Underrepresentation of Sacred Text Studies in Students' Theses: Evidence from a Religious Studies Program in Indonesia

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Abstract: This study examines the position and representation of sacred text studies in undergraduate and graduate theses within the Religious Studies Program at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Indonesia, and explores the factors associated with their relatively limited presence. The study is important in light of the growing prominence of empirical and interdisciplinary approaches in Religious Studies, which may influence students' research orientations and the balance between textual and contextual inquiry. This research employs a qualitative approach with descriptive survey elements. Data were collected through document analysis of 100 thesis titles produced between 2020 and 2024, a checklist-based questionnaire administered to 30 respondents, and in-depth interviews with five lecturers and three students. The data were analyzed interpretatively to identify thematic patterns, associated factors, and students' perceived academic support needs. The findings show that sacred text studies appear in only seven titles, or 7% of the total theses analyzed, while most student research is oriented toward sociological, cultural, interreligious, and other contextual approaches. Their limited representation is associated with structural constraints, methodological challenges, and students' preferences for topics perceived as more practical and manageable. The study implies that strengthening textual methodology training, improving access to primary sources, and enhancing expert supervision may help create a more balanced academic environment. The originality of this study lies in its micro-academic focus on student thesis practices, offering an empirical account of how disciplinary orientations are shaped within a specific Religious Studies program.

Keywords: Higher education; religious studies; sacred text studies; student research practices; underrepresentation.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji posisi dan keterwakilan kajian teks suci dalam skripsi dan tesis mahasiswa pada Program Studi Studi Agama-Agama di Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, Indonesia, serta menelusuri faktor-faktor yang berkaitan dengan keterwakilannya yang relatif terbatas. Penelitian ini penting dilakukan seiring semakin menonjolnya pendekatan empiris dan interdisipliner dalam studi agama, yang dapat memengaruhi orientasi penelitian mahasiswa serta keseimbangan antara kajian tekstual dan kontekstual. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan unsur survei deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui analisis dokumen terhadap 100 judul skripsi dan tesis yang dihasilkan antara tahun 2020 dan 2024, kuesioner berbasis checklist kepada 30 responden, serta wawancara mendalam dengan lima dosen dan tiga mahasiswa. Data dianalisis secara interpretatif untuk mengidentifikasi pola tematik, faktor-faktor yang berkaitan, serta kebutuhan dukungan akademik yang dipersepsikan mahasiswa. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kajian teks suci hanya muncul dalam tujuh judul, atau 7% dari total tesis yang dianalisis, sementara sebagian besar penelitian mahasiswa lebih berorientasi pada pendekatan sosiologis, kultural, interreligius, dan pendekatan kontekstual lainnya. Keterwakilan yang terbatas ini berkaitan dengan kendala struktural, tantangan metodologis, dan preferensi mahasiswa terhadap topik yang dipandang lebih praktis dan lebih mudah dikelola. Implikasi penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa penguatan pelatihan metodologi tekstual, peningkatan akses terhadap sumber primer, dan penguatan supervisi akademik yang kompeten dapat membantu menciptakan lingkungan akademik

yang lebih seimbang. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada fokusnya di tingkat mikro-akademik pada praktik penulisan skripsi dan tesis mahasiswa, sehingga menawarkan penjelasan empiris mengenai bagaimana orientasi disipliner terbentuk dalam konteks spesifik suatu program studi agama.

Kata kunci: Pendidikan tinggi; studi agam-agama; studi teks suci; praktik penelitian mahasiswa; kurangnya representasi.

1.   Introduction

Over the past two decades, the development of Religious Studies in Indonesia has shown significant growth. Data from the Science and Technology Index of the Ministry of Higher Education indicate that at least 26 Religious Studies programs are currently offered across Indonesian universities (SINTA, 2024). This expansion reflects the increasing institutionalization of Religious Studies as an academic field. As a discipline, Religious Studies is expected to promote an objective, comparative, and multidisciplinary understanding of religion, distinguishing itself from theological approaches that tend to be normative and tradition-specific (Abdullah, 1996; Bowie, Panjwani, & Clemmey, 2022; Franzén Johnson, Lilja, & Osbeck, 2024). Within this framework, the study of sacred texts such as the Qur'an, Bible, Vedas, and Tripitaka remains an important component as foundational sources of religious traditions.

