

# **BETWEEN UNIVERSALITY AND CONTEXT: A CONCEPTUAL INQUIRY INTO ADAPTIVE ISLAMIC CHARACTER FORMATION**

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**Abstract:** *Contemporary debates on education highlight the limitations of approaches that privilege cognitive achievement while marginalizing moral formation. Within Islamic traditions, akhlaq has long been understood as the core purpose of education, yet approaches to character formation vary widely across socio-religious contexts. Existing scholarship remains fragmented, offering limited conceptual integration to explain how moral universality is sustained amid contextual diversity and the tensions that accompany this process. This article advances a conceptual synthesis through systematic interpretive engagement with recent literature from Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority settings (Indonesia, Thailand, Turkey, and the United Kingdom), treating context as a constitutive dimension of moral formation. The analysis reveals a persistent ethical core of honesty, responsibility, justice, compassion, and social accountability, alongside significant variation in pedagogical and governance practices. The proposed Contextual–Adaptive Holistic Character Education (CAHCE) model conceptualizes character formation as integrating universal moral core, pedagogical mediation, and context-sensitive governance. Critically, the model does not resolve inherent*

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tensions between operationalization and ontological depth, internal pluralism and normative coherence, or ethical translation and transformation, but provides tools for navigating them with integrity. The contribution is both conceptual and methodological: reframing Islamic character formation as an adaptive ethical enterprise and demonstrating how comparative analysis illuminates the underlying logic of moral traditions. While grounded in Islamic contexts, the framework may apply to other traditions navigating tensions between universality and contextuality, contributing to broader debates on moral formation in pluralistic societies, a pressing social and educational concern.

**Keywords:** moral formation; Islamic ethics; ethical universality; contextual plurality; moral translation

## Introduction

Contemporary societies are increasingly confronted with moral, social, and civic challenges that expose the limitations of educational approaches that are primarily focused on cognitive achievement, technical skills, and instrumental outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Public concern over ethical erosion, social fragmentation, intolerance, and declining moral responsibility has revived philosophical inquiry into how character is formed rather than merely transmitted or regulated. Within this broader debate, character formation is no longer understood as an auxiliary function of schooling, but as a foundational dimension of moral and social life.<sup>2</sup>

Within Islamic intellectual traditions, this concern has long been articulated through the concept of *akhlaq*, which understands character formation as a holistic process integrating moral disposition, spiritual consciousness, intellectual discipline, and social responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Classical Islamic thinkers, most notably al-Ghazālī, conceived *akhlaq* not as external conformity to rules but as an internalized moral orientation that enables consistent ethical action without coercion.<sup>4</sup> This conception resonates sharply with contemporary philosophical approaches to character education that

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<sup>1</sup> Gert Biesta, “What Is Education For? On Good Education, Teacher Judgement, and Educational Professionalism,” *European Journal of Education*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2015): pp. 75–87.

<sup>2</sup> Marvin W. Berkowitz, “Moral and Character Education,” in *APA Educational Psychology Handbook*, ed. Karen R. Harris et al., vol. 2: Individual differences and cultural and contextual factors (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2012), pp. 247–64.

<sup>3</sup> Abū Ḥāmid AL-Gazzālī, *Al-Ghazālī on Disciplining the Soul (Kitāb Riyāḍat Al-Nafs)*, trans. Tim Winter, 2nd ed., Al-Ghazālī Series (The Islamic Texts Society, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge (Kitāb al-‘Ilm): Book 1 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*, trans. Kenneth Honerkamp (Fons Vitae, 2013).

emphasize moral agency, virtue, and habituated ethical practice rather than behavioral compliance alone.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the normative clarity of Islamic moral philosophy, the practical articulation of holistic character formation in contemporary contexts is far from uniform. Islamic traditions today operate within socio-religious environments shaped by globalization, secular governance, multiculturalism, and political regulation. As a result, Islamic approaches to moral formation are inevitably mediated by historical, cultural, and institutional conditions. Scholars of Islamic education have therefore emphasized that Islamic moral pedagogy cannot be understood as a monolithic system, but must be analyzed in relation to the social and political contexts in which it is embedded.<sup>6</sup> This observation aligns with broader ethical and social theory perspectives that view moral traditions not as abstract systems detached from power and history, but as lived practices continually negotiated within specific configurations of authority, identity, and legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

