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Distancing without Departing: Sharia Trauma and the Digital Renegotiation of Religiosity among Indonesian Muslim Youth

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Abstract

Indonesian social media have become a space where young Muslims recount their religious upbringing, including experiences of fear, shame, and coercion in religious learning. Such accounts are often read as signs of declining piety. This article examines how restrictive religious learning is narrated and contested in Indonesian digital spaces, what forms of religious distancing these narratives express, and how the phenomenon can be evaluated through maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. It employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative design that combines library research, public and official reports, and observation of public content on TikTok, X, Instagram, and YouTube. The article introduces Sharia Trauma as a sociological concept for enduring distress that individuals attribute to the way sharia norms were taught and enforced, rather than to sharia itself. The findings show three interrelated patterns. Restrictive learning is remembered through fear, humiliation, and the closure of questioning. Young Muslims distance themselves selectively from particular authorities, communities, and practices while retaining their Muslim identity. Comment sections become arenas where religious authority is contested and re-anchored. Refining Grace Davie's notion of believing without belonging, the article describes this pattern as believing with selective belonging, a reflexive shift from inherited to chosen religiosity. A maqāṣid reading shows that fear-based transmission undermines the objectives it claims to serve, particularly the preservation of religion and intellect and the protection of human dignity. The article recommends a compassionate and dialogical religious pedagogy that goes beyond the safeguarding measures recently adopted in Indonesian Islamic education.

Keywords: *Religious Distancing; Sharia Trauma; Indonesian Muslim Youth; Digital Religion; Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah*

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Introduction

Religious education in Muslim societies does more than transmit doctrine. It shapes how young people understand obligation, sin, authority, and their relationship with God. Its success is commonly measured by visible compliance: praying on time, wearing the hijab, memorizing verses. Yet compliance reveals little about how religion is experienced. When religious learning relies on fear, shame, or coercion, it may produce outward conformity alongside inner estrangement (Downie, 2022; Stone, 2013). Religious educators rarely see this estrangement. Social media now make it visible.

Indonesia's digital transformation has changed where religious education takes place. The 2024 survey of the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association recorded 221.5 million internet users, or 79.5 percent of the population. Generation Z formed the largest share of users at 34.4 percent, with a penetration rate of 87 percent (Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia, 2024). Religious learning follows the same path. Indonesian youth now learn religion through YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook alongside families, schools, mosques, and *pesantren* (Abdullah, 2022; Chair et al., 2024). Authority in these spaces is built through visibility, communication style, and audience engagement rather than through scholarly lineage alone (Solahuddin & Fakhruroji, 2020). It even reaches into the family, where parents now compete with online preachers as religious guides (Himam, 2025).

At the same time, the institutions that transmit religion face growing public scrutiny. The Indonesian Education Monitoring Network (JPPI) recorded 573 cases of violence in educational institutions in 2024, double the 285 cases of the previous year. Thirty-six percent of these cases occurred in religion-based institutions, namely *pesantren* (20%) and madrasah (16%) (Jannah, 2024; Wulandari, 2024). The state has responded. In 2024 the Ministry of Religious Affairs issued technical guidelines on child-friendly care in *pesantren* (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam, 2024). In 2025 it launched the Love-Based Curriculum (*Kurikulum Berbasis Cinta*) for madrasah, citing concern that religious learning had failed to prevent bullying and intolerance among students (Tristara, 2025). These measures signal official recognition that the problem lies not only in what religion teaches, but also in how it is taught.

Social media reveal the experiential side of this problem. Young Indonesians increasingly recount religious upbringings they describe as painful: being threatened with hell for minor mistakes, humiliated in religious classes, or rebuked for asking questions. Many of these accounts end not with leaving Islam but with an affirmation of continued faith. This combination of withdrawal and attachment does not fit the binary through which youth religiosity is usually read, namely rising piety versus secularization. Studies of Indonesian Muslim youth already point to a "grey area" in which religious commitment, popular culture, and diverse ideological orientations coexist (Waliyuddin, 2024), and to hybrid religious identities formed through digital *hijrah* movements (Nurfitria, 2023; Sunesti et al., 2018). What remains underexplored is the reverse movement: young Muslims who step back from particular forms of religious life because of how religion was taught to them.