However, empirical observations at the level of student research practices indicate a different tendency. A review of 100 thesis titles produced between 2020 and 2024 in the Religious Studies Program at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University shows that only approximately 7% explicitly focus on sacred texts as the primary object of analysis (UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2024). In contrast, most theses examine contemporary religious phenomena, including social practices, religious experiences, and digital representations of religion, often using sociological, psychological, and media-based approaches (UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2024). These topics are frequently perceived by students as more accessible in terms of data availability and methodological application.

Previous studies suggest that the relatively limited engagement with sacred text studies in higher education may be influenced by multiple factors. These include constraints in accessing interreligious textual sources, the perceived complexity of textual and philological methods, and challenges in identifying appropriate analytical frameworks (Sofjan, 2020). Such findings indicate that students' topic preferences may not be solely individual choices, but are also shaped by broader academic and institutional conditions. However, empirical studies that systematically examine this pattern at the level of student theses remain limited.

It is important to note that the relatively low representation of sacred text studies in Religious Studies programs does not necessarily indicate a general decline of textual studies in higher education. In practice, sacred text studies continue to develop within specialized programs, such as Qur'anic Studies and Hadith Studies, where textual and normative approaches are institutionally concentrated (Afwadzi, Sumbulah, Ali, & Qudsy, 2024; Rosa & Shoheh, 2024). This condition suggests that the distribution of research topics may reflect a form of disciplinary differentiation rather than the disappearance of textual traditions (Abdullah, 2017; Azra, 2005).

Within Religious Studies, which emphasizes comparative and interdisciplinary approaches, research often prioritizes empirical and contextual analyses of religion as a social and cultural phenomenon (Ammerman, 2013; Geertz, 1973; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2013). In this context, sacred texts are frequently positioned as supporting references rather than as primary analytical objects. This tendency may contribute to a disciplinary imbalance between textual and contextual approaches, particularly in student research practices.

The existing literature on Religious Studies can be broadly categorized into three main tendencies. First, studies employing sociological and anthropological approaches emphasize religion as a social and cultural phenomenon, focusing on collective practices, social structures, and cultural meanings (Abdurrohman, 2022; Durkheim, 1915; Fauzi, 2023; Syam, 2007). These approaches have been strengthened by interdisciplinary methodologies integrating perspectives from the social sciences and

humanities (McClymond, 2020; Stausberg & Engler, 2013). While they enrich contextual understanding, sacred texts are often treated as background rather than as primary analytical objects.

Second, studies in the psychology of religion focus on individual religious experiences, including spirituality, religious conversion, mental health, and personal religiosity (Demmrich & Wolfradt, 2019; Hamali, 2018; Jung, 2017; Na'imah, 2019; Yusron, 2024). These studies highlight the relationship between religiosity and well-being, as well as the influence of socio-cultural contexts on individual belief systems (Francis, Astley, & Parker, 2016; Jones, 2017; Karakus, Ersozlu, Usak, & Yucel, 2021). However, similar to sociological approaches, sacred texts are generally positioned as implicit normative backgrounds rather than central analytical objects.

Third, research examining the relationship between religion and media, particularly in digital contexts, explores how media shape religious practices, representations, and experiences (Campbell, 2010; Gani, Fattah, & Nasri, 2024; Hoover, 2006; Stout & Buddenbaum, 2001; Williams & Mukherjee, 2023). This trend reflects the increasing responsiveness of Religious Studies to technological and social changes, including in higher education contexts (Gray-Hildenbrand & King, 2019; Wuriningsih, Sukestiyarno, & Prihatin, 2023). While these approaches are relevant to contemporary developments, they tend to shift attention away from textual studies.

On the other hand, studies on sacred texts in higher education demonstrate their continued importance in developing interpretative skills, ethical reflection, and cross-cultural understanding (Mayse, 2025; Sabbath, 2024). Comparative approaches to sacred texts enrich students' perspectives on religious diversity. However, previous research also highlights several challenges, including methodological complexity, language requirements, and limited institutional support, which may affect students' engagement with textual studies (Bhatnagar, Kaur, Subramanian, & Krishnamoorthy, 2024; Bruehler, 2018).

