

The Level of Religious Literacy Among University Students in Yogyakarta: A Study of Students at UIN Sunan Kalijaga and UGM

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Yogyakarta has been suffered by a series of religious intolerances, an ubiquitous phenomena caused by decrease of religious literacy. By considering the pivotal role of student in maintaining religious harmony, this research, hence, will examine the level of religious literacy among the students of State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga and Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in Yogyakarta. According to experts, religious knowledge alone does not necessarily make someone tolerant. However, this is different from religious literacy, which can foster the development of tolerance. Drawing on those gaps, this research is aimed to analyze the level of religious literacy among the college students in Yogyakarta by using quantitative approach and the method of statistic descriptive. By investigating three main components of religious literacy respectively, religious knowledge, religious multi-interpretation, and religious literacy, I found that the students have different level in each; they occupy the level of 'quite high' to 'high' for the first variable, 'low' to 'quite high' for the second and third variable. From the result, I finally argued that the religious literacy does not go in line with the religious knowledge highly accumulated by the students.

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INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have shown an interrelated relationship between religious education, religious literacy, and tolerance. Religious teaching can play an important role in reducing religious illiteracy (Dinham & Shaw, 2017; D. Moore, 2006). While religious education can increase religious knowledge, according to Prothero dan Kerby (2015), religious knowledge does not always make a person religiously literate and therefore may not necessarily lead to tolerant attitudes. This argument indicates that religious knowledge remains problematic, as it does not necessarily make individuals tolerant or open toward those who are different from them. Nevertheless, religious literacy has the potential to foster the development of tolerance, especially for minorities (Halafoff et al., 2020; S. Prothero & Kerby, 2015; Rahmi et al., 2025). This raises the question of what kind of model of religious education can enhance religious literacy and thereby become one of the important factors in cultivating a more open and tolerant model of diversity.

Religious literacy does not mean promoting a particular religion; rather, it equips individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to understand and discuss religions accurately and critically (Bruce, 2016). According to Sakaranaho et al. (2020), there is a need for a new understanding of how "religion" is represented in the public sphere or in the media. Meanwhile, for Dinham dan Francis (2015), religious literacy refers to a person's ability to discuss religious issues in an informed and appropriate manner, as reflected in the following statement:

“We have argued that religious literacy resides, then, in an improved quality of conversation about the category of religion and belief itself, which first of all irons out the muddled binaries and assumptions explored here – about religion versus the secular, private versus public, and perceptions of religion as a threat or a risk to an otherwise rational modern world”.

From the statement above, it can be seen that religious literacy, on the one hand, is generally beneficial for understanding and critically discussing other religions, improving the quality of conversations about religious discourse, and fostering tolerance. On the other hand, the lack of religious literacy can have several negative consequences, including enabling the media to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes and contributing to potentially harmful government policies (Bruce, 2016).

In addition to its role in developing tolerant attitudes, Akinochi et al., (2024) argue that religious literacy should be promoted so that students learn about religious and cultural diversity. Religious literacy that does not foster an understanding of cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity risks reinforcing stereotypes about a religious tradition that may not accurately reflect reality. Respecting and learning from those who are different means treating individuals as persons in their own right rather than as mere representatives of a particular community (Sj & Smith, 2015). Therefore, religious literacy occupies a crucial position in building a pluralistic and peaceful society capable of responding to the dynamics of globalization and increasingly complex diversity (Rohman & Badar, 2025). Furthermore, it helps societies develop broader perspectives and avoid being trapped in homogeneous and monocultural ways of thinking (Imamah & Lee, 2024).

Religious literacy is not an effort to promote a particular religion; rather, it equips individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and discuss religions accurately and critically (Bruce, 2016). According to Menurut Dinham & Francis (2015) and Robertson (2022), religious literacy represents the ability to engage in meaningful and informed discussions about religious issues, as reflected in the following statement: *“Religious literacy manifests itself in an improved quality of conversation about the categories of religion and belief themselves, which were previously obscured by binary understandings and assumptions....”*. From this perspective, religious literacy is generally beneficial for understanding and critically discussing other religions, improving the quality of religious discourse, and fostering tolerance. On the other hand, low levels of religious literacy may lead to the media perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes and to the development of potentially harmful government policies (Bruce, 2016).

