

Between Devotion and Precarity: Religious Calling, Moral Resilience, and Livelihood Strategies among Underpaid Madrasah Teachers

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Abstract

This study examines how underpaid teachers in private Islamic junior secondary schools (madrasah tsanawiyah) in rural Indonesia make sense of their profession amid persistent economic constraints. Against a broader context of precarious educational labor and limited welfare provision, the research explores how religious values shape teachers' commitment and coping strategies. Using a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design, data were collected through observations of 62 teachers and in-depth interviews with six teachers and two school principals in Demak. Thematic analysis was conducted through open, axial, and selective coding. The findings reveal that teaching is constructed not merely as employment but as a religious calling and moral devotion, fostering a form of moral resilience that sustains teachers despite low and unstable income. At the same time, teachers engage in hybrid livelihood strategies—including farming, small-scale trading, and informal work—to meet their economic needs while maintaining their pedagogical identity. However, this moral framing also risks normalizing structural inequality and symbolic exploitation. This study contributes to the literature by proposing the concept of “moral resilience through religious calling” within a moral economy of teaching, integrating religious, economic, and educational dimensions in understanding teacher sustainability in the Global South.

Keywords: Moral Resilience, Religious Calling, Underpaid Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher precarity has emerged as a pressing global issue that transcends national boundaries and educational systems. In many parts of the Global South, teaching is no longer synonymous with economic stability but is increasingly characterized by low wages, insecure contracts, and limited social protection (Brady, 2022; Winarsih & Rindih, 2025). This condition reveals a fundamental paradox: while education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development, its key actors—teachers—often experience structural marginalization. Existing studies highlight that deteriorating teacher welfare not only affects instructional quality but also threatens the long-term sustainability of education systems (Anastasiou & Garametsi, 2021), particularly in rural areas and within private institutions that frequently function as a “shadow system” alongside the state.

Within the field of Islamic education, this issue becomes more complex due to the moral and religious dimensions embedded in the teaching profession. Teaching is not merely understood as professional labor but as a form of religious devotion imbued with values such as *ibadah*

(worship), sincerity, and moral responsibility (Abdullah & Mehboob-Ur-Rehman, 2025; Bunnell & Poole, 2023). Much of the existing literature emphasizes the normative ideals of Islamic education, including character formation, value internalization, and the teacher's role as *murabbi* (moral guide) (Ahmad et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2024; Kartika et al., 2023). However, these studies tend to overlook how such ideals are enacted in contexts marked by economic hardship, leaving a gap between theological aspirations and lived realities.

A growing body of research has examined teacher precarity, professional motivation, and livelihood strategies from different disciplinary perspectives. Studies on precarious work in education have documented how low salaries and unstable employment conditions affect teacher retention and professionalism (Blyznyuk & Kachak, 2024). Meanwhile, research on moral and intrinsic motivation underscores the importance of ethical commitment and sense of calling in sustaining teachers' engagement (Irman et al., 2023; Subhaktiyasa et al., 2024). In parallel, scholarship on rural livelihoods demonstrates that individuals often rely on diversified income-generating strategies to cope with economic uncertainty (Gimbert et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2023). Despite these contributions, these strands of literature largely remain disconnected, with limited attempts to integrate religious, economic, and educational dimensions into a unified analytical framework.

Consequently, a significant gap remains in understanding how underpaid teachers in Islamic educational settings navigate the intersection of moral commitment and economic survival. Little is known about how religious values function not only as sources of motivation but also as mechanisms of resilience in the face of systemic economic pressures. Previous research has not sufficiently addressed the interplay between religious calling, precarious labor conditions, and hybrid livelihood strategies, particularly in the context of private madrasah in rural Indonesia. Moreover, empirical studies grounded in teachers' lived experiences remain scarce, as much of the existing work is either normative or conceptual in nature.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore how underpaid honorary teachers in private Islamic junior secondary schools (*madrasah tsanawiyah*) in Demak, Indonesia, make sense of their teaching profession within a moral-religious framework while navigating economic constraints. It seeks to understand how teachers interpret teaching as a form of religious calling, the types of economic challenges they encounter under conditions of income insecurity, and the ways in which they develop livelihood strategies to sustain their lives. To address these concerns, the study employs a qualitative approach using an interpretative phenomenological design, drawing on participant observation and in-depth interviews.