Despite these developments, a clear research gap remains. While existing studies have explored various methodological orientations in Religious Studies, relatively few have examined how these orientations are reflected in student research practices, particularly in relation to the representation of sacred text studies. Moreover, the interaction between structural, methodological, and institutional factors influencing students' topic selection remains underexplored.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the position and representation of sacred text studies in student theses within a Religious Studies program and to explore the factors associated with their relatively limited presence. Rather than making broad claims about systemic marginalization, this study focuses on identifying patterns of underrepresentation at the micro-academic level and understanding how these patterns are shaped by institutional conditions and methodological considerations.

This study argues that the underrepresentation of sacred text studies in student theses cannot be understood solely as a matter of individual preference, but is associated with the interaction of structural, methodological, and institutional conditions within Religious Studies. Limited access to textual resources, the availability of expert supervision, and the methodological demands of textual and philological analysis may influence students' choices of research topics. At the same time, the growing emphasis on empirical and interdisciplinary approaches may encourage students to prioritize research topics that are perceived as more accessible and applicable within contemporary academic contexts.

In this regard, sacred texts should not be viewed only as normative sources, but also as social and cultural phenomena that shape religious identity, practices, and collective meanings, as emphasized by Frederick M. Denny (2015). Therefore, rather than suggesting a systemic marginalization, this study highlights a pattern of underrepresentation that reflects a disciplinary imbalance between textual and contextual approaches. Strengthening the integration of textual studies within interdisciplinary frameworks may provide a more balanced perspective in Religious Studies while maintaining relevance to contemporary social contexts.

2.   Method

The unit of analysis in this study consists of academic documents in the form of undergraduate and master's theses written by students of the Religious Studies Program at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, produced between 2020 and 2024. In addition, the unit of analysis includes students as authors of academic works and lecturers as academic supervisors, in order to understand the dynamics of topic preferences and research orientations within an institutional context.

This study employs a qualitative approach with descriptive survey elements. The qualitative orientation is used to explore in depth the meanings, considerations, and experiences underlying students' choices of research topics, while the survey component provides descriptive support for identifying general patterns among respondents. This combination allows for a more comprehensive understanding of both observable patterns and underlying reasons without aiming for statistical generalization (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Moleong, 2000).

The data sources consist of both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from students who had completed their undergraduate or master's theses in the Religious Studies Program, as well as from lecturers who teach and supervise research in this field. Secondary data consist of academic documents, particularly thesis titles and abstracts from 2020 to 2024, which are used to map research trends. This study thus integrates informant-based data and document-based data to provide a comprehensive perspective.

Data were collected through three main techniques. First, a questionnaire was distributed to students who had completed their theses between 2020 and 2024, resulting in 30 respondents (n = 30). The respondents were selected purposively. The questionnaire was designed in the form of structured items using a checklist format, allowing respondents to select more than one option for each question. The instrument focuses on identifying students' considerations in selecting research topics, their perceptions of the complexity of sacred text studies, and factors influencing their methodological choices. The responses were tabulated and presented in percentage form to describe patterns of responses. These percentages are used solely for descriptive purposes and do not imply statistical generalization.

Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with five lecturers who have experience teaching and supervising research in Religious Studies, as well as with three students who had completed their theses. These interviews aim to capture more detailed explanations regarding academic considerations, institutional contexts, and challenges related to sacred text studies.

Third, document analysis was conducted on 100 thesis titles obtained from the institutional repository (digilib.uin-suka.ac.id). The analysis focuses on identifying patterns of research themes and the extent to which sacred texts are used as primary objects of analysis. In this process, thematic coding was applied to classify research topics. The thematic categories were developed inductively based on recurring topics identified in the thesis titles, including sociological approaches, cultural studies, interreligious relations, religious traditions, contemporary issues, and sacred text studies. Each thesis title was coded into one or more thematic categories based on its main focus, resulting in multiple thematic tags per document. Therefore, the frequency counts reported in this study represent the occurrence of thematic categories rather than mutually exclusive distributions of theses.

