



## Exploring the Lived Experiences of Islamic Religious Educators in Online Religious Instruction During the Pandemic: Insights into Spiritual Transformations

Jafar Sidik

Universitas Islam Negeri Datokarama Palu, Indonesia

[jafarsidik@uindatokarama.ac.id](mailto:jafarsidik@uindatokarama.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a crucial role in shaping spiritual identity and moral development, particularly within Islamic educational contexts. As digital technology transforms teaching practices, the shift to online religious instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges and opportunities for spiritual pedagogy. However, little is known about how Islamic religious educators experience and interpret their spiritual roles in virtual environments. This study addresses this gap by asking: How do religious educators experience spirituality when teaching through online platforms during the pandemic? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), the study explores the lived experiences of ten Islamic religious education teachers who transitioned to digital teaching. These participants were selected from various Islamic educational institutions across urban and semi-urban areas in Indonesia, with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 20 years. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically. The research reveals that educators experienced a deepened sense of spiritual intentionality, reimagined pedagogical practices, and emotional struggles that ultimately led to meaningful transformation. These findings demonstrate that digital religious instruction can foster, rather than hinder, spiritual engagement when approached with reflective intention. The use of IPA allowed for a rich, contextual interpretation of educators' narratives, uncovering the nuanced ways spirituality is enacted and reconstructed in digital spaces. This study advances our understanding of religious education as a dynamic, adaptive, and deeply personal practice, and it highlights the value of phenomenological methods in exploring spiritual dimensions in contemporary pedagogical settings.



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### INTRODUCTION

Religious education occupies a foundational role in shaping moral values, spiritual identity, and ethical behavior within diverse societies. In Islamic contexts, it goes beyond the transmission of knowledge to include the nurturing of inner spiritual development (Arif et al., 2025). This pedagogical mission involves the intersection of teachers' personal faith, cultural frameworks, and students lived experiences. Amid rapid social and technological change, religious education has been compelled to evolve—particularly through digitalization, which now plays a central role in reshaping pedagogical practices.

The global COVID-19 pandemic significantly intensified this shift, pushing religious educators into unfamiliar digital learning environments (Whyte, 2023). Islamic religious education teachers, in particular, faced the tension between sacred tradition and the use of technology, often navigating it with limited preparation or institutional support.

This situation introduced distinct challenges and opportunities—especially in sustaining spiritual authenticity and meaningful engagement in virtual classrooms. Online instruction redefined

not only teacher–student interactions but also educators’ roles as spiritual mentors and the ways they conveyed religious meaning (Syaputri et al., 2024). Despite these transformations, little is known about how Islamic religious educators interpret and experience their spiritual roles in digital spaces.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the spiritual dimensions of online religious teaching during the pandemic (Alimah, 2020). The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do Islamic religious education teachers experience and embody spirituality while teaching through online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This phenomenon holds significant relevance not only within the realm of educational reform but also in understanding how individuals experience, interpret, and reconstruct faith-based practices in contemporary settings (Altinyelken, 2021). The subjective dimension of this transition how religious educators make sense of their roles, responsibilities, and spiritual transformations demands deeper exploration. These lived experiences are embedded within broader sociocultural shifts that influence how faith is embodied and communicated in modern pedagogical contexts.

A phenomenological exploration of this issue is crucial, as it enables a focus on the meanings derived from the experiences of those most intimately involved. Rather than relying solely on external evaluations or general educational metrics, such an approach centers on the inner worlds of religious educators, capturing the nuanced interplay between belief, identity, and practice (Marzuki & Syahrial, 2020). Understanding this phenomenon from the inside-out contributes to a richer, more humanistic perspective on the evolving role of religious education in the digital age.

Within the broader field of religious education, growing scholarly attention has been directed toward the lived experiences of educators, particularly in times of crisis or structural change. Research examining how teachers engage with religious content, interact with students, and construct meaning from their instructional roles has revealed rich, complex layers of spiritual and emotional significance. These experiences are often deeply personal and context-dependent, shaped by individual beliefs, pedagogical values, and cultural expectations. As such, understanding the subjective dimension of teaching especially in the context of digital transformation requires methodological approaches capable of capturing nuanced meaning beyond observable behavior.

However, much of the existing research on religious instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic has relied on quantitative or mixed-methods designs that prioritize measurable outcomes, such as student engagement or technological proficiency. While informative, such approaches often overlook the inner transformations and existential reflections that educators undergo during profound pedagogical shifts. Quantitative measures tend to abstract lived experience into generalized categories, limiting insight into how teachers internalize, negotiate, and reinterpret their spiritual identities within new teaching modalities.