Research on religious trauma offers a starting point. It shows how authoritarian religious environments generate fear, shame, guilt, and loss of trust (Downie, 2022), and how conflict with religious figures and anxiety about divine punishment become measurable sources of distress (Exline et al., 2014). This literature developed mainly in Western and largely Christian settings. Recent work has begun to address Muslim contexts. Ok et al. (Ok et al., 2025) developed

a Muslim religious trauma scale, and Ahmad et al. (2026) proposed the notion of digitally mediated religious trauma among Indonesian Muslims living abroad. The first is psychometric and the second focuses on the diaspora. Neither examines how religious education at home is remembered and contested by Indonesian youth online, and neither offers an evaluative framework from within Islamic legal thought. This gap matters because research on young people generally finds religiosity to be protective against depression and anxiety (Aggarwal et al., 2023). Where religious life becomes a source of distress, the cause may therefore lie less in religiosity itself than in the way it is transmitted.

This article addresses these gaps through the concept of Sharia Trauma, read through the sociology of religion and evaluated through *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*. It asks three questions. First, how is restrictive religious learning narrated and contested in Indonesian digital spaces? Second, what forms of distancing do these narratives express, and from what exactly do young Muslims distance themselves? Third, how can this phenomenon be evaluated from a *maqāṣid* perspective? The article argues that the distancing observed is best understood as distancing without departing. It is a selective withdrawal from particular authorities, communities, and practices that coexists with, and is often justified by, continued attachment to Islam. It signals reflexive renegotiation rather than religious decline.

Methods

This article employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative design. Following comparable studies of Indonesian digital religion (Husein & Slama, 2018; Syafaq et al., 2026), it draws on three types of data. The first is scholarly literature on religious trauma, digital religion, Muslim youth identity, and *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*. The second consists of public and official documents that anchor the analysis in the Indonesian context, namely the national internet penetration survey, reports on violence in educational institutions, and regulations and curriculum policies of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The third is non-participant observation of public content on TikTok, X, Instagram, and YouTube between January 2024 and August 2026, located through Indonesian keywords such as *trauma agama, trauma pesantren, takut dosa, ancaman agama, and ustaz galak.*

Observation served to identify how restrictive religious learning is narrated and how audiences respond to such narratives. Content was considered when it was publicly accessible, contained a first-person account of religious learning in the family, school, *pesantren*, *majelis taklim*, or online *daʿwah*, described emotional responses to that learning, and originated from an Indonesian context. Parody, commercial promotion, and content primarily concerned with electoral politics were excluded. Observation results are presented as recurring patterns rather than as individual cases. Each pattern is read alongside the literature and public reports, so that it rests on more than one type of source.

Analysis proceeded deductively and interpretively. Data from the three sources were reduced into themes guided by the theoretical framework, then interpreted through the sociology of religion and finally evaluated through *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*. Ethical procedures followed the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (franzke et al., 2020). Only publicly accessible content was observed, and the researchers did not interact with users. Because personal religious narratives remain sensitive even when public, no usernames, screenshots, or verbatim posts are reproduced. The design has two limitations. Online narratives

are shaped by self-presentation and platform algorithms, and they overrepresent users willing to speak publicly. The findings therefore describe how restrictive religious learning is narrated and contested in digital spaces, not how widespread such experiences are.

Theoretical Framework

From Religious Trauma to Sharia Trauma

Religious trauma refers to lasting distress produced by religious beliefs, practices, or environments. Studies identify recurring mechanisms: fear of divine punishment, chronic shame, authoritarian control, and the suppression of doubt (Downie, 2022; Stone, 2013). Exline et al. (Exline et al., 2014) show that such struggles, including conflict with religious figures and anxiety about punishment, form distinct and measurable dimensions of religious life. These mechanisms are not confined to Christianity. Ok et al. (Ok et al., 2025) demonstrate that religious trauma can be measured among Muslims, while Ahmad et al. (2026) show how digital platforms can both generate religious distress, through moral judgment and the amplification of rigid narratives, and support recovery, through shared storytelling and more inclusive readings of Islam.

This article builds on these insights through the concept of Sharia Trauma. The term does not claim that sharia, as a normative tradition, causes trauma. Such a claim would conflate divine norms with the human processes that interpret and enforce them. Sharia Trauma refers instead to enduring distress that individuals attribute to the way sharia norms were taught and enforced, whether through threats, humiliation, surveillance, or unquestionable authority. The concept shifts attention from doctrine to transmission, and from individual psychology to the social relations in which religious meanings are learned.

Two boundaries keep the concept precise. First, “trauma” is used in a sociological and emic sense. It follows the vocabulary that users themselves adopt online and does not denote a clinical diagnosis. Second, not every negative religious experience qualifies. Moral correction, discipline, and disagreement belong to any religious education. Sharia Trauma becomes analytically relevant only when narratives describe persistent fear, humiliation, coercion, or loss of religious security that outlast their original setting. Without these boundaries, the concept would become a rhetorical tool for delegitimizing religious authority as such.