The data were analyzed using an interpretative approach through four stages. First, data reduction was conducted to select relevant information from questionnaires, interviews, and documents (Nasution, 1992). Second, the selected data were categorized into key themes, such as research topic patterns, factors associated with the underrepresentation of sacred text studies, and institutional influences. Third, the data were presented in a descriptive narrative form to illustrate patterns and relationships among findings. Fourth, conclusions were drawn through a reflective and interpretative process to explain the underlying factors shaping students' research preferences.

3.   Results

Thematic Mapping of Religious Studies Students' Theses

The analysis of the titles of 100 undergraduate and graduate theses produced by students in the Religious Studies Program at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, during the 2020–2024 period shows general patterns in students' research orientations. These data were obtained through document analysis of thesis titles to identify trends in research themes.

In the analytical process, each thesis title was classified into one or more thematic categories based on its main focus. Therefore, the table below presents the frequency of thematic tags rather than a mutually exclusive distribution. As a result, the total frequency exceeds the number of documents analyzed.

Table 1. Frequency of Thematic Categories (Thematic Tags) in Students' Theses (2020–2024)

No	Thematic Category	Frequency
1	Sociological Approaches (Sociology of Islam & General Sociology)	51
2	Cultural and Local Religious Studies	34
3	Interreligious and Social Relations	27
4	Religious History and Context	26
5	Religious Traditions (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism)	25
6	Anthropological and Phenomenological Approaches	14
7	Psychology and Spirituality Studies	12
8	Contemporary Issues (Media, Gender, Ecology)	10
9	Sacred Text Studies	7

Based on Table 1, the most frequently occurring thematic tags in student theses are sociological approaches (51), followed by cultural and local religious studies (34), interreligious and social relations (27), religious history and context (26), and religious traditions (25). These categories indicate that student research is predominantly oriented toward religion as a social, cultural, and contextual phenomenon. The relatively high frequency of these thematic tags suggests that students more often engage with topics related to social practices, cultural expressions, intergroup relations, and historically situated religious contexts than with direct textual analysis.

Other thematic categories appear with lower but still visible frequencies. Anthropological and phenomenological approaches appear in 14 titles, psychology and spirituality studies in 12 titles, and contemporary issues related to media, gender, and ecology in 10 titles. Although these categories are less frequent than the dominant thematic groups, they still indicate a degree of thematic diversity in student research and show that the program accommodates a range of approaches beyond the most prominent social and cultural orientations.

In contrast, sacred text studies appear in only seven titles, representing 7% of the total theses analyzed. This pattern suggests that sacred text studies remain present within the broader research landscape, but occupy a relatively limited position compared to other thematic orientations. In this sense, the thematic mapping indicates that although sacred text-related topics are not entirely absent, they are far less prominent than studies centered on social, cultural, and contextual dimensions of religion.

Factors Associated with the Limited Representation of Sacred Text Studies

Based on questionnaire responses from 30 respondents (n = 30), supported by interviews with students and lecturers, this study identifies several factors associated with the relatively limited representation of sacred text studies in students' theses. The questionnaire was designed in a checklist format that allowed respondents to select more than one factor. Therefore, the frequencies and

percentages presented represent the number of responses for each indicator rather than mutually exclusive distributions.

The findings show that these factors can be grouped into three main categories: structural factors, methodological factors, and student preferences. First, structural factors relate to institutional conditions that influence students' selection of research topics. Based on the questionnaire data, 21 out of 30 respondents (70%) identify limited academic facilities as a major constraint. In addition, 19 respondents (63.3%) indicate a limited number of lecturers with expertise in philology or classical text studies.

This condition is also reflected in the following lecturer's statement:

The number of lecturers who truly have expertise in classical text studies or philology is very limited, and most of them are approaching retirement. This situation clearly affects the direction of student supervision. In practice, we often struggle to guide students who want to pursue text-based research because it requires specialized competencies that not all lecturers possess. As a result, students are more often directed toward contextual and empirical topics that are considered more feasible to complete within the limited study period (BC, Lecturer, Personal Communication, June 12, 2024).