Considering the urgency of religious literacy, this study aims to examine the level of religious literacy among university students in Yogyakarta, particularly those from UIN Sunan Kalijaga and Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). Numerous studies on religious literacy have been conducted by scholars, as outlined above. These studies have explored religious literacy from various perspectives, including education and teaching (Dinham & Shaw, 2017; D. Moore, 2006), the public sphere (Sakaranaho et al., 2020), pluralism (Rohman & Badar, 2025), tolerance (S. Prothero & Kerby, 2015), and others. However, among the many existing studies, the researcher finds that only a limited number focus specifically on religious literacy in Indonesia, particularly among young people such as university students. Young people deserve greater attention in religious issues because the future of a nation’s social harmony lies in their hands. Therefore, this study undertakes a specific investigation of religious literacy among university students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a field research employing a quantitative research design. Accordingly, it tests existing hypotheses within a particular population or sample using instruments and statistical (quantitative) data analysis. The data collection methods used in this research include questionnaires and documentation. In this study, the researcher uses a closed-ended questionnaire to obtain data regarding the level of religious literacy. The instrument is constructed using test techniques and a Likert scale. In addition, the documentation method is employed to obtain general information, such as the number of students at the

universities where the research is conducted. The validity of the instrument is tested using SPSS version 16.0 through bivariate correlation analysis. Meanwhile, the reliability test is conducted by examining the Cronbach's Alpha value using SPSS 16.0 through scale reliability analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to S. K. Prothero (2007), as also cited by Hannam et al., (2020), religious literacy refers to *"the ability to understand and use religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, and narratives that are employed in the American public sphere."* Meanwhile, for D. L. Moore (2015) religious literacy is defined as an individual's ability to understand religion within various contexts, such as political, social, cultural, historical, and belief systems. This is further explained by D. L. Moore (2015) in the following statement:

"Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place."

The diverse perspectives on literacy outlined above suggest that religious literacy fundamentally refers to an individual's sophisticated ability to utilize their personal understanding, lived experiences, and direct encounters with diverse religious traditions. Upon critically analyzing the scholarly works of the two aforementioned experts, it becomes remarkably clear that the concept of "religious literacy" they employ transcends a singular focus on one's own faith. Instead, it encompasses a pluralistic engagement that includes a profound awareness and knowledge of multiple religions beyond one's own personal belief system. This differs from the concept proposed by Ali et al. (2021), who introduce the term "interreligious literacy," which refers not merely to an understanding of a single religion but to multiple religious traditions.

As mentioned earlier, religious literacy, like the broader concept of literacy, can also have a different meaning, namely referring to the activities of reading and writing. For example, Rachel Kohn interprets religious literacy as a process of reading for religious purposes. Kohn (2009) states:

"My definition of the term religious literacy suggests that when one is reading for religious purposes, the reader adopts a particular interpretative stance... My definition of literacy, then, is not parallel to "cultural literacy," where religious literacy is simply knowing about the episodes and parables of a particular religion or the ideological differences between the major religions of the world. In this dissertation, religious literacy is a selected process of reading with particular goals so that the process of interpretation leads to the strengthening of one's faith and/or to spiritual enlightenment or salvation."

By critically examining the diverse perspectives outlined above, we can observe significant variations in the conceptual understanding of religious literacy, which are systematically categorized by scholars into two distinct analytical frameworks: comprehensive broad interpretations and more restrictive, specialized narrow definitions. In the broad sense, Prothero dan Parker (2020) define religious literacy as the ability to apply and use religion in various contexts. Similarly, Moore views it as the capacity to analyze religion from multiple perspectives, including social, cultural, political, economic, and other aspects of life. In the narrow sense, religious literacy is associated with the ability to read and write. The following section illustrates the differences in the meaning of religious literacy as explained by various scholars. Despite these differing perspectives, academics agree that the concept of religious literacy aims to enhance an individual's knowledge of and awareness toward followers of other religions, rather than focusing solely on deep understanding of one's own religious tradition (Suyanto et al., 2024).