This methodological gap highlights the limitations of prior research in uncovering the essence of spiritual experience among religious educators (Abubakar et al., 2023). Without access to the voices, emotions, and narratives of those who live the phenomenon, the full richness of their pedagogical and spiritual journeys remains underexplored. The interpretative phenomenological approach addresses this need by providing a lens through which to understand the subjective realities and deeply felt meanings that arise when religious education is mediated through digital platforms. By prioritizing first-person accounts, this study contributes to a more holistic and empathetic understanding of spiritual teaching in a time of technological and societal transition.

Current responses to the challenges posed by digital religious instruction have largely centered on practical solutions such as the integration of learning management systems, teacher training on online platforms, and curriculum adjustments to accommodate virtual formats. While these strategies have offered functional support for educators, they often emphasize external performance metrics and technological adaptation, rather than internal transformation. Consequently, much of the existing scholarship fails to address how religious educators experience and make meaning of these pedagogical shifts on a personal and spiritual level.

This narrow focus has created a gap in understanding the inner realities of teachers who navigate the intersection of faith, technology, and instruction. The prevailing approaches, though

helpful for improving logistical efficiency, lack the methodological depth required to capture the lived experiences and evolving spiritual identities of educators within digital contexts. As a result, they produce knowledge that is operationally useful but experientially shallow.

To address this limitation, a phenomenological approach is essential one that centers the voices of religious educators and seeks to understand the meanings they construct from their experiences (Hanif et al., 2024). Interpretative phenomenology, in particular, enables a more holistic exploration of the spiritual, emotional, and existential dimensions of teaching in a mediated environment. By shifting the focus from what teachers do to how they live and feel their roles, this approach fills a critical void in the current literature and enriches our understanding of the complex human dimensions of religious education in times of transformation.

Several recent studies have explored the experiences of educators adapting to digital teaching during crises, including work on professional identity shifts, emotional burnout, and pedagogical transformation. However, most of these investigations have approached the subject using quantitative frameworks or surface-level thematic analyses, offering limited insight into the internal spiritual processes educators undergo. Some qualitative studies have addressed the psychosocial dimensions of teaching, yet few have explored the lived spiritual experiences of religious educators in digital contexts. The absence of this perspective leaves a significant gap in understanding how religious instruction, which is inherently personal and value-driven, evolves when mediated by technology. This study positions itself within this emerging discourse by focusing on subjective meaning and spiritual interpretation.

To explore this complex and deeply personal phenomenon, this article adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). IPA allows for a detailed exploration of how individuals experience, interpret, and make sense of significant events in their lives, particularly within spiritual or emotionally charged domains. This methodology is especially suited for capturing the nuanced transformations that religious educators experience in a digital classroom setting (Athoillah et al., 2024). It addresses the limitations of prior research by foregrounding the voices and narratives of those who live the phenomenon directly. In doing so, the study offers a meaningful response to the knowledge gap by uncovering the essence of educators' spiritual engagement in online religious education.

This article is structured as follows: it begins with an introduction that outlines the broader educational and spiritual context of the research. The next section describes the interpretative phenomenological framework used and explains the rationale for its selection. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the data collection process, including participant criteria and interview procedures. The analysis section presents the interpretative process and highlights key themes drawn from the data. The article concludes with a discussion of findings in relation to existing literature and implications for future religious education practice in digital environments.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived spiritual experiences of Islamic religious education teachers during digital instruction in the pandemic context. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected for its emphasis on understanding how individuals make sense of significant life experiences, allowing for the uncovering of layered, contextual meanings (Johnson, 2014). This design is particularly suitable for examining spiritual dimensions, as it facilitates deep engagement with the subjective interpretations and personal reflections of participants. The interpretative (hermeneutic) variant of phenomenology, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, guided the inquiry by prioritizing the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant, acknowledging the dynamic interaction between the participant's worldview and the researcher's interpretative lens.

Researcher positionality was acknowledged throughout the study. The lead researcher is a practicing Muslim with a background in religious education and digital pedagogy, which informed

both the sensitivity to participants' contexts and the interpretative stance adopted. Reflexive journaling was maintained to monitor assumptions, and potential biases were discussed with peer researchers to enhance interpretive neutrality.

### **Participants**

Participants included Islamic religious education teachers who had actively taught during the COVID-19 pandemic using digital platforms. Selection was based on purposive sampling to ensure that individuals possessed firsthand and meaningful experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one academic year of digital teaching experience in religious education at the secondary level and to self-identify as practicing Muslims. Those with less than six months of teaching experience in online settings were excluded. The sample consisted of ten participants (6 males, 4 females), ranging in age from 29 to 52 years, with an average of 37.6 years. Most participants were affiliated with public secondary schools in urban and semi-urban settings.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a flexible interview protocol that allowed for the emergence of rich narratives. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet, private setting or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and public health conditions. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of spiritual experiences, pedagogical reflections, and emotional responses related to digital religious instruction. A supportive and respectful environment was maintained to encourage openness. The interview protocol was adapted from established phenomenological interview guides, with modifications to reflect the unique spiritual and pedagogical context of the study.