This study contributes to the literature at multiple levels. Theoretically, it advances the concept of "moral resilience through religious calling" as an extension of the moral economy framework in education. Empirically, it provides rich, context-specific insights from private madrasah in Indonesia—an underrepresented setting in global scholarship. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of phenomenological approaches in capturing the lived experiences of teachers at the intersection of religion and economy. Finally, the findings offer important implications for more equitable and humane education policies by recognizing both the contributions and vulnerabilities of underpaid teachers within contemporary education systems.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach using an interpretative case study design to explore the lived experiences of underpaid honorary teachers in making sense of their teaching profession under economic pressure (Williams, 2021). This approach is particularly suitable for capturing the subjective, contextual, and meaning-making dimensions of teaching as a moral-religious calling,

which cannot be adequately reduced to quantitative measures. The study was conducted at a private Islamic junior secondary school (*madrasah tsanawiyah*) in Demak, Central Java, Indonesia. The site represents a typical rural Islamic educational institution characterized by limited financial resources and strong reliance on community support. The agrarian context further intensifies the complexity of teachers' roles, as they often engage in informal economic activities alongside their teaching responsibilities.

The participants consisted of 62 honorary teachers who were observed during the fieldwork, with six teachers and two school principals selected as key informants through purposive sampling. These participants were chosen based on their active involvement in teaching and their willingness to share in-depth reflections on their professional and economic experiences. Data were collected over a three-month period through participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and field notes. Interviews were conducted flexibly, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' narratives regarding religious motivation, economic challenges, and livelihood strategies.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following the stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to develop coherent patterns of meaning. The analysis was iterative and interpretative, allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data while being theoretically informed (Köhler, 2024). To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed source triangulation, member checking, and the development of a transparent audit trail. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, and maintaining the confidentiality of participants. While the study is limited to a single site and does not aim for statistical generalization, it offers analytical depth and contextual richness that can inform future research in similar settings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Calling as a Basis of Moral Commitment

The first finding reveals that teachers construct their professional role primarily as a form of religious devotion imbued with transcendental meaning. Teaching is not framed as merely formal employment but as a moral and spiritual calling believed to generate divine reward (*barakah*). This narrative appears consistently across nearly all interviews, indicating that religious motivation serves as a foundational mechanism for sustaining professional commitment despite inadequate economic compensation.

Table 1. Teaching as Religious Mission and Moral Devotion

| Thematic Category | Data Source | Frequency | Representative Quote | Interpretation |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------|---|--|
| Teaching as worship | Interviews (6 teachers) | 6/6 | "Low salary does not matter, as long as knowledge flows." | Teaching is legitimized as an act of worship |
| Expectation of barakah | Observation | High | Teachers remain present even though there are no additional incentives. | Barakah functions as a moral orientation |
| Knowledge as amal jariyah | Documentation | Consistent | Teaching integrates religious values | Education seen as a form of enduring charity |

Beyond demonstrating the dominance of religious meaning, this finding illustrates how each value dimension operates concretely in teachers' lived experiences. Each category presented in Table 1 represents a distinct yet interconnected unit of meaning that contributes to the construction of moral resilience. The category of *teaching as worship* is explicitly articulated by all

informants (6/6), who frame their professional activities as acts of devotion to God. Statements such as “low salary does not matter, as long as knowledge flows” reflect a profound shift in the meaning of work—from an economic domain to a spiritual one. In this sense, teaching transcends material considerations and becomes intrinsically meaningful. Professional commitment is therefore not primarily driven by external incentives but by deeply internalized religious consciousness.