In addition, limited access to interreligious textual sources emerges as another constraint. A total of 18 respondents (60%) report difficulties in obtaining relevant primary sources.

A student also expresses this issue:

The main difficulty when I want to study sacred texts lies in accessing the sources, especially across different religions. Not all texts are easily available, particularly in forms suitable for academic research such as manuscripts or critical editions. Sometimes we only find popular versions online, which are not always academically reliable. Because of this, I feel safer choosing other topics with clearer and more accessible sources (AR, Student, Personal Communication, June 15, 2024).

Second, methodological factors also emerge from respondents' answers. A total of 23 out of 30 respondents (76.7%) perceive sacred text studies as more difficult compared to other approaches.

This difficulty relates to the need for specific skills, such as proficiency in source languages and familiarity with textual analysis methods. A total of 20 respondents (66.7%) acknowledge limitations in language proficiency, while 22 respondents (73.3%) report unfamiliarity with approaches such as philology or hermeneutics.

This situation is reflected in the following student experience:

I am actually interested in sacred text studies because they are important as the foundation for understanding religion. However, I find them difficult, especially because I need to understand original languages and complex analytical methods. In addition, we did not receive much technical training during our studies, so I feel unprepared and eventually choose topics that I can handle more confidently (BA, Student, Personal Communication, June 15, 2024).

Third, student preferences also emerge as an important factor. A total of 24 respondents (80%) indicate a tendency to choose topics that they consider easier or more practical. In addition, 22 respondents (73.3%) consider completion time, and 21 respondents (70%) mention the availability of online references as supporting factors.

This tendency is reflected in the following student statement:

Choosing social topics feels easier because the data are clear, and we can directly conduct interviews or observations. The research process is more straightforward from beginning to end. In contrast, sacred text studies feel more difficult, and I often do not know where to start—whether from the text, the context, or the analytical method. Using original languages or specific approaches like philology also feels challenging. Therefore, I choose topics that I can manage more effectively (IM, Student, Personal Communication, June 15, 2024).

Another student also states:

I am more interested in contemporary social religious issues because they feel more relevant… we tend to choose more current topics rather than classical studies such as sacred texts, which are considered more complex (IM, Student, Personal Communication, June 15, 2024).

Based on these findings, the questionnaire results can be summarized in the distribution of factors selected by respondents, as presented in Table 2. This table shows the frequency and percentage of responses for each indicator across the three main categories: structural factors, methodological factors, and student preferences.

Table 2. Distribution of Factors Associated with Topic Selection (n = 30)

No	Factor Category	Indicator	n	Percentage
1	Structural	Limited facilities	21	70%
2	Structural	Limited expert lecturers	19	63.3%
3	Structural	Limited access to interreligious texts	18	60%
4	Methodological	Textual studies perceived as difficult	23	76.7%
5	Methodological	Limited language proficiency	20	66.7%
6	Methodological	Unfamiliarity with textual methods	22	73.3%
7	Student Preference	Social topics perceived as easier	24	80%
8	Student Preference	Faster completion time	22	73.3%
9	Student Preference	Greater availability of online references	21	70%

Table 3. Ranking of Factors Based on Response Frequency

Rank	Factor	Percentage
1	Topics perceived as easier/practical	80%
2	Textual studies perceived as difficult	76.7%
3	Unfamiliarity with textual methods	73.3%
4	Faster completion time	73.3%
5	Limited facilities	70%

Based on Table 2, indicators related to student preferences and methodological aspects appear with relatively higher frequencies compared to structural factors. Indicators such as the tendency to choose easier or more practical topics (80%) and the perception that sacred text studies are more difficult (76.7%) are among the most frequently selected by respondents.

Table 3 presents the ranking of factors based on response frequency. It is important to note that this ranking is descriptive and based on the number of responses for each indicator, rather than representing causal relationships or levels of influence. Given the limited number of respondents, these data aim to provide a general overview of response patterns.

these findings indicate that the limited representation of sacred text studies in student research does not result from a single factor. Instead, it appears alongside a combination of structural constraints, methodological demands, and students' preferences for more practical and manageable topics. Taken together, these factors are associated with patterns in students' research topic selection, as reflected in Tables 2 and 3.