Believing without Belonging in a Networked Society

Davie (Davie, 1994) coined the phrase believing without belonging to describe the persistence of belief alongside declining institutional participation in post-war Britain. There, withdrawal from churches carried little social cost. In Indonesia, religious belonging is socially expected and publicly monitored, so withdrawal is rarely total. The concept therefore serves here as a sensitizing lens rather than a ready-made category.

Two further perspectives sharpen this lens. Campbell (Campbell, 2012) describes religion in digital culture as networked religion, in which community and authority are formed through flexible, interactive networks rather than fixed institutions. Giddens (Giddens, 1991) describes late-modern identity as a reflexive project, in which individuals continually examine and revise the narrative of who they are. Together, these perspectives explain how young Muslims can loosen their ties to inherited institutions while rebuilding religious belonging through networks they select themselves.

Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah as an Evaluative Lens

Maqāṣid al-sharīʿah holds that Islamic law aims to secure human welfare and to prevent harm (Ibn ʻĀshūr, 2001; Kamali, 2008). Auda (Auda, 2008) adds that purposefulness is the central criterion of a systems approach to Islamic law: a means is judged by whether it achieves its end. Applied to education, this criterion moves the question from whether religious norms were transmitted to whether their transmission served the purposes those norms exist to protect.

The Islamic tradition itself links harsh transmission to the dispersal of believers. The Qur'an addresses the Prophet as follows:

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لِنتَ لَهُمْ ۖ وَلَوْ كُنتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ ۖ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ

> *"It is by the mercy of God that you were gentle with them. Had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would surely have dispersed from around you. So pardon them, ask forgiveness for them, and consult them in the matter"* (QS. Āli ʿImrān [3]: 159).

The Prophet likewise instructed his companions:

يَسِّرُوا وَلَا تُعَسِّرُوا، وَبَشِّرُوا وَلَا تُنَفِّرُوا

> "*Make things easy and do not make them difficult; give good tidings and do not drive people away"* (al-Bukhārī, no. 69).

The verse names dispersal (*infiḍāḍ*) as the consequence of harshness, while the ḥadīth forbids *tanfīr*, the act of driving people away from religion. Both texts treat religious distancing as a foreseeable outcome of the manner of transmission, not merely as a failure of those who distance themselves. This normative insight grounds the evaluation in the final part of the discussion.

Results and Discussion

Remembering Restrictive Religious Learning

Observation of public content shows that restrictive religious learning is remembered through three recurring experiences. The first is fear as the main motive for practice, in which prayer, fasting, or veiling are taught primarily through vivid images of hell and divine punishment. The second is shame and humiliation, such as being reprimanded, mocked, or punished in front of peers for errors in recitation, dress, or conduct. The third is the closure of questioning, in which questions about doctrine or practice are treated as signs of weak faith or disrespect toward teachers. Ahmad et al. (Ahmad et al., 2025) identify a similar configuration in their analysis of around 150 YouTube and TikTok items, where religious distress stemmed from moral judgment and rigid religious narratives.

These memories do not emerge in a vacuum. The JPPI data cited above show that bullying and psychological violence together accounted for 42 percent of recorded cases of violence in Indonesian educational institutions in 2024 (Jannah, 2024). These figures cover all types of institutions and capture only reported cases. Still, they indicate that humiliation and intimidation are part of the educational environment in which many young Indonesians, including students of religion-based institutions, learn. The online narratives give these figures a subjective

dimension. They show how such experiences are remembered years later and how they are tied to religion itself.

What unites these memories is not the content of the norms but the mode of their transmission. The narratives rarely dispute that prayer is obligatory or that modesty matters. They dispute the conditions under which these norms were learned. The object of complaint is therefore a pedagogical relationship rather than a doctrine. Critical approaches to Islamic religious education make a parallel point: learning that excludes questioning yields memorization without understanding and obedience without conviction (Saada & Magadlah, 2020). Young Muslims in Europe likewise value settings where questions are welcomed and experience their absence as alienating (Altinyelken, 2021).

The memories also reveal how fear-based teaching is internalized. Rules first obeyed because of external sanctions turn into self-surveillance. When religious worth is tied to flawless compliance, every lapse becomes evidence of spiritual failure rather than an ordinary mistake. This is the mechanism through which routine discipline becomes, in retrospect, a lasting wound. It corresponds to what the religious trauma literature identifies as chronic shame and anxiety about punishment (Downie, 2022; Exline et al., 2014). Yet the Indonesian narratives are articulated in Islamic terms: fear of *dosa*, of punishment in the grave, of being a bad *santri* or an ungrateful child.