This contextual variation becomes particularly visible when comparing Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority settings. In Muslim-majority societies such as Indonesia and Turkey, Islamic moral formation is often institutionalized within state-supported educational frameworks, where ethical values are aligned with national identity, civic responsibility, and public morality.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in Muslim-minority contexts such as Thailand and the United Kingdom, Islamic character formation frequently operates under conditions of regulatory oversight, social negotiation, and identity preservation.<sup>9</sup> In these settings, moral education must simultaneously sustain religious integrity and facilitate social integration within pluralistic societies. This dual orientation reflects broader debates on moral education and citizenship across diverse cultures, in which ethical traditions must articulate

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (Bantam Books, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim, *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Muhammet Genç, "Values Education or Religious Education? An Alternative View of Religious Education in the Secular Age, the Case of Turkey," *Education Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2018): pp. 220.

<sup>9</sup> Rohimah Rohimah et al., "Implementation Of Islamic Education Policy In Muslim Minority Countries (Case Study of Islamic Education in Thailand)," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, vol. 13, no. 02 (2024); Irene Zempi and Athina Tripli, "Listening to Muslim Students' Voices on the Prevent Duty in British Universities: A Qualitative Study," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2023): pp. 230–45.

their normative commitments in publicly intelligible ways without relinquishing internal coherence.<sup>10</sup>

Empirical studies across these contexts reveal both convergence and divergence. On the one hand, ethical values such as honesty, responsibility, justice, compassion, and social accountability consistently appear as core elements of Islamic moral formation.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the pedagogical forms, institutional arrangements, and governance structures through which these values are enacted differ markedly. These differences suggest that while Islamic ethical principles may be universal in aspiration, their realization is profoundly shaped by context. Yet this pattern also raises critical questions: How is moral universality sustained amid such diversity? Does contextual adaptation represent ethical translation or transformation? And what internal tensions—between authority and autonomy, tradition and modernity, universality and particularity—accompany these adaptive processes?

Existing scholarship on Islamic character education, however, remains largely fragmented. Much of the literature remains confined to single-country case studies or descriptive accounts of institutional practice, offering limited insight into the ethical logic that enables moral continuity amid contextual plurality.<sup>12</sup> Comparative studies that bridge Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts remain scarce, and few attempts have been made to synthesize these diverse findings into a coherent conceptual framework that accounts for both normative coherence and contextual complexity.

Against this background, the present study intervenes in this gap by offering a context-sensitive conceptual synthesis of holistic character formation in Islamic contexts. This study employs a conceptual-analytic approach through systematic interpretive engagement with recent scholarly literature from Indonesia, Thailand, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Rather than following a meta-analytic protocol, the analysis prioritizes thematic synthesis and philosophical coherence, examining how ethical universality and contextual plurality interact within moral formation. Drawing on this literature, the article shifts analytical attention from institutional forms and pedagogical techniques to the ethical logic that sustains moral coherence across divergent socio-religious environments, reframing Islamic character formation as an adaptive ethical project rather than a uniform institutional

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<sup>10</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, 1st ed, Issues of Our Time Series, v. 0 (W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> J. Mark Halstead, “Islamic Values: A Distinctive Framework for Moral Education?,” *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2007): pp. 283–96; Abdullah Sahin, “Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education,” *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 11 (2018): pp. 335.

<sup>12</sup> Rohimah et al., “Implementation Of Islamic Education Policy In Muslim Minority Countries (Case Study of Islamic Education in Thailand)”; Zempi and Tripli, “Listening to Muslim Students’ Voices on the Prevent Duty in British Universities.”

model. This orientation resonates with contemporary philosophical discussions that emphasize moral formation as the cultivation of ethical dispositions capable of remaining intelligible and normatively coherent within pluralistic societies.<sup>13</sup>

On this basis, the article proposes a Contextual–Adaptive Holistic Character Education (CAHCE) model, which conceptualizes character formation as a layered process involving a universal ethical core, pedagogical mediation, and context-sensitive governance. Importantly, the model does not resolve inherent tensions within Islamic moral formation but provides conceptual tools for navigating them with intellectual honesty and ethical integrity. The contribution of this study is therefore both conceptual and methodological: it reframes Islamic character formation as an adaptive ethical enterprise while demonstrating how comparative analysis can illuminate the underlying logic of moral traditions operating under conditions of plurality.