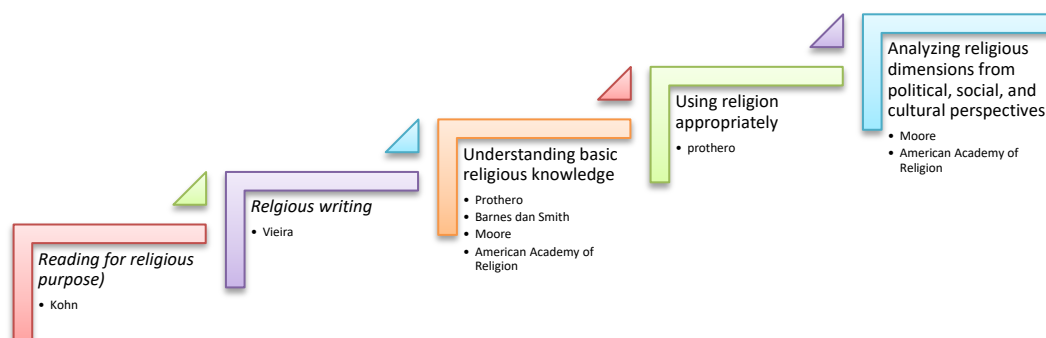


Figure 1. Definition of Religious Literacy

Bruce (2016) proposes four elements of religious literacy: (1) basic knowledge of particular religions; (2) an awareness of how beliefs embedded in specific traditions and textual interpretations affect how individuals act and practice in their daily lives; (3) critical awareness; and (4) the ability to engage respectfully with religious groups. These four elements provide substantial guidance for the formulation of the variables in this study. The researcher investigates students' basic religious knowledge, their understanding of diverse interpretations of specific issues, and their attitudes related to religious literacy. This aligns with the goals of religious literacy, which are useful for conveying foundational knowledge, correcting misinformation, emphasizing commonalities, and supporting the development of behaviors that go beyond "mere" tolerance (De Lissovoy, 1954).

In addition to the elements mentioned above, a critical attitude toward religious issues is also an important component of religious literacy. Just as literacy in general encourages critical thinking (Riyanto, 2023), religious literacy similarly requires a critical stance (Marsh, 2018). An example of a critical attitude in religious literacy is when encountering negative information or interpretations that tend to marginalize a particular religion, one does not accept it immediately; instead, one consults reliable literature and, if possible, seeks clarification directly from knowledgeable practitioners or experts.

Based on the discussion of the concept of literacy above, conceptually, religious literacy is defined as an individual's ability to understand and use religion appropriately, including its narratives, history, images, core teachings, terminology, and practices related to religion. This understanding does not imply an expectation that one can have perfect knowledge of all religions. As Dinham dan Francis (2015) emphasize, a person with religious literacy can at least speak about and discuss a particular religion accurately while also recognizing that a religion is not homogeneous and is subject to change. Building on this conceptual definition, the researcher will provide an operational definition focusing more specifically on each element (variable). Accordingly, three definitions will be explained, which, in the researcher's view, constitute the essential components that make up religious literacy.

1. Religious knowledge in this study refers to students' understanding of the core teachings of religion, such as *aqidah* (beliefs), *ibadah* (rituals, including prayer, fasting, zakat, and pilgrimage), *muamalah* (human-to-human interactions, such as trade, debt, and other social transactions), and *akhlaq* (moral conduct, including good and bad deeds).
2. Multiple interpretations in religion in this study are defined as students' understanding, knowledge, and the extent of their encounters with diverse interpretations or opinions on a particular issue, as well as the contextual narratives (historical background) underlying a religious ruling.
3. Attitude in religious literacy in this study refers to the stance students adopt when confronted with narratives that each individual may have a different interpretation of their religion, their critical awareness of stereotypes attached to a religion, and their engagement in the events and activities of other religious groups.

Based on these elements, the researcher classifies the research instruments into three types: tests, summed items, and Likert scales. Religious knowledge is measured using a test. Understanding of multiple

interpretations in religion is assessed by summing the scores obtained from the responses. Meanwhile, attitudes in religious literacy are measured using a Likert scale.

