaking" (Fahmi, 2013).

The steps used by Gus Mus to instill the character education value of *nguwongke* in his students are as follows (Fahmi, 2013):

- a) Gus Mus first sets an example through his own behavior
- b) Then he tells stories that reflect the character of *nguwongke*
- c) Next, Gus Mus helps his students understand the meaning of *nguwongke*
- d) The students try to comprehend what he says and what he practices

### Social Piety

The next character education value developed by Gus Mus is Social Piety (*Saleh Sosial*), which is implemented as the outcome of worship to Allah being reflected in how a person shows good behavior toward others. The concept of Social Piety developed by Gus Mus is explained as follows: “In short, piety or righteousness means being righteous before Allah, as reflected in ritual worship, and at the same time being good toward Allah’s creatures (social piety)” (Fahmi, 2013).

This concept conveys the understanding that a person’s piety can be seen in their sincerity in practicing values of devotion and worship to Allah SWT. However, it goes beyond that—Social Piety also reflects good moral behavior toward others, whether between individuals, within society at large, or in relation to the environment.

The method of role modeling (*suritauladan*) is also applied by Gus Mus in teaching this character value. This can be seen in how he designates a specific day (Friday) to meet and serve the people who visit his home. Without making distinctions, he welcomes everyone equally as his guests. Anyone from any background who wishes to meet him can do so directly on that day (Fahmi, 2013).

The steps taken by Gus Mus to instill the character value of Social Piety (*Saleh Sosial*) are carried out through several stages (Fahmi, 2013):

- a) Gus Mus first sets an example through his own behavior.
- b) Then, he helps his students understand the concept of social piety, both in terms of its definition and its practical application.
- c) The students strive to comprehend what he conveys and what he practices.

### Looking in the Mirror: A Metaphor for Self-Education

The next character education value taught by Gus Mus is Looking in the Mirror (Waid, 2017), which serves as a metaphor for self-reflection. In his work *Membuka Pintu Langit* (Opening the Gate of Heaven), Gus Mus writes (Safitri, 2017): “For example, we see a friend who behaves harshly and insensitively, or a friend who likes to boast and belittle others; or a friend who always wants to win, to dominate, or displays other bad traits. How do we react to such attitudes in our friends? We may feel irritated, disgusted, or at least dislike them. Now, let us imagine that these friends are us, and we are them. In other words, it is we who possess those negative behaviors, and they are the ones observing.”

In this case, every person has the potential to act inappropriately, to do shameful things, or to behave in a harsh and insensitive manner. Before we become angry, irritated, or even

hateful toward others' bad actions—when we are merely observers—this is where the value of “looking in the mirror” becomes meaningful. We are asked to reflect inwardly and consider: what if all the wrongs we see in others were actually our own behaviors being seen by someone else?

The method applied by Gus Mus in the character education value of “Looking in the Mirror” uses the *muhasabah* (self-reflection) method (Wanti, Eka Ariska, 2022). Gus Mus explains and invites individuals to look inward and reflect on their own behavior personally. To carry out this self-reflection, Gus Mus applies several steps (A.M., 2019; Fahmi, 2013):

- a) Gus Mus first sets an example through his own behavior.
- b) Then, he helps his students understand the concept of looking in the mirror through metaphors.
- c) Gus Mus provides reaffirmation as a key emphasis of the material he delivers. For example, in his book *Membuka Pintu Langit*, where he discusses the character education of looking in the mirror, he ends with a clear statement: “Thus we can extend examples of the noble teaching of the hadith by looking into the mirror. Our fellow brother is our mirror.”

The character education value of Looking in the Mirror teaches that using others as a reflection for self-evaluation is a powerful step in preventing greater immoral behavior. Through this approach, Gus Mus also emphasizes a value derived from the hadith, that fellow Muslims are brothers, and therefore, it is noble to practice Looking in the Mirror by reflecting on the actions of our fellow Muslims for the sake of mutual good.