By situating Islamic character formation within a comparative and philosophically informed framework, this study aims to advance broader discussions on moral education, religious ethics, and contextual plurality in contemporary societies. While grounded in Islamic contexts, the analytical framework developed here may prove applicable to other spiritual and ethical traditions navigating similar tensions between continuity and adaptation. In doing so, the study speaks not only to scholars of Islamic education but also to broader interdisciplinary conversations about how ethical traditions endure and remain morally intelligible in a world marked by social diversity and moral complexity, a concern of pressing social and educational importance.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This section establishes the theoretical foundations for analyzing holistic character formation in Islamic contexts, focusing on *akhlaq* as moral ontology, the unity of ethical life, and the dynamics of contextual translation.

#### **1. *Akhlaq* and the Ontology of Character Formation**

Within Islamic intellectual traditions, character formation is fundamentally grounded in the concept of *akhlaq*, understood not as outward conduct but as an enduring moral disposition embedded in the self. Classical Islamic moral philosophy conceives *akhlaq* as a stable orientation of the soul (*hay'ah rasikhah*) that enables ethical action to emerge spontaneously, without coercion or deliberation.<sup>14</sup> This framing is ontological rather than procedural: it concerns *who one becomes*, not merely *what one does*, a view

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Hand, *A Theory of Moral Education* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018); Kristján Kristjánsson, *Virtuous Emotions* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge (Kitāb al-ʿIlm): Book 1 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*.

that resonates with virtue-ethical traditions locating moral agency in cultivated dispositions rather than rule compliance.<sup>15</sup>

For al-Ghazālī, moral education operates through habituation (*ta'addub*), reflection (*tafakkur*), and spiritual discipline (*mujāhadah*), cultivating dispositions from which virtuous action flows naturally.<sup>16</sup> This tripartite process, affective, cognitive, and volitional, reflects a moral psychology wherein character formation integrates knowledge, practice, and intention toward ethical excellence. Yet Islamic virtue ethics differs from secular counterparts in one crucial respect: moral formation is inseparable from spiritual realization, understood as alignment with divine attributes (*takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*). This theocentric grounding embeds moral ontology within a theological horizon where character perfection is simultaneously ethical and spiritual.<sup>17</sup>

This ontological framing remains essential for contemporary discussions of Islamic character formation, particularly in pluralistic societies where ethical norms are contested. By grounding character in *akhlaq*, Islamic moral thought provides a normative anchor transcending shifting social expectations while remaining open to contextual articulation. The central question is not whether Islamic ethical principles possess universal validity, but how they maintain normative force when their theological foundations are not publicly shared, a problem demanding both philosophical clarity and pedagogical creativity.

## 2. Holistic Moral Formation and the Unity of Ethical Life

The concept of holistic character formation reflects the Islamic view that moral life cannot be compartmentalized into discrete domains such as belief, behavior, cognition, or social responsibility. Instead, ethical formation is understood as an integrated process encompassing spiritual orientation, moral judgment, emotional disposition, and social engagement.<sup>18</sup> This unity of ethical life distinguishes Islamic moral pedagogy from instrumental models that prioritize measurable outcomes over moral coherence.

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<sup>15</sup> Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 11th print (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (Crossroad, 1987); Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge (Kitāb al-Ilm): Book 1 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*.

<sup>17</sup> Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue* (State University of New York Press, 1975).

<sup>18</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, International Islamic University, 1991).

Contemporary character education discourse echoes this holistic orientation by emphasizing the inseparability of moral reasoning, affective development, and social responsibility. Lickona, for example, argues that authentic character formation involves knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good as an integrated moral process.<sup>19</sup> While emerging from different intellectual traditions, these perspectives resonate with Islamic conceptions in which ethical integrity (*istiqāmah*) is achieved through the alignment of inner conviction and outward action. Yet *istiqāmah* extends beyond behavioral consistency to encompass existential coherence: the unity of one's being before God, in which thought, feeling, and action reflect a singular moral orientation rather than fragmented commitments.<sup>20</sup>

In contemporary Islamic contexts, however, this holistic vision encounters institutional and political constraints that fragment moral education into curricular units, policy objectives, or compliance mechanisms. The bureaucratization of moral formation risks *pedagogical reductionism*, translating ethical wholeness into measurable competencies and reducing *akhlak* to behavioral outputs divorced from ontological and spiritual depth. Scholars emphasize recovering holistic moral formation as a guiding ethical principle rather than a technical outcome.<sup>21</sup> The tension between holistic ideals and institutional realities is structural, reflecting broader contradictions between premodern ethical traditions and modern educational rationalities.<sup>22</sup> This concern provides an essential conceptual backdrop for examining how character formation is rearticulated under varying socio-religious conditions.