Validity and Reability Test

Regarding the religious knowledge variable, the researcher aims to assess basic knowledge of religion, with questions focusing on *aqidah*, *ibadah*, and *akhlaq*. For instance, questions on the concept of tawhid—the oneness of Allah—are designed to test whether respondents understand this fundamental principle of Islam. After conducting analysis using SPSS, the researcher found that 13 items were valid, specifically items numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14. These 13 items all had calculated r-values greater than the r-table value (>0.333).

For the multiple interpretations in religion section, there were 10 items concerning the relationship between religion and social, political, and economic dimensions. For example, one question asked whether respondents were aware of differing opinions regarding greetings to non-Muslims. Analysis using SPSS showed that all 10 items were valid, with calculated r-values exceeding the r-table value.

In the attitudes in religious literacy section, there were 13 items related to respondents' awareness of differing opinions on religious issues, their critical stance toward negative stereotypes of religious groups or communities, and their encounters with other religions. The researcher found 11 valid items out of the 13 questions, specifically items numbered 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13. These 11 items had calculated r-values greater than the r-table value (>0.333), and thus were deemed valid.

For the reliability test, the Cronbach's alpha for the 13-item religious knowledge instrument was 0.765. Since this value exceeds 0.7, the religious knowledge instrument is considered reliable. The 10-item instrument for multiple interpretations in religion had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.892, also above 0.7, indicating reliability. Meanwhile, the 11-item instrument for attitudes in religious literacy had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.738, which similarly exceeds 0.7.

The following discussion presents the differences in levels of religious knowledge, multiple interpretations in religion, and attitudes in religious literacy among students from the four faculties that were subjects of this study. First, the researcher will describe the students' level of religious knowledge. For this purpose, a comparison of religious knowledge levels across faculties has been prepared as follows:

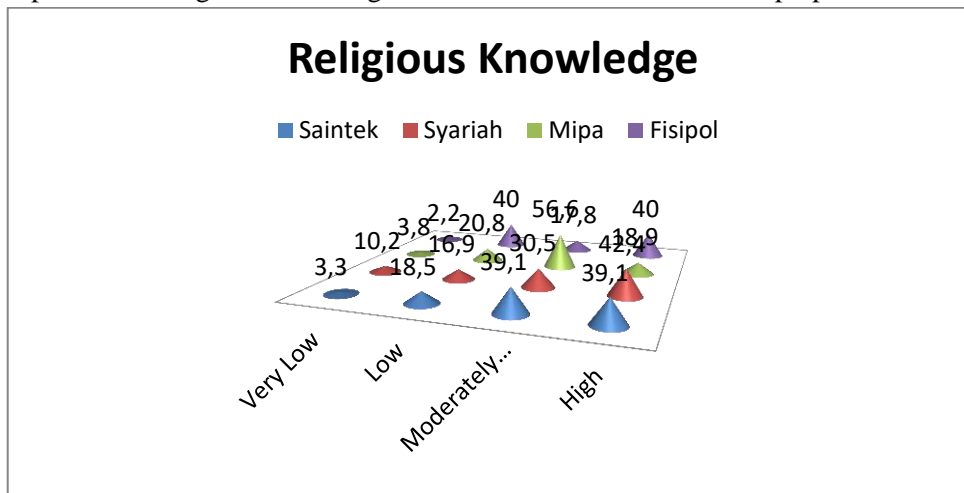


Figure 2. Students' Level of Religious Knowledge

As shown in the diagram above, each faculty displays data indicating different levels of religious knowledge. In general, most students fall into the moderately high to high categories, although 40% of students from Fisipol are in the low category. The highest percentage is observed in the Faculty of MIPA, where 56.6% of students fall into the moderately high category.

Interestingly, the diagram suggests that the assumption that more religious education automatically results in greater religious knowledge is not supported by the data above. If that assumption held, students from religious institution would be expected to have a higher percentage in the moderately high or high categories. In fact, as previously explained, MIPA students achieved the highest average score in religious knowledge (11.11) compared to the other faculties. Meanwhile, for the three other faculties, most students also fall into the moderately high to high categories. This indicates that out of the 13 questions, most students were able to answer at least 10 correctly or made only up to three mistakes.

Using Prothero’s concept of religious literacy, the fact that most students were able to answer many questions indicates that they possess a fairly sufficient level of “Islamic literacy.” This suggests that the students who participated as respondents have a solid grasp of the basics of Islam. However, this situation is understandable, as the respondents are Muslim and the questions pertained specifically to Islam. Government regulations that require students to receive religious education according to their own faith ensure that students should indeed have a competent understanding of Islam.