Student Perceptions of Academic Support for Sacred Text Studies

Based on questionnaire responses from 30 students (n = 30), this subsection presents students' perceptions of the forms of academic support considered important for increasing engagement with sacred text studies. The data are presented descriptively to show the relative frequency of support needs identified by respondents, including methodological training, access to sacred text sources, the availability of expert supervisors, laboratory facilities, and curriculum support. In this context, the findings do not aim to measure the effectiveness of particular interventions, but rather to illustrate the

types of academic support that students perceive as necessary for engaging more confidently with text-based research topics. These patterns are summarized in Table 4, which presents the frequency and percentage of each support need identified by respondents.

Table 4. Student Perceptions of the Needs for Revitalizing Sacred Text Studies (n = 30)

No	Need Indicator	n	Percentage
1	Need for textual methodology training	26	86.7%
2	Need for access to sacred text sources	24	80%
3	Need for expert supervisors	23	76.7%
4	Need for a text study laboratory	22	73.3%
5	Need for strengthening textual curriculum	21	70%

Table 4 show that textual methodology training is the most frequently identified need, selected by 26 respondents (86.7%). This is followed by access to sacred text sources, including critical editions and academic references, identified by 24 respondents (80%), and the availability of expert supervisors, selected by 23 respondents (76.7%). In addition, 22 respondents (73.3%) mention the need for a text study laboratory, while 21 respondents (70%) indicate the importance of strengthening curriculum components related to textual studies. Overall, these data indicate that students associate stronger engagement with sacred text studies with the availability of methodological support, source access, expert guidance, and supporting academic facilities.

These needs are also reflected in students' interview responses. One student explained that greater engagement with sacred text studies would be more likely if students received specific technical training, stating that, "*If there were specific training on how to read and analyze sacred texts, I think many students would be more interested in pursuing such studies,*" while also noting that the lack of methodological preparation reduced confidence in choosing text-based topics (IM, Student, Personal Communication, June 15, 2024). Another student emphasized the importance of qualified academic supervision, explaining, "*We need lecturers who can truly guide us from the beginning, not just provide general directions. Textual studies require detailed work, so they need serious supervision*" (AR, Student, Personal Communication, June 15, 2024). In addition, limited source access also emerged as a practical concern, as one student noted that relevant sacred texts across religious traditions are not always easily available in academically reliable forms, which makes other topics appear more manageable (AR, Student, Personal Communication, June 15, 2024).

The findings indicate that students' engagement with sacred text studies is closely associated with the availability of methodological support, access to relevant textual sources, and competent academic supervision. In addition, respondents also identify supporting facilities and curriculum-related support as important elements in strengthening their confidence to undertake text-based research. Taken together, these patterns show that students' interest in sacred text studies is linked not only to personal preference, but also to the forms of academic support they perceive as available and accessible within their learning environment.

4. Discussion

This study shows that sacred text studies occupy a relatively limited position in undergraduate and graduate theses within the Religious Studies Program at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, accounting for about 7% of the 100 thesis titles analyzed for the 2020–2024 period. In contrast, student research is more frequently oriented toward contextual and empirical approaches, particularly in areas such as sociology of religion, cultural studies, interreligious relations, and religion in digital media. When read together with the questionnaire and interview findings, this pattern suggests that the limited representation of sacred text studies is associated not with a single cause, but with the interaction of structural constraints, methodological demands, and students' practical topic preferences.

At the level of academic practice, students' topic selection appears to be shaped by considerations of feasibility. The findings show that students tend to choose topics that are perceived as easier, more practical, and more manageable within the available time frame. This tendency is reinforced by the perception that sacred text studies require more specialized competencies, including language proficiency, familiarity with philological or hermeneutical methods, and access to reliable primary sources. In this sense, the relatively limited representation of sacred text studies should not be read simply as a lack of student interest, but rather as a pattern shaped by the academic conditions in which students conduct their research.