### 3. Context, Ethics, and the Problem of Moral Translation

While Islamic ethical values claim universal validity, their educational realization is inevitably shaped by context. Ethical universality does not entail uniformity; moral principles require translation into pedagogical, institutional, and social forms intelligible and legitimate within specific socio-political environments.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it raises a foundational question: Is context merely the

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<sup>19</sup> Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*.

<sup>20</sup> William C. Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oneworld Publications, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Anke Iman Bouzenita and Bronwyn Wood, "Unintended Consequences? The Commodification of Ideas in Tertiary Education and Their Effects on Muslim Students," *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2018): pp. 883–902; Sahin, "Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies."

<sup>22</sup> Bouzenita and Wood, "Unintended Consequences? The Commodification of Ideas in Tertiary Education and Their Effects on Muslim Students"; Sahin, "Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies."

<sup>23</sup> Andrew F. March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

*medium* through which unchanging ethical content is communicated, or does it constitute part of ethical *meaning* itself? If the latter, moral universality must be theorized as *dynamic*, achieving normative coherence through contextual embodiment rather than despite it.

The problem intensifies when ethical traditions operate across radically different conditions. Adaptation risks two opposing failures: ethical rigidity, insisting on uniform implementation regardless of context, or moral relativism, dissolving universal commitments into cultural particularity. Between these extremes lies *moral translation*, neither mechanical replication nor arbitrary invention, but hermeneutical engagement rearticulating normative principles in response to new interpretive demands.<sup>24</sup> Yet translation is never neutral; context is a socio-political field structured by relations of authority, recognition, and regulation. Ethical traditions are *constituted through* context, not merely placed within it.<sup>25</sup>

The epistemological challenge persists: if moral principles acquire concrete meaning only within particular contexts, how do they retain universal force? One response distinguishes substantive content (justice, compassion) from institutional forms, arguing that the former remains constant while the latter adapts. But this may be simplistic. Moral concepts are not self-interpreting; their meaning is mediated by social practices, linguistic categories, and normative horizons through which they are understood.<sup>26</sup> Translation thus requires ongoing interpretive labor to discern which aspects of tradition are essential and which are historically contingent. It is within this conceptual space, between rigid uniformity and unbounded relativism, that the proposal of an adaptive model grounding holistic character formation in ethical continuity and contextual responsiveness forms an essential endeavor.

### **Holistic Character Formation in Islamic Contexts**

The analytical synthesis of the reviewed literature suggests that holistic character formation in Islamic contexts is best understood not as a uniform educational program, but as a contextually mediated moral project. Rather than producing convergent institutional models, Islamic traditions sustain ethical continuity through adaptive forms of moral articulation. Three interrelated themes emerge from this synthesis: (1) the persistence of a universal ethical core, (2) the plurality of pedagogical translation, and (3) the mediating role of contextual governance in moral formation.

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<sup>24</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (1960; repr., Continuum, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25–73.

<sup>26</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

## 1. Universal Ethical Core: Moral Continuity beyond Institutional Form

Across the diverse contexts examined, the literature consistently affirms a shared ethical foundation grounded in Islamic moral philosophy. Ethical values such as honesty (*ṣidq*), responsibility (*amanah*), justice (*'adl*), compassion (*raḥmah*), and social accountability, long established in classical Islamic moral philosophy,<sup>27</sup> recur across contemporary studies, regardless of differences in national setting, educational structure, or regulatory environment.<sup>28</sup> These values are not presented as instrumental competencies or externally imposed norms, but rather as moral dispositions that shape the integrity of the self. This distinction is philosophically significant: it locates moral formation not in behavioral regulation but in the cultivation of an ethically constituted subjectivity, what classical Islamic thought termed the *nafs mutma'innah* (the soul at peace with itself through moral coherence).

This convergence reflects the enduring influence of the Islamic concept of *akhlaq*, which understands character as a stable moral orientation (*hay'ah rasikhah*) that enables ethical action to emerge spontaneously.<sup>29</sup> In al-Ghazālī's moral ontology, character formation is directed toward cultivating inner harmony among reason, desire, and spiritual awareness, rather than mere compliance with ethical rules.<sup>30</sup> This tripartite conception mirrors ancient virtue-ethical frameworks, particularly Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of the soul's proper ordering, yet reframes them within a theocentric ontology where moral alignment is inseparable from spiritual realization. Contemporary scholars of Islamic education confirm that this ontological understanding continues to inform moral formation, even when expressed through modern institutional vocabularies.<sup>31</sup> What persists, therefore, is not simply a catalogue of virtues but an underlying moral anthropology: a conception of human flourishing (*falāḥ*) as the actualization of ethical potentiality through habituated practice.