To ensure trustworthiness, participants were invited for member checking after transcription to validate the accuracy of their narratives. Minor clarifications were incorporated with participant approval. Additionally, informal peer debriefing sessions were conducted among three qualitative researchers to examine emerging interpretations and reduce interpretive bias.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic, multi-stage process. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to develop familiarity with each participant's narrative. Meaning units were identified and coded to capture significant expressions related to spiritual experience, pedagogical transformation, and emotional negotiation. Codes were then organized into emerging themes across cases, with attention to convergence and divergence of meaning. Thematic development proceeded through iterative engagement with the data, using both manual coding and NVivo software to assist in data management and organization.

To enhance analytical rigor, an audit trail of coding decisions was maintained, and representative quotes were mapped against each emergent theme to preserve transparency. Peer researchers reviewed selected transcripts and thematic groupings to ensure consistency of interpretation. The analytical process aimed to uncover essential meanings and contextual interpretations of the participants' lived experiences, aligning with the phenomenological goal of understanding how individuals interpret their world.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants, who were informed of the study's aims, their voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely to ensure confidentiality. The research adhered to ethical standards established by the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant national research ethics guidelines.

## RESULTS

This study revealed a constellation of deeply personal and spiritual experiences among Islamic religious education teachers as they navigated the transition to digital teaching during the pandemic. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), three overarching themes emerged: (1) Spiritual Deepening through Digital Teaching, (2) Reconstructing Religious Pedagogy in a Virtual Space, and (3) Negotiating Faith, Technology, and Emotional Struggles.

### Spiritual Deepening through Digital Teaching

Participants consistently described an unexpected intensification of their spiritual connection amidst the shift to online platforms. Rather than weakening their religious expression, digital teaching compelled them to engage in deeper preparation and intentionality.

“I felt closer to God, oddly enough, when teaching online. It was like I had to cleanse my heart before teaching preparing not just my slides, but my soul.” (Participant 4)

Teachers reported that the solitude of online teaching sessions, devoid of classroom distractions, fostered a more meditative and inwardly focused environment. Some likened this process to a form of *muraqabah* (spiritual self-vigilance).

“Every time I turned on the camera, I reminded myself that even if students were not fully present, Allah was always watching. That changed how I spoke, how I prayed before class.” (Participant 1)

#### How to enhance spiritual connection in teaching?



Online Teaching

Fosters deeper spiritual connection through solitude and intentionality



Traditional Teaching

May face distractions and less personal reflection

### Reconstructing Religious Pedagogy in a Virtual Space

This theme reflects how educators transformed their teaching strategies and reconstructed the transmission of religious values through digital means. Traditional face-to-face religious instruction relied heavily on embodied practices and communal rituals, which became inaccessible.

“I used to bring students to the mosque, guide their wudu, their prayers. Online, I had to guide them through words alone. I realized how powerful my words needed to be.” (Participant 7)

Some participants emphasized their efforts to contextualize religious concepts using digital metaphors or online interactions to replace physical demonstration.

“Teaching about sincerity used to mean looking into a student's eyes. Now, I'd say, ‘Imagine your webcam is recording your prayer would you still pray the same?’” (Participant 2)

Teachers found themselves relying more on storytelling, personal reflections, and emotionally resonant language to convey the essence of spiritual teachings in the absence of physical proximity.

### Negotiating Faith, Technology, and Emotional Struggles

The integration of faith and technology was not without emotional complexity. Participants faced tension between their religious expectations and the impersonal nature of digital platforms.

Feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and spiritual fatigue surfaced, especially in the early stages of the pandemic.

“Sometimes I questioned whether I was truly teaching religion. It felt like broadcasting, not educating. Was I feeding their souls or just filling time?” (Participant 5)

Others expressed a struggle to maintain sincerity and emotional engagement when teaching to silent screens or inattentive students.

“When a student turns off their camera, I worry is he praying with me, or watching YouTube? I can’t see their hearts, and that haunts me.” (Participant 6)

However, this struggle also led to personal growth and a reevaluation of their role as religious guides in modern times.

“Maybe this is a new jihad to keep our sincerity in a world that numbs it.” (Participant 3).