The second category, the *expectation of barakah*, emerges strongly from observational data, particularly in the consistent presence and engagement of teachers despite the absence of financial incentives. Here, *barakah* operates as a non-material horizon of meaning—one that is not economically measurable but is believed to yield long-term benefits in both worldly and spiritual life. As such, it functions as both a cognitive and affective mechanism that stabilizes teachers’ commitment under conditions of uncertainty.

The third category, *knowledge as amal jariyah* (ongoing charity), highlights how teaching is perceived as a form of continuous spiritual investment. Documentary evidence indicates that instructional materials are frequently infused with religious values, reinforcing the belief that knowledge transmission has enduring significance beyond temporal limits. Within this framework, teachers position themselves as agents of value transmission whose impact extends into the afterlife.

Taken together, these three categories form an integrated structure of meaning. Teaching as worship provides a normative foundation, the expectation of *barakah* sustains ongoing commitment, and the concept of *amal jariyah* extends the temporal horizon of teaching beyond immediate outcomes. Their interaction produces a form of moral resilience that not only enables teachers to endure economic hardship but also imbues their professional lives with enduring purpose and significance.

Temporal Uncertainty, Waiting, and Aspirational Hope

The pervasive condition of structural uncertainty experienced by teachers, particularly in relation to unstable income and unclear employment status. However, rather than generating overt resistance, this uncertainty is navigated through a combination of patience, hope, and moral reasoning rooted in religious values. These responses reflect not passivity, but an active process of meaning-making that allows teachers to endure and function within structurally precarious conditions.

Table 2. Temporal Uncertainty, Waiting, and Aspirational Hope

| Thematic Category | Data Source | Frequency | Representative Quote | Interpretation |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------|--|--|
| Income uncertainty | Interviews (6 teachers) | 6/6 | “Sometimes it is delayed, sometimes it is not enough.” | Prearity as a normalized structural condition |
| Hope in the state | Principal interviews (2) | 2/2 | “We hope for greater government attention.” | Dependence on and trust in policy intervention |
| Religious patience | Observation | High | Teachers maintain consistent attendance despite lack of incentives | Patience as a moral coping strategy |

This finding demonstrates that structural uncertainty is not experienced as a meaningless condition but is actively interpreted through religious and social frameworks. Each category in Table 2 illustrates how teachers not only confront uncertainty but also manage it through mechanisms of hope, patience, and moral rationalization. The category of *income uncertainty* reveals that all informants (6/6) experience fluctuating, insufficient, and often delayed salaries. Statements such as “sometimes it is delayed, sometimes it is not enough” indicate that precarious work has become

embedded in everyday professional life. Importantly, this condition does not provoke open resistance but is instead normalized as part of the occupational reality. This suggests a form of cognitive adaptation in which structural inequality is reframed into a tolerable and expected condition, allowing teachers to maintain continuity in their professional roles.

The second category, *hope in the state*, emerges from interviews with school principals (2/2), who express expectations of policy intervention, particularly in relation to financial support and formal recognition. The statement “we hope for greater government attention” reflects an ambivalent position: while there is awareness of structural injustice, there remains a degree of trust in the state as a potential agent of change. This aspirational orientation functions as a bridge between present constraints and the possibility of future improvement, sustaining institutional and individual optimism.

The category of *religious patience* reveals a deeper moral dimension in teachers’ responses to uncertainty. Observational data indicate that teachers continue to fulfill their responsibilities without open protest, even under unfavorable conditions. In this context, patience (*sabr*) is not merely a passive attitude but an active moral strategy grounded in the belief that hardship carries spiritual value. Rather than direct confrontation, this form of response can be understood as a subtle mode of endurance that preserves dignity while avoiding conflict. It reflects what may be termed “quiet resilience,” where moral agency operates within, rather than against, structural constraints.