The next question is whether having a high level of religious knowledge is sufficient to serve as a foundation for participation in national and civic life. Just as religious literacy comprises multiple elements, the same applies to religious knowledge. Prothero, like other scholars, does not limit religious literacy to a single religion but includes multiple religions. Therefore, religious knowledge, particularly basic knowledge of Islam in this context, represents only a small portion of what is needed to develop broader religious literacy. The following section discusses the level of multiple interpretations in religion, as illustrated in the diagram below:

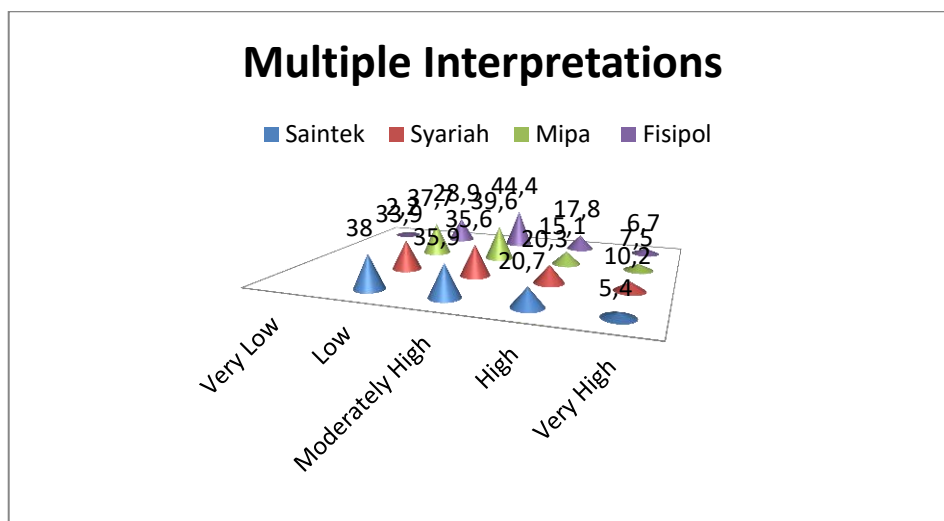


Figure 3. the Level of Multiple Interpretations in Religion

As shown in the diagram above, most students fall within the low to moderately high levels for the variable of multiple interpretations in religion. This differs from the religious knowledge variable discussed earlier, which had a higher percentage of students in the moderately high to high categories. Although both variables involve cognitive aspects, as they assess an individual’s knowledge of a subject, the data above indicate that the relationship between them is not necessarily linear. This is because the variable of multiple interpretations in religion requires deeper learning, reading, and discussion.

Based on the diagram, all faculties show the highest percentage of students in the moderately high category. This suggests that there are no significant differences between faculties. Nevertheless, students from the Faculty of Shariah achieved the highest average scores among the four faculties. Out of the 40 narratives or discourses presented by the researcher, most students had heard or were aware of at least 6 to 17 items. Only one student from Fisipol fell into the very low category. In contrast, for the high and very high categories, each faculty accounted for approximately 5% to 20% of students.

This indicates that a person's level of basic religious knowledge does not necessarily parallel their understanding of multiple interpretations of religion. This is because understanding the diversity of interpretations or the contextual background accompanying a religious teaching is not easily acquired through standard religious education in schools or universities. Therefore, as previously mentioned, acquiring knowledge of multiple religious interpretations requires extensive reading, learning, engagement with experts, and deeper discussions. The next discussion focuses on the attitudes variable in religious literacy. The following diagram presents the levels of this variable to provide a clearer overview:

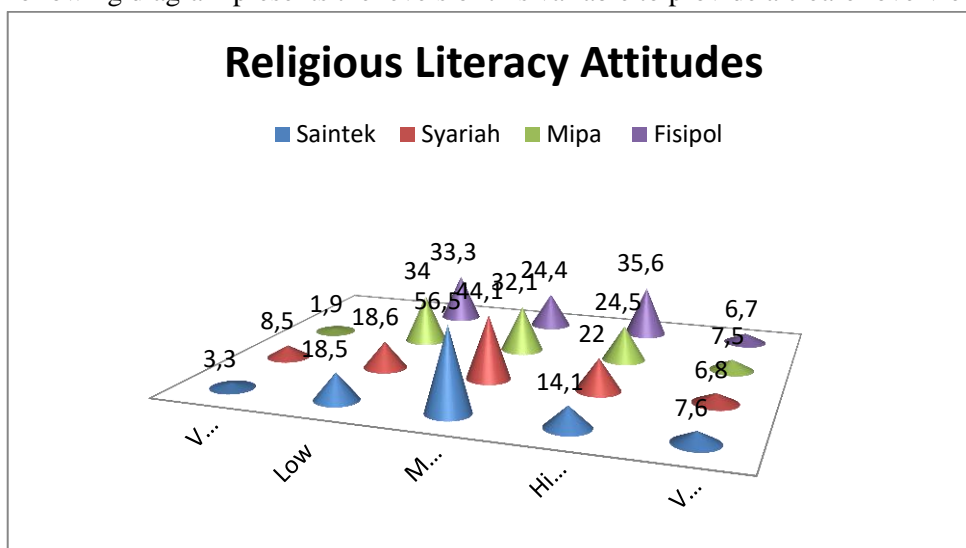


Figure 4. the Level of Students' Religious Literacy Attitudes

Unlike the previous variables, which assessed students' knowledge of religious narratives or discourses, this section examines students' attitudes toward specific situations related to their encounters with other religions. As shown in the diagram above, most students from UIN or religious university fall within the moderately high or mid-level categories. For UGM, the majority of students from Fisipol are in the high category, with a percentage of 35.6%, which differs from the other three faculties. In contrast, for MIPA, unlike the previous three faculties that had higher percentages in the moderately high or high categories, most students (34%) fall into the low category.

The above shows that most students at religious university generally have religious literacy attitudes, such as critical attitudes towards certain religious stereotypes or views on differences in interpretation, which are in the moderately high category. This differs from students at non-religious university studying social sciences, in this case Fisipol UGM, where the majority fall into the high category. Furthermore, Fisipol students also have the highest average scores compared to other faculties. Therefore, students from non-religious institution, particularly those studying social sciences, demonstrate higher levels of attitudes in religious literacy compared to those from religious institution.

Unlike the previous variable, which focused only on a single religion, namely Islam, the items in this section emphasize religious diversity. The finding that students from non-religious university demonstrate higher attitudes in religious literacy suggests that their diverse backgrounds contribute to these attitudes. Interestingly, some students from non-religious institution in the natural sciences have religious literacy scores ranging from low to moderately high. This situation illustrates that there are other criteria, namely regarding the science they are studying, whether it is natural science or social science, may influence religious literacy attitudes. Meanwhile, students from religious institution generally exhibit attitudes in religious literacy that are moderately high or medium. Next, the researcher will discuss the overall level of religious literacy among students. To facilitate understanding of differences across faculties, a diagram is provided as follows:

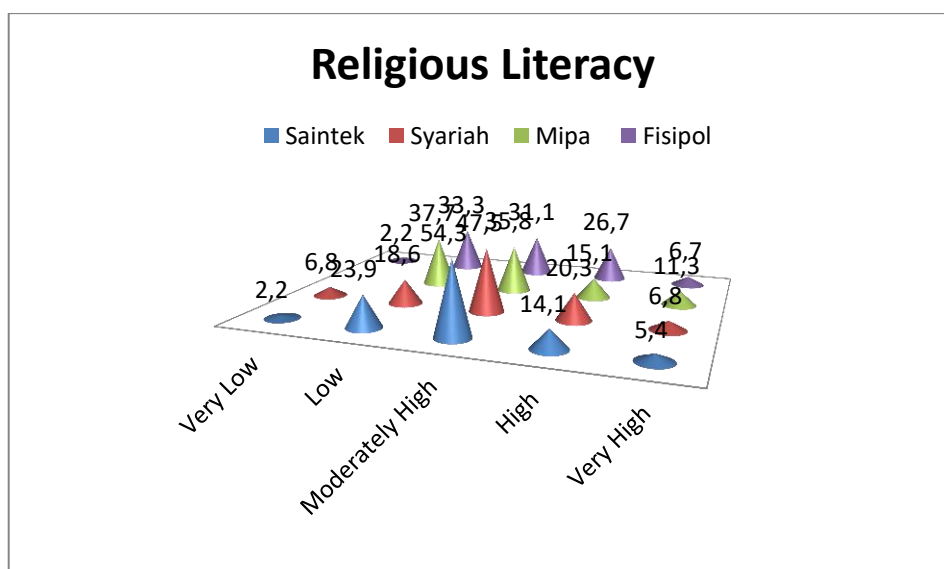


Figure 5. the Level of Students' Religious Literacy

The diagram above illustrates the calculation derived from the three previously mentioned variables. When the variables of religious knowledge, multiple interpretations in religion, and attitudes toward religious literacy are combined, they form what this study refers to as religious literacy. As shown in the diagram above, in the high category, only Fisipol has more than 25% of its students in this category. In addition, Fisipol has the highest average score of religious literacy compared to the others. Since this measure combines cognitive abilities consisting of religious knowledge and multiple interpretations in religion and affective aspects consisting of attitudes toward religious literacy, it indicates that the religious literacy of students from nonreligious faculties who study social sciences is higher than that of the others.

However, despite this, the largest percentage of Fisipol students still falls within the low category. Similar to Fisipol, the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences also has the largest percentage of students in the low category of religious literacy. This is different from religious higher education institution, where the largest percentage of students falls within the moderately high category. This indicates that students in religious higher education institution who are assumed to have studied religious subjects from primary school until university generally demonstrate a moderately high level of religious literacy. Moreover, if we examine the distribution more closely, most of the percentages tend to cluster in the low to moderately high categories.

This finding indicates that if religious education is assumed to have a linear relationship with religious literacy, then a high level of religious knowledge should lead students to possess strong religious literacy as well. However, this assumption is not supported, as illustrated by the data above. While in the variable of religious knowledge most students fall within the moderately high to high categories, in the variable of religious literacy most students fall within the low to moderately high categories.

This phenomenon suggests that religious education in Indonesia is paradoxical. On the one hand, the government encourages students to study religion according to their own beliefs, as stipulated in Law No. 20 of 2003. As a result, religious subjects or courses are offered at every level of education. Consequently, most students understand the basic knowledge of religion. This indicates that the majority of students possess relatively strong cognitive abilities in religious education. On the other hand, however, this condition has not necessarily led students to develop equally strong religious literacy.

According to the researcher, this situation is not very different from the findings of this study. As mentioned earlier, the religious education that students have learned so far has primarily produced cognitive understanding of religion. Further literacy capacities, such as knowledge and understanding of the diversity of religious interpretations, remain relatively limited when compared to their religious knowledge. In fact,

according to the researcher, broader knowledge of diverse interpretations can stimulate critical thinking, as individuals are confronted with multiple perspectives. Such diversity of perspectives encourages students to develop their own arguments rather than adhering exclusively to a single perspective.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the level of religious literacy among students from non-religious higher education institution is higher than that of students from religious institution. Nevertheless, there are layers within these institution between those who study social sciences and those who study the natural sciences, which cannot be generalized. In general, most students fall within the moderately high to high categories in terms of religious knowledge. However, among Fisipol students, who come from non-religious institution, about 40% fall within the low category.

Regarding the variable of multiple interpretations in religion, most students fall within the low to moderately high levels. This differs from the variable of religious knowledge discussed above, where the largest percentages are found in the moderately high to high categories. Meanwhile, for the variable of attitudes toward religious literacy, most students from UIN or religious higher education institution fall within the moderately high level, or in the middle range, compared to students from non-religious university. As for religious literacy, which combines the three variables mentioned above, the religious literacy of students from non-religious institution who study social sciences, particularly those from the Faculty of Fisipol, is higher than that of the others.

This study focuses only on religious literacy among young people, particularly university students in Yogyakarta. Future research may examine other aspects within the scope of religious literacy, including economic, social, political, cultural, and legal dimensions. Research on religious literacy in relation to education can also be further developed, for example by examining curriculum, teachers, students at different educational levels such as elementary, junior secondary, and senior secondary education, as well as learning methodologies.

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