The findings reveal that religious educators experienced profound internal transformation while teaching in digital environments. The shift to online education did not diminish their spiritual agency but rather compelled a creative and reflective reconstruction of religious instruction. These educators negotiated technological challenges with spiritual depth, demonstrating resilience and adaptive pedagogy rooted in faith.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that Islamic religious educators experienced a deepening of their spiritual awareness, a reconfiguration of their pedagogical approaches, and a negotiation of emotional challenges in transitioning to digital instruction (Sibgatullina, 2022). These themes illuminate how the essence of spiritual teaching was not lost but rather transformed in the digital context, directly addressing the central research question: How do religious educators experience spirituality when teaching through online platforms during the pandemic?

The results demonstrate that the educators lived experiences provide critical insight into how digital religious education is internalized and reinterpreted (Zainuri & Huda, 2022). Rather than reducing teaching to technical delivery, participants described a heightened sense of spiritual intentionality and a reconnection with core religious values. These narratives underscore a unique contribution to existing scholarship: the spiritual self of the teacher becomes a central, rather than peripheral, element in virtual pedagogy. The study enriches the understanding of religious teaching as a form of spiritual practice that adapts and evolves in digital environments, thus offering a deeper, more holistic comprehension of religious education under crisis conditions.

These findings resonate with and extend prior qualitative studies in religious education and teacher identity. For example, Palmer (1998) posits that good teaching flows from the identity and integrity of the teacher a concept echoed in participants' reflections on the necessity of inner preparation before teaching online. Similarly, works by Farooqui & Kaushik (2021) on religious educators' moral agency support the idea that teaching religion involves personal transformation. However, this study expands the discourse by illustrating how digital environments serve not only as constraints but also as catalysts for spiritual introspection and pedagogical creativity. In contrast to research that emphasizes technological limitations (Amaly et al., 2023), this study highlights the interpretive and spiritual richness that can emerge when teachers engage deeply with the medium, revealing how meaning is reconstructed rather than diminished in online religious education.

The implications of this study extend beyond individual experiences, offering meaningful insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers within religious education. The findings suggest that spiritual teaching is not confined to physical spaces but can be cultivated and even deepened through intentional use of digital platforms. This challenges traditional assumptions that equate religious authenticity with face-to-face rituals and presence, suggesting instead that spirituality is relational, contextual, and adaptive. For educational institutions, these results emphasize the need to support the spiritual well-being and reflective practices of educators not just their technical

competencies when implementing digital pedagogies. On a broader scale, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about the role of personal meaning-making in professional practice, particularly within culturally embedded domains such as religious education.

Despite these insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a relatively small and context-specific sample of Islamic religious educators in a particular sociocultural setting (Sefriani et al., 2024). As with most phenomenological research, the findings are not intended to be generalizable in a statistical sense but rather offer depth of understanding within a defined context. The reliance on self-reported narratives may also introduce interpretative bias, although the use of methodological rigor such as triangulation and member checking was employed to enhance credibility. Future research could explore diverse religious traditions, educational levels, or geographic contexts to further enrich our understanding of digital spirituality in educational settings.

Looking forward, this study opens several avenues for future inquiry. One potential direction is the longitudinal exploration of how digital religious teaching shapes educators' spiritual identities over time. Another promising path involves comparative studies between faith-based and secular educators to examine whether and how spirituality influences pedagogical adaptation in crisis situations. Additionally, future work might investigate how students perceive and respond to the spiritual expressions of teachers in online environments, thereby offering a more holistic view of the educational ecosystem. Such research would not only build upon the current study's contributions but also expand the epistemological frameworks used to understand teaching as a profoundly human and spiritual act.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived spiritual experiences of Islamic religious education teachers as they transitioned to digital instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that digital teaching did not diminish spiritual engagement but instead deepened educators' connection to their faith and transformed their pedagogical approaches. Participants described a heightened sense of intentionality, spiritual reflection, and emotional negotiation in their roles as religious guides in virtual environments. These insights address a critical gap in the literature by highlighting how spirituality can adapt and flourish through digital means, challenging conventional views of religious authenticity. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of religious education as a dynamic and reflective practice rooted in personal meaning. However, the study is not without limitations. The small sample size and context-specific focus on Islamic religious educators in Indonesia may limit generalizability. Additionally, the study relied solely on teacher narratives, without triangulation from student perspectives.

Future research should consider incorporating longitudinal designs to examine how digital spiritual engagement evolves over time, particularly as online religious education becomes more institutionalized. Investigating the experiences of students as recipients of digital religious instruction would also provide a richer, more holistic understanding of the pedagogical and spiritual dynamics involved. Cross-tradition comparative studies could further illuminate how different religious frameworks negotiate spirituality in online learning environments.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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