Distancing from What? Authority, Community, and Practice

The second pattern concerns the object of distancing. The narratives rarely describe leaving Islam. They describe stepping back from something more specific: a particular teacher, preacher, or parent; a particular community, such as a *pesantren* network or a study circle; or a particular practice tied to a painful memory. Many narrators combine this withdrawal with an explicit affirmation of faith. Ahmad et al. (Ahmad et al., 2025) report a comparable trajectory, in which distressed users recover through more inclusive readings of Islam rather than by abandoning it.

This pattern can be mapped onto distinct levels of distance. Distance from authority carries the lowest cost, since one can stop following a preacher without changing daily life. Distance from community is more consequential, because Indonesian religious communities are interwoven with family and neighborhood life. Distance from practice is the most sensitive and is often framed as a pause rather than an abandonment. Religious identity, the deepest level, tends to remain intact. Distinguishing these levels prevents a single label, such as religious decline, from flattening very different movements.

Davie's (1994) concept captures part of this pattern, since belief persists while institutional attachment weakens. The Indonesian case, however, differs in one crucial respect. Where religious belonging is expected and monitored, complete withdrawal carries high social costs. Young Muslims therefore do not stop belonging altogether. They choose where and to whom they belong. They leave one study circle and join another, unfollow one preacher and follow a gentler one, or step away from a *pesantren* network while remaining active in their local mosque. This article describes the pattern as believing with selective belonging. Belonging does not disappear; it becomes a matter of choice rather than inheritance.

This refinement changes how distancing should be interpreted. Read through the binary of piety and secularization, religious distancing appears as loss. Read as selective belonging, it

appears as reorganization. It is consistent with the grey area in which young Indonesian Muslims combine seemingly contradictory orientations (Waliyuddin, 2024) and with the hybrid religious identities of Muslim millennials (Nurfitria, 2023). The narrators are not exiting religion. They are redrawing the boundary between Islam, which they continue to claim, and the human authorities and institutions through which they first encountered it.

Comment Sections as Arenas of Contestation and Re-authorization

The third pattern lies in the responses that these narratives provoke. Three types of response recur. Solidarity responses share similar experiences and turn individual memories into a collective narrative. Defensive responses accuse the narrator of weak faith, ingratitude toward teachers, or exposure to liberal ideas. Corrective responses offer alternative religious explanations, often citing Qur'anic verses or prophetic traditions on mercy, gradualness, and gentleness in teaching.

These exchanges illustrate Campbell's (2012) networked religion. In the comment section, authority is not held by whoever has credentials; it is negotiated among participants. Solidarity responses perform important social work. They tell narrators that their experience is not a personal failing, and through this collectivization private memories become a recognizable social phenomenon. Ahmad et al. (2026) likewise observe that shared storytelling and community support turn digital platforms into spaces of recovery.

Defensive responses reveal what is at stake. They frame the narrator's complaint as an attack on religion itself, which is precisely the conflation the narrator rejects. This reaction shows how closely religious authority and religious truth are fused in some segments of Indonesian Muslim society, so that questioning a teacher's method is heard as questioning God. The digital arena thus reproduces, in public, the very dynamic that the narratives describe.

Corrective responses point to re-authorization. Young Muslims do not move from authority to no authority; they move from one authority to another (Rachman et al., 2025). Preachers and fellow users who present a compassionate and reasoned Islam become alternative anchors. This shift, however, is not necessarily progressive. The same platforms that circulate gentler interpretations also amplify rigid and punitive ones (Ahmad et al., 2025), and digital piety generates its own anxieties, such as fear of hypocrisy and of appearing insufficiently pious (Husein & Slama, 2018). A restrictive authority can simply be replaced by another. What matters is not the number of available voices but the capacity to evaluate them.

From Inherited to Chosen Religiosity

Taken together, these patterns indicate a sociological shift in how Indonesian Muslim youth hold their religiosity. In earlier settings, religion was largely ascribed: received from parents, teachers, and the local community, and sustained through social continuity. Today, with Generation Z almost entirely online (Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia, 2024), young Muslims encounter teachings from parents, school teachers, *kiai*, lecturers, preachers, and influencers at the same time. Inherited interpretations lose their taken-for-granted status because they can now be compared.

The narratives examined here are reflexive revisions of the self in Giddens' (1991) sense, expressed in a religious register. Narrators reinterpret their upbringing, separate what they keep from what they reject, and announce the result to an audience. Religious identity becomes

something one authors rather than merely inherits. Sharia Trauma narratives thus mirror another popular genre, the *hijrah* narrative, in which young people recount becoming more pious (Sunesti et al., 2018). The two move in opposite directions, yet they share a structure. Both are first-person religious biographies, told publicly, organized around a turning point, and validated by an audience. This parallel suggests that the deeper transformation is not toward more or less religion, but toward religion narrated as a personal choice.