From a structural perspective, the findings indicate that institutional conditions play an important role in shaping students' research orientations. Limited access to primary textual materials, the absence of dedicated text-based learning facilities, and the small number of lecturers with expertise in philology or classical text studies all appear to reduce students' opportunities to pursue text-based topics. These findings are consistent with the view that research choices are shaped not only by individual preferences but also by the distribution of academic resources and forms of supervision available within a study program. In this respect, the underrepresentation of sacred text studies may be understood as a reflection of broader academic arrangements rather than as an isolated thematic preference.

The findings also point to broader implications for the development of Religious Studies as a discipline. The prominence of empirical and contextual approaches in student research suggests a shift in emphasis from direct engagement with sacred texts toward the study of religion as lived, mediated, and socially situated practice. This tendency is consistent with wider developments in Religious Studies, where scholarship increasingly draws on the social sciences and humanities to examine religion as a dynamic social and cultural phenomenon (Ammerman, 2013; McGuire, 2008; Stausberg & Engler, 2013). Within this orientation, sacred texts often remain present, but more as background references than as primary analytical objects. In Frederick M. Denny's perspective, however, sacred texts are not merely normative documents; they also function as social and cultural phenomena that shape identity, ritual practice, and collective meaning (Denny, 2015).). From this standpoint, the relatively limited engagement with sacred texts may reduce students' opportunities to develop a more integrated understanding of religion that connects textual foundations with lived religious realities.

At the same time, the prominence of empirical approaches should not be viewed only negatively. Contextual and field-based research has clear academic value because it enables Religious Studies to remain responsive to contemporary developments and to examine religion as it is practiced, negotiated, and represented in everyday life. Sociological, anthropological, psychological, and media-based approaches all contribute important insights into the lived dimensions of religion. The issue, therefore, is not the presence of empirical approaches themselves, but the possibility that their dominance, when not accompanied by sufficient engagement with textual sources, may create an imbalance in the range of approaches available to students. In this sense, the concern raised by this study is not about replacing contextual inquiry with textual inquiry, but about preserving a productive balance between the two.

These findings align with broader trends in the development of Religious Studies, which show an increasing use of interdisciplinary approaches grounded in the social sciences and humanities. Studies employing sociological and anthropological approaches emphasize religion as a social and cultural phenomenon that shapes collective identity, social practices, and cultural meanings (Durkheim, 2016; Geertz, 1973; McClymond, 2020; Stausberg & Engler, 2013; Syam, 2007). This tendency is also reflected in student research practices, which tend to prioritize field-based studies and socio-religious dynamics.

In addition, research in the psychology of religion highlights a focus on individual religious experiences that are subjective and contextual (Demmrich & Wolfradt, 2019; Francis et al., 2016; Jones, 2017; Jung, 2017; Karakus et al., 2021). Meanwhile, studies on religion and media, particularly in digital contexts, demonstrate how religion is increasingly examined through technological and mediated environments (Campbell, 2010; Gani et al., 2024; Hoover, 2006; Stout & Buddenbaum, 2001; Williams & Mukherjee, 2023). These developments illustrate how empirical and contextual approaches have

become prominent in understanding religion, which may influence the relative position of textual studies within academic practice.

However, this study differs from previous research in its focus on the micro-academic level, particularly student thesis writing practices. While earlier studies primarily examine methodological orientations and thematic developments at a broader level, this study highlights how these trends are reflected in students' research choices and identifies the institutional and methodological conditions associated with them. In this sense, the study provides a more grounded perspective on how disciplinary orientations are enacted within everyday academic practice.

More broadly, these findings may be related to a tendency toward analytical simplification, where religion is primarily approached as a social phenomenon without sufficient engagement with its textual foundations. Studies in the philosophy of science and social sciences suggest that overly reductionist approaches may overlook the complexity of phenomena, including normative and symbolic dimensions (González, 2009; Meyer-Ortmanns, 2015). In the context of Religious Studies, this tendency may reduce the role of sacred texts as primary sources of meaning.