What is analytically significant is that this ethical core persists across both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts, suggesting that Islamic moral universality is not contingent upon political dominance or institutional support. Ethical continuity is maintained even under conditions of marginality, regulation, or pluralism. This finding challenges assumptions that religious moral formation necessarily weakens in minority settings and instead

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<sup>27</sup> C.K. Ibn Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character (Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq)*, trans. C.K. Zurayk (Great Books of the Islamic World, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Halstead, "Islamic Values."

<sup>29</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge (Kitāb al-'Ilm): Book 1 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Ghazālī.

<sup>31</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "Education, Young Islamists and Integrated Islamic Schools in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2012).

highlights the resilience of ethical traditions grounded in internalized moral dispositions rather than external authority.<sup>32</sup> Such resilience suggests that moral universality operates not through institutional enforcement but through what might be termed *dispositional transmission*, the intergenerational cultivation of ethical sensibilities that retain normative force independently of political or structural support.

Taken together, this suggests that moral universality in Islamic character formation functions less as a product of institutional power than as an ethical capacity rooted in the cultivation of internal dispositions capable of withstanding contextual variability, a view that resonates with virtue-ethical accounts of moral continuity grounded in character rather than external authority.<sup>33</sup> The locus of ethical permanence, in this account, resides not in institutions but in persons; not in systems but in souls.

## 2. Pedagogical Translation: Ethical Universality and Contextual Plurality

While ethical values remain broadly stable, the literature reveals substantial variation in how these values are pedagogically enacted. This variation reflects not moral inconsistency but context-sensitive translation, in which universal ethical commitments are articulated through practices that respond to local social realities. The concept of *translation* here is not merely metaphorical but analytically precise: it names the hermeneutical process by which normative principles are rendered pedagogically intelligible within particular horizons of meaning.<sup>34</sup> Such translation is not dilution but adaptation, a distinction critical to understanding how ethical traditions sustain coherence across difference.

In Muslim-majority contexts, pedagogical translation often takes institutionalized forms. In Indonesia, *pesantren* and *madrasah* traditions embed moral formation within daily religious practices, communal discipline, and sustained teacher–student relationships, emphasizing habituation and moral exemplarity.<sup>35</sup> Character formation is lived rather than segmented, blurring distinctions among curriculum, school culture, and ethical life, in a holistic integration that mirrors classical Islamic pedagogical models in which the teacher (*murabbī*) functions not merely as an instructor but as a moral exemplar whose life embodies the virtues being taught. Similarly, in Turkey, *Imam-Hatip* schools translate Islamic ethical values into a synthesis of

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<sup>32</sup> Muhamad Basyrul Muvid and Nur Kholis, “Contribution of Sufism Trilogy in the Formation of Religious Behavior: A Proposed Model,” *Cogito*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2024): pp. 29-53.

<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

<sup>35</sup> M. Ali Sibram Malisi, Sulasman Sulasman, and Abd Hakim Mohad, “Institutionalizing Educational Reform: Balancing Tradition and Modernity at Pesantren,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2024): pp. 363–74.

religious instruction and civic responsibility, aligning moral formation with national narratives of citizenship and public virtue.<sup>36</sup> This synthesis reflects what might be termed *civic vernacularization*: the articulation of religious ethics in the idiom of modern citizenship without abandoning their theological foundations.

In Muslim-minority contexts, pedagogical translation assumes more adaptive and negotiated forms. In southern Thailand, Islamic moral formation relies heavily on community-based authority, informal instruction, and localized educational spaces, reflecting both resilience and vulnerability amid limited institutional support.<sup>37</sup> Here, pedagogy operates under conditions of structural precarity, where the absence of state recognition compels reliance on communal networks and informal transmission, which might be understood as a *pedagogical refuge* within the social margins. In the United Kingdom, Islamic schools articulate character formation through the language of citizenship, tolerance, and social cohesion, embedding Qur'anic ethics within secular educational frameworks and regulatory expectations.<sup>38</sup> This represents a form of *discursive negotiation*, wherein Islamic moral commitments are publicly justified in terms legible to liberal democratic norms, not as strategic concealment but as genuine translation across moral vocabularies.