### Cultivating the Attitude of Forgiveness

Gus Mus refers to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) for the definition of the word *maaf* (forgiveness). According to him, a person who asks for forgiveness is someone with a noble soul, and one who forgives is a symbol of a person with a chivalrous spirit. The character education of “Forgiveness” is expressed as follows:

*“Maaf can mean the release of someone from punishment (demands, fines, etc.) due to a mistake; it can also mean a plea for pardon—in other words, a request to be released from punishment (demands, fines, etc.).” According to Gus Mus, asking for or granting forgiveness is a noble act. A person who is willing to admit a mistake and ask for forgiveness is a knight. A person who readily forgives is someone with a great soul.*

The concept of character education through “Forgiveness” reflects the greatness of both parties involved. Based on Gus Mus’s explanation, someone who acknowledges their fault and seeks forgiveness is portrayed as a noble knight, while someone who willingly grants forgiveness is depicted as a person of magnanimous spirit.

In implementing the character education of “Forgiveness,” Gus Mus provides an understanding of the concept of *maaf* (forgiveness) and the virtues of those who forgive (Almarzuqi, 2023; Pramita et al., 2023). The method he uses is the same as before—namely, the exemplary method (*suritauladan*). In practice, he first demonstrates forgiveness through his own behavior before delivering the conceptual understanding of forgiveness, following the example of his father, Kyai Bisri Mustofa.



The practical steps consist of the following stages (Fahmi, 2013):

- a) Gus Mus first demonstrates forgiveness through his own behavior.
- b) Then, he tries to help his students understand the character of forgiveness.
- c) The students try to grasp what he conveys and what he practices.

A forgiving character that does not find it difficult to forgive others—whether in terms of releasing claims, fines, or offenses—is a highly moral act, even portrayed as a sign of a great soul. However, through the character education of “Forgiveness,” it is also taught that admitting fault and asking for forgiveness is a noble and even more commendable act.

### The Importance of Islamic Education in Shaping Character and Morality in the Digital Era

In addition to his concern for religious education, Gus Mus also pays close attention to the development of character and morality, especially within the realm of education (Laila, 2018, 2022). Regarding the goals of education, Gus Mus states (Fahmi, 2013):

*“The general goal of Islamic education is to produce complete human beings—not only those who are intelligent but also those who are rich in heart, educated individuals with both intellect and conscience. Such people will be optimally beneficial and, at the very least, will not cause much harm. Smart people who commit evil deeds are more difficult to catch.”*

This statement explains that the goal of Islamic education is to develop a generation that is well-rounded both intellectually and morally. Educating with Islamic values is expected to reduce the number of individuals who contribute to destruction, by emphasizing the central role of conscience (the heart).

Gus Mus argues that character is an undeniable issue in human life—from the past, present, and into the future. Character is a major and critical issue, and the survival or downfall of a nation heavily depends on the quality of its character (Almarzuqi, 2023).

Understanding how essential character and morality are, in one of his works, Gus Mus emphasizes the need to cultivate moral and character education. He once advised the importance of self-reflection—of looking into ourselves first—so we can become more aware of our faults, and at the very least, reduce them through mutual introspection. As he stated (A.M., 2019):

*“As we know, seeing others is easier and clearer than seeing ourselves. Let us look at others, observe their flaws and shortcomings, and then feel our own response toward those flaws and shortcomings. For example, we see our friend behaving rudely and insensitively, or a friend who likes to boast and belittle others; or one who is selfish and always wants to win, or others who display poor character. How do we respond to our friends’ behavior? We might feel annoyed, disgusted, or at least uncomfortable. Then, let us imagine that those friends are us, and we are them. Meaning, we are the ones with that unworthy behavior, and they are the ones watching.”*

From this, Gus Mus’s thought on implementing education based on *Tarbiyah*, structured into four aspects of character education—*Nguwongke* (humanizing others), Social Piety, Self-Reflection (Looking in the Mirror), and Forgiveness—offers important values that should be

adopted by all levels of educational institutions. These values can be aligned with both curriculum and teaching methods.