This shift also clarifies the difference between compliance and commitment. Compliance can be produced by surveillance and sanctions, whereas commitment requires understanding. When religious education measures success through observable conformity, it risks mistaking obedience for internalization. Inner estrangement then remains hidden until it surfaces, as it now does, in public digital spaces.

A Maqāṣid Reading of Sharia Trauma

The *maqāṣid* criterion of purposefulness turns the sociological findings into a normative evaluation. From the perspective of *ḥifẓ al-dīn*, the preservation of religion, the findings present a paradox. Teaching methods intended to protect religion produce distance from religious communities and practices. This is precisely the *tanfīr* that the ḥadīth forbids. A method that weakens attachment to religion contradicts the objective it claims to serve. Preserving religion means sustaining a living relationship with faith, not merely enforcing outward observance.

From the perspective of *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql*, the preservation of intellect, the closure of questioning is the central problem. The Islamic intellectual tradition developed through inquiry, disagreement, and debate. Treating questions as signs of weak faith departs from this heritage and leaves young Muslims ill-equipped to evaluate the competing authorities they meet online. Critical approaches to Islamic religious education accordingly propose that questioning be cultivated within the tradition rather than suppressed (Altinyelken, 2021; Saada & Magadlah, 2020).

From the perspective of human dignity, the findings concern humiliation and intimidation. Contemporary *maqāṣid* thought extends the classical objectives to include the protection of human dignity (Kamali, 2008), and Ibn ʿĀshūr (2006) counts freedom among the higher purposes of sharia. The Prophetic model of teaching points in the same direction. Muʿāwiyah ibn al-Ḥakam al-Sulamī, who had made a mistake in prayer, described how the Prophet corrected him:

مَا رَأَيْتُ مُعَلِّمًا قَبْلَهُ وَلَا بَعْدَهُ أَحْسَنَ تَعْلِيمًا مِنْهُ، فَوَاللَّهِ مَا كَهَرَنِي وَلَا ضَرَبَنِي وَلَا شَتَمَنِي

"I have never seen a teacher, before or after him, who taught better than he did.
By God, he did not scold me, strike me, or insult me" (Muslim, no. 537).

Measured against this model, public shaming and intimidation in religious learning are not neutral pedagogical choices. They depart from the Prophetic sunnah of teaching itself.

Recent policies show that Indonesian Islamic education has begun to move in this direction. The child-friendly *pesantren* guidelines aim to prevent violence through better care and respectful relationships (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam, 2024), and the Love-Based Curriculum places love at the center of madrasah learning (Tristara, 2025). From a *maqāṣid* perspective, these steps are necessary but not sufficient. Safeguarding regulations target overt violence that can be reported and sanctioned. Sharia Trauma, however, also arises from

everyday pedagogy that is not counted as violence: routine threats of hell, public reprimands, and the dismissal of questions. Responding to it requires what Auda (2022) calls re-envisioning Islamic education through *maqāṣid*, so that curricula and teaching relationships are designed around objectives rather than mere transmission. Such a shift does not require weakening religious authority. It requires changing how that authority is exercised.

Conclusion

This article examined how restrictive religious learning is narrated and contested in Indonesian digital spaces and what forms of distancing these narratives express. It found that restrictive learning is remembered through fear, humiliation, and the closure of questioning; that young Muslims distance themselves selectively from authorities, communities, and practices while retaining their Muslim identity; and that comment sections turn these memories into arenas where religious authority is contested and re-anchored. Public data on violence in educational institutions and recent state policies confirm that these narratives point to a recognized problem in the transmission of religion.

These findings support the central argument that religious distancing among Indonesian Muslim youth is best understood as distancing without departing. Theoretically, the article refines Davie's believing without belonging into believing with selective belonging, a formulation suited to societies where religious belonging is socially expected. It also proposes Sharia Trauma as a contextual adaptation of religious trauma research that locates harm in modes of transmission rather than in sharia itself. Normatively, the *maqāṣid* reading shows that fear-based transmission undermines the objectives it claims to serve and departs from the Prophetic model of teaching.

The article is limited by its reliance on public narratives and secondary data, which cannot indicate how widespread such experiences are. Future research could combine digital observation with interviews, compare different types of religious institutions, or examine how religious educators respond to these narratives. Such work would help Islamic education sustain religious continuity while fostering healthier relationships between young Muslims and their tradition.

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