These differences demonstrate that pedagogical plurality is a structural feature of Islamic moral formation, not a deviation from it. Ethical universality is preserved precisely because moral values are translated into forms that remain intelligible and legitimate within specific contexts. Pedagogy thus functions as a site of ethical mediation, where moral ideals are neither abandoned nor rigidly imposed, but rearticulated in response to social conditions. At a conceptual level, this reframing underscores that moral education is not the enforcement of uniform practices but the cultivation of ethical intelligibility, the capacity of values to remain normatively compelling across shifting social realities. This concern is central to contemporary philosophical debates on moral education in pluralist societies, where the

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<sup>36</sup> İbrahim Aşlamacı and Recep Kaymakcan, "A Model for Islamic Education from Turkey: The Imam-Hatip Schools," *British Journal of Religious Education*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2017): pp. 279–92.

<sup>37</sup> Kasetchai Laeheem, "Relationships between Islamic Ethical Behavior and Islamic Factors among Muslim Youths in the Three Southern Border Provinces of Thailand," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2018): pp. 305–11.

<sup>38</sup> Farah Ahmed, "Educating for Personhood: Personalised Character Education for Young British Muslims," *Impact*, no. 6 (2020): pp. 54; Deborah Phillips, "Claiming Spaces: British Muslim Negotiations of Urban Citizenship in an Era of New Migration," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2015): pp. 62–74.

challenge is not merely to preserve tradition but to ensure its ongoing moral legibility.<sup>39</sup>

### 3. Contextual Governance: Power, Legitimacy, and Moral Mediation

A third critical theme concerns the role of contextual governance in shaping the conditions for moral formation. Governance extends beyond formal policy to include regulatory regimes, political sensitivities, public discourse, and societal expectations regarding religion and morality. This expanded conception of governance aligns with Foucault's understanding of *governmentality*, the diffuse mechanisms through which conduct is shaped not merely by law but by normative discourses, institutional practices, and the internalized disciplines of self-regulation.<sup>40</sup> In the context of moral education, governance operates not only through what is permitted or prohibited but through what becomes thinkable, articulable, and legitimate as moral pedagogy within particular socio-political configurations.

In Muslim-majority societies, governance structures often facilitate the institutionalization of Islamic moral education, granting it curricular legitimacy and public visibility. However, scholars caution that close alignment between moral formation and state agendas may risk instrumentalizing ethics for political or ideological ends.<sup>41</sup> When moral education becomes entangled with national projects, whether nationalist identity construction, political legitimation, or social control, ethical depth may be subordinated to symbolic conformity, which represents what might be termed *ethical cooptation*: the appropriation of moral language for purposes extrinsic to moral formation itself. The danger is not merely that ethics becomes politicized, but that the ontological depth of *akhlaq*, as an internalized disposition, is reduced to ideological performance, transforming character education from a process of ethical becoming into a theater of national belonging.

In Muslim-minority contexts, governance operates through regulation, oversight, and public scrutiny. Islamic institutions must justify their moral practices within pluralistic norms, often emphasizing compatibility with democratic values and social cohesion.<sup>42</sup> While such conditions may constrain

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<sup>39</sup> Hand, *A Theory of Moral Education*; Robert Jackson, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (RoutledgeFalmer, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>41</sup> Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia* (University of Hawaii Press, 2009); Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, *Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: Continuity and Conflict* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Lynn Revell and Sally Elton-Chalcraft, "Extremism, Values, and Education in Policy and Practice," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, by Lynn Revell and Sally

explicit religious expression, they also compel ethical reflection and discursive engagement, encouraging forms of moral articulation that foreground universality, tolerance, and shared civic responsibility. This dynamic reveals an instructive paradox: regulatory constraint can function as a catalyst for ethical articulation. When religious communities are required to justify their moral commitments publicly, they are pressed toward what Taylor terms *retrieval*,<sup>43</sup> the critical reappropriation of tradition through engagement with contemporary ethical challenges. The result is not necessarily dilution but clarification: a sharpened awareness of which moral commitments are essential and which are culturally contingent.

Analytically, these dynamics reveal that context does not merely shape the delivery of moral education; it mediates its moral language, authority, and public legitimacy. Ethical universality must therefore be negotiated within concrete power relations, reinforcing the need for conceptual models that treat context as a constitutive element of moral formation rather than an external constraint. Seen in this light, context emerges not as a secondary condition to be managed, but as an ethical horizon within which moral formation acquires public meaning and legitimacy, a perspective widely emphasized in critical accounts of ethics, tradition, and power.<sup>44</sup> This reframing challenges the assumption that authentic moral formation requires insulation from political and social forces. Instead, it suggests that ethical traditions remain vital precisely through their capacity to engage, resist, and transform the power relations within which they operate, sustaining moral coherence not despite contextual pressures but through critically reflexive engagement with them.