Character and moral education today are indeed essential to accompany the evolution of the times and the development of Ta'lim (instruction). The four concepts developed by Gus Mus provide a pathway for transformative change, particularly in securing a future generation of high quality for the nation.

### Implications of Gus Mus's Islamic Educational Thought in Contemporary Education

The character of *nguwongke* (humanizing others) can be implemented by developing an educational curriculum based on appreciating and supporting the uniqueness and character of every student, moving away from the old concept of education that focuses solely on academic achievement or grades. The goal is to shape good moral personality values for all students and to maximize their strengths, such as talents in both academic and non-academic achievements.

The character of *Saleh Sosial* (social piety) can be directly integrated by teachers with students by building good relationships, trying not to emphasize the stark differences between teacher and student status in order to eliminate feelings of awkwardness or fear among students. This reflects the character of social piety, which is caring about social aspects (Anam et al., 2024). A socially caring character means not being selfish and always wanting to help those in need. This character can be seen as a reflection of practicing worship values as well as good conduct toward Allah's creatures.

The character of *melihat cermin* (looking into the mirror), a concept introduced by Gus Mus, is similar to the honesty character taught in formal education. This character invites a person to be honest with themselves and not to easily insult others based on the reflection of themselves if they commit similar actions. The method of *muhasabah* (self-reflection) is also applied by teachers in Islamic Religious Education subjects in schools. Moreover, teachers' practice of self-reflection positively impacts their behavior, such as providing good examples (*suritauladan*), and in delivering material to students, which also encourages teachers to guard their speech and avoid using inappropriate words or phrases.

The forgiving character (*memaafkan*), as conveyed by Gus Mus, is similar to the tolerant and democratic character promoted by formal education (Wahid, 2018). In Islamic Religious Education subjects, moral teachings include forgiveness as one form of good character. Teachers can use real-life story methods, such as the story of Prophet Muhammad SAW who refrained from praying for harm against the people of Thaif after being rejected and mistreated, instead choosing to pray for their guidance from Allah SWT (Masruri, 2021). This story resonates more deeply with students because it is based on real events.

The implementation of the character education concepts developed by Gus Mus above is very relevant to face the challenges of the modern era (Almarzuqi, 2023). Although these concepts have not yet been formally incorporated into curricula or syllabi in formal education, there are similarities with existing materials. The concepts developed by Gus Mus —



*Nguwongke*, *Saleh Sosial*, *Melihat cermin*, and *Memaafkan* — have broader applications because they are based on Islamic teachings.

## Conclusion

In Gus Mus's view, education is not solely focused on teaching (*ta'lim*), but rather on holistic education (*tarbiyah*). With a systematic approach that emphasizes values and exemplary behavior, it is hoped that positive character and morals can develop well. Only with positive character and morals can the digital era be approached wisely and constructively.

Islamic education in Gus Mus's thought must foster attitudes that humanize others (*nguwongke*), encourage social piety (*Saleh Sosial*), and frequently engage in self-reflection (*melihat cermin*). Gus Mus places great emphasis on ethics (*akhlak*) as the key indicator of successful education. In the contemporary education era, the target is not only quantitative achievements but also qualitative values such as ethics, character, and morals.

## Authorship Contribution Statement

This article was completed with the assistance and contributions of all co-authors. First, Iffa Hulawalia developed the initial ideas, formulated the article concept, and collected literature data regarding the thoughts of Gus Mus. Then, Mahariani and Muh. Khaidir Nahsyam contributed by analyzing the data and designing the article structure. Meanwhile, Nur Rahmah Al Haqq and Ahmad Hariyadi were responsible for drafting and final editing of the article up to the submission process.

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