In the long term, this condition may influence students' academic capacity to read, interpret, and critically analyze religious texts in depth. This tendency can be understood in relation to broader developments in Religious Studies, where scholarship increasingly moves toward contextual, relational, and empirical approaches (Krüger, 2021; McClymond, 2020). While these developments expand interdisciplinary perspectives and enrich the study of religion, a strong emphasis on contextual approaches without sufficient engagement with textual sources may reduce opportunities for students to engage directly with primary religious materials. As a result, students may rely more on secondary representations and social interpretations rather than on direct textual analysis. In this sense, maintaining a balance between textual and contextual approaches remains important for supporting a more comprehensive understanding of religion.

At the same time, the prominence of empirical approaches in student research also carries positive implications. These approaches enable Religious Studies to remain responsive to contemporary social realities and allow students to explore religion as *lived religion* that interacts with everyday life. Through field-based and contextual analysis, students can better understand how religious meanings are constructed, negotiated, and practiced within specific social contexts. However, the findings of this study also indicate that relatively limited engagement with sacred texts may influence the depth of analysis in understanding religious traditions. Studies on textuality emphasize that sacred texts function not only as written documents but also as sources of meaning shaped through interpretive traditions, symbolic authority, and communal practices (Hannan, 2023; Schaper, 2021). When engagement with these sources remains limited, certain dimensions of religion particularly those related to its normative and interpretive foundations—may not be fully explored. Consequently, the analytical scope of student research may become more focused on observable social phenomena, with less attention to the textual foundations that inform those phenomena.

In addition, this condition may also reflect broader academic dynamics, in which certain approaches become more prominent within institutional and methodological contexts (Fuller, 2025; Travis, 2022). Rather than viewing this as a form of systemic exclusion, it is more appropriate to understand it as a tendency shaped by available resources, methodological training, and curriculum orientation. Within this context, students' research choices appear to be influenced not only by individual preferences but also by the academic environment in which they operate.

Based on these findings, efforts to strengthen students' engagement with sacred text studies can be understood as part of broader academic development. These efforts may include strengthening curriculum components related to textual methodologies, such as philology, hermeneutics, and textual analysis, as well as improving access to primary sources. In addition, academic support through methodological training and supervision may help students develop the necessary competencies to engage with textual studies more confidently.

At the institutional level, initiatives such as developing text-based learning facilities and supporting the regeneration of expertise in textual studies may also contribute to creating a more

balanced academic environment. These efforts do not aim to replace contextual approaches but rather to complement them. In this regard, integrating textual and contextual approaches in a complementary manner may help ensure that Religious Studies continues to develop as a discipline that is both empirically grounded and textually informed.

5.   Conclusion

This study shows that sacred text studies in undergraduate and graduate theses within the Religious Studies program at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University occupy a relatively limited position, representing about 7% of the total research produced during the 2020–2024 period. In contrast, student research tends to be oriented toward empirical and contextual approaches, particularly in the fields of sociology of religion, cultural studies, and media. These findings suggest a tendency in students' research orientation from text-based approaches toward more socially grounded and practically accessible topics. This condition appears to be associated with the interaction of structural factors, methodological considerations, and students' preferences, as identified in this study.

This study contributes to the development of Religious Studies by providing insights at the micro-academic level, particularly in relation to student thesis writing practices. The findings highlight a tendency toward an imbalance between textual and contextual approaches in student research. In addition, the study shows that students' choices of research topics are not solely individual decisions but are shaped by institutional conditions, resource availability, and curriculum orientation. In this context, the study underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between textual and contextual approaches in order to support a more comprehensive understanding of religion. Practically, this may involve strengthening curriculum components related to textual methodologies, improving access to primary sources, and enhancing academic support for both lecturers and students.

However, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single study program within one university, which limits the extent to which the findings can be applied to other institutional contexts. Second, the number of questionnaire respondents (n = 30) and the selective nature of interviews may influence the range of perspectives captured. Third, the document analysis is based on thesis titles, which may not fully represent the depth and complexity of the research content. Therefore, future research is encouraged to expand the institutional scope, include a larger number of participants, and conduct more in-depth analyses of student research outputs. Comparative studies across universities may also provide a broader understanding of the position of sacred text studies within Religious Studies in Indonesia.

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