Taken together, these three categories form a complex pattern of response to structural uncertainty. Income instability represents the objective condition of precarity, hope in the state introduces a future-oriented perspective, and religious patience sustains psychological and moral stability. Their interaction demonstrates that teachers do not merely survive economically but actively construct a meaningful framework that enables them to continue functioning professionally under persistent constraints. This finding reinforces the argument that resilience in this context is not only economic but deeply moral and temporally oriented.

Hybrid Livelihood Strategies in a Rural Socioeconomic Context

Teachers actively construct hybrid livelihood strategies as a pragmatic response to persistent economic constraints. These strategies include engagement in agriculture, small-scale trading, and various forms of informal labor. Rather than being incidental, these activities constitute a structured and adaptive system of income generation that enables teachers to sustain their livelihoods while maintaining their professional roles.

Table 3. Hybrid Livelihood Strategies among Teachers

| Thematic Category | Data Source | Frequency | Representative Quote | Interpretation |
|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------|--|--|
| Teacher as farmer | Interviews (6 teachers) | 4/6 | “I teach in the morning, farm in the afternoon.” | Dual identity and complementary livelihood |
| Small-scale trading | Interviews (6 teachers) | 3/6 | “I sell online for additional income.” | Economic diversification and market adaptation |
| Informal labor | Observation | High | Teachers take on various side jobs | Flexible survival strategy |

This finding highlights the most operational dimension of teachers’ professional sustainability—how they deliberately design and enact multiple income-generating activities under conditions of limited and unstable earnings. Each category in Table 3 reflects not merely a variation of side jobs but a patterned logic of adaptation that combines economic rationality with an enduring moral commitment to teaching. The category of *teacher as farmer* illustrates how a

majority of participants (4/6) maintain a structured division of labor between classroom responsibilities and agricultural work. The statement “I teach in the morning, farm in the afternoon” indicates a stable dual-work rhythm rather than a temporary coping mechanism. Agriculture is not only accessible within the rural agrarian context but also offers temporal flexibility, allowing teachers to fulfill their pedagogical duties. Importantly, farming does not replace their identity as educators; instead, it complements and sustains it. This reflects a form of complementary livelihood, where agricultural income provides a relatively predictable financial base compared to fluctuating teaching salaries.

The category of *small-scale trading* reflects a shift toward more fluid and market-oriented economic strategies. Interview data (3/6) indicate involvement in activities such as online selling, small retail, or service-based micro-enterprises. The statement “I sell online for additional income” demonstrates an adaptive response to emerging economic opportunities that require minimal capital investment. These activities highlight the role of practical economic literacy and the strategic use of social networks as forms of social capital. Compared to agriculture, trading offers greater spatial and temporal flexibility, enabling teachers to diversify income without significantly disrupting their teaching responsibilities.

The category of *informal labor* represents the most flexible and residual form of livelihood strategy. Observational data show high engagement in various non-specialized jobs, including daily wage labor, transportation services, and seasonal work. This category reflects a contingency-based strategy, characterized by a readiness to take on any available work in response to immediate financial needs. Although often unstable and low-paying, such activities function as a critical safety net when other income sources are insufficient. This underscores the economic elasticity of teachers’ roles in navigating income volatility.

When examined holistically, these three categories form a layered livelihood architecture. Agriculture provides a baseline income, trading generates supplementary earnings, and informal labor serves as a contingency mechanism. This multi-tiered structure demonstrates that the sustainability of the teaching profession in this context does not rely on a single income source but on the ability to orchestrate multiple streams simultaneously.

Importantly, these hybrid livelihood strategies do not erode teachers’ pedagogical identity. Instead, they reinforce it through what can be described as *adaptive role layering*, where multiple roles coexist in a complementary rather than conflicting manner. Teaching remains the core identity, while other economic activities function as supporting instruments. This finding challenges conventional assumptions about role conflict by showing that teachers are able to maintain professional commitment alongside economic diversification.

Ultimately, this finding suggests that livelihood diversification among