#### **4. Toward an Adaptive Ethical Synthesis**

The analysis presented across the preceding sections reveals a consistent pattern: holistic character formation in Islamic contexts operates through a layered moral logic in which a universal ethical core provides normative continuity, pedagogical translation enables contextual articulation, and governance structures mediate legitimacy and form. This layered interaction explains why Islamic character formation can appear highly institutionalized in some settings and deeply adaptive in others, without implying ethical dilution.

It is from this interpretive synthesis that the Contextual–Adaptive Holistic Character Education (CAHCE) model emerges. The model does not prescribe a uniform educational blueprint but offers a conceptual lens for understanding how moral universality and contextual plurality coexist within Islamic

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Elton-Chalcraft (Oxford University Press, May 26, 2021); Ahmed, “Educating for Personhood: Personalised Character Education for Young British Muslims.”

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition.”

<sup>44</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

traditions. As such, CAHCE functions as a heuristic framework for analyzing moral formation in pluralistic societies, rather than a fixed institutional design.

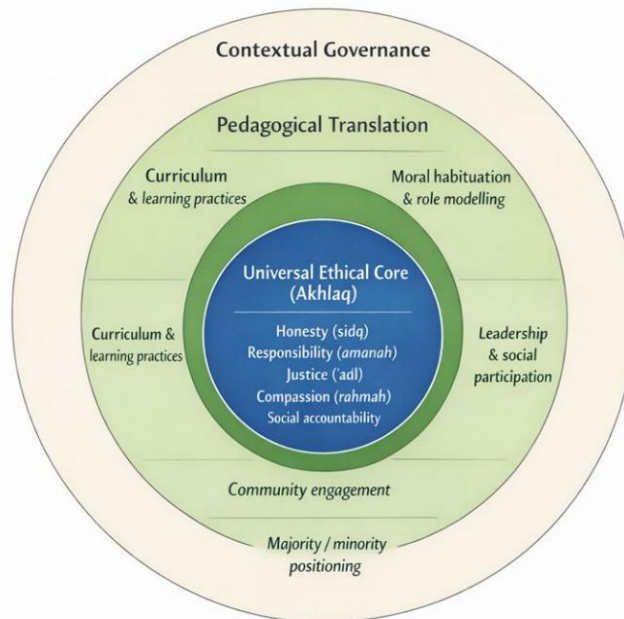
Yet this interpretive coherence should not obscure the genuine tensions and practical challenges that characterize Islamic moral formation in contemporary contexts. Operationalizing *akhlaq* remains a persistent challenge. Classical pedagogy relied on prolonged mentorship and embodied exemplarity within stable communities of practice. Modern institutions, however, demand measurable outcomes and standardized curricula conditions that risk reducing internalized moral disposition to behavioral checklists. The very ontological strength of *akhlaq* as "a firmly rooted disposition in the soul" resists the instrumental logics of modern educational bureaucracy.

Internal pluralism further complicates claims of a "universal ethical core." Salafi, Sufi, modernist, and traditionalist approaches generate substantively different moral pedagogies, and the CAHCE model risks imposing false consensus over real interpretive diversity. Moreover, critiques of traditional Islamic education, including concerns about authoritarian pedagogy, gender hierarchies, and ideological instrumentalization, demand reflexive engagement rather than defensive dismissal. These critiques do not invalidate Islamic moral traditions but underscore the need for critical self-examination.

The universality-particularity tension proves more philosophically complex than linear models of "core and adaptation" might suggest. When Islamic schools in minority contexts adopt secular civic language, or when *pesantren* integrate nationalist ideology, are they translating unchanging principles or negotiating hybrid moral frameworks? The boundary between ethical translation and ethical transformation remains contested terrain. These questions resist easy resolution, and the CAHCE model should be understood not as resolving these tensions but as providing conceptual tools for navigating them with ethical integrity.

With this critical awareness in place, a visual representation of the model can clarify its structural logic while acknowledging the complexities it seeks to navigate. **Figure 1** presents the Contextual–Adaptive Holistic Character Formation (CAHCE) model as a visual heuristic. The figure illustrates the layered relationship between ethical universality, pedagogical mediation, and contextual conditions that shape moral formation in Islamic contexts. By representing character formation as concentric layers, the model highlights how a stable ethical core grounded in *akhlaq* is continuously translated through pedagogical practices and mediated by broader socio-religious and governance environments. Notably, the visual representation does not depict a procedural or prescriptive framework but supports conceptual clarity and philosophical reflection, complementing the narrative argument developed throughout this study. The resulting synthesis reframes holistic character

formation as an ethical process that maintains normative coherence precisely through, rather than despite, its capacity for contextual adaptation.



**Figure 1. The Contextual-Adaptive Holistic Character Education (CAHCE) Model**

### Conclusion

This study has sought to rethink holistic character formation in Islamic contexts by moving beyond institution-centered and policy-driven accounts toward a conceptual and ethical synthesis. Drawing on systematic interpretive engagement with contemporary literature across Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority settings, the analysis demonstrates that Islamic character formation cannot be reduced to a single educational model or institutional arrangement. Instead, it emerges as a contextually mediated moral project, sustained through the dynamic interaction of ethical continuity and adaptive practice.

The findings reveal that Islamic moral traditions retain a stable ethical core grounded in *akhlaq*, emphasizing virtues such as honesty, responsibility, justice, compassion, and social accountability. This ethical continuity persists across diverse socio-political environments, suggesting that moral universality in Islamic thought is not dependent on institutional dominance or political authority but resides in the cultivation of internalized moral dispositions. At

the same time, the pedagogical enactment of these values varies significantly, reflecting ethical translations shaped by local cultures, governance regimes, and social expectations. Such variation should not be interpreted as moral fragmentation, but rather as evidence of ethical traditions' adaptive capacity to remain meaningful under changing conditions.

By foregrounding the role of context, not as an external constraint but as a constitutive dimension of moral formation, this study advances a more nuanced understanding of how ethical universality and contextual plurality coexist. The proposed Contextual–Adaptive Holistic Character Education (CAHCE) model offers a conceptual lens through which this coexistence can be understood. Rather than prescribing a uniform blueprint for character education, the model frames moral formation as a layered process involving a universal ethical orientation, pedagogical mediation, and context-sensitive governance. Critically, the model does not resolve the inherent tensions within Islamic character formation, between operationalization and ontological depth, between internal interpretive pluralism and normative coherence, and between ethical translation and transformation. Instead, it provides conceptual tools for navigating these tensions with intellectual honesty and moral integrity.

The contribution of this study is therefore both conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, it reframes Islamic character formation as an adaptive ethical enterprise that negotiates continuity and change without surrendering normative coherence, offering an alternative to essentialist accounts that treat Islamic ethics as timeless and unchanging, as well as to relativist perspectives that dissolve moral universality into cultural particularity. Methodologically, it demonstrates how comparative analysis across diverse socio-religious contexts can illuminate the ethical logic underlying moral formation, moving beyond descriptive case studies toward philosophically informed synthesis.

While grounded in Islamic contexts, the implications of this analysis extend to broader philosophical debates on moral formation, virtue, and education in pluralistic societies. The analytical framework developed here, emphasizing the interplay between universal ethical commitments, pedagogical translation, and contextual governance, may prove applicable to other religious and moral traditions navigating similar tensions between continuity and adaptation. For educators and policymakers, the study underscores that effective character formation requires not rigid adherence to uniform models but pedagogical reflexivity, institutional autonomy, and the capacity to articulate moral commitments in contextually intelligible ways without compromising ethical substance.

Future research should pursue empirical validation of the CAHCE model through comparative case studies, longitudinal assessment of character

formation outcomes, and participatory engagement with practitioners. Developing culturally responsive evaluation instruments that capture the multidimensional nature of *akhlaq*, beyond behavioral compliance, remains a critical methodological challenge. Additionally, cross-traditional comparative studies examining how other ethical traditions (Confucian, Catholic, secular humanist) navigate similar dynamics of universality and contextuality could enrich theoretical understanding and practical application.

Ultimately, this study affirms that holistic character formation in Islamic contexts is neither a static inheritance nor a diluted adaptation, but a living ethical practice that sustains moral coherence precisely through its capacity for contextual responsiveness. In an era marked by social diversity, moral complexity, and contested values, understanding how ethical traditions endure and remain intelligible across contexts is not merely an academic concern but a pressing social and educational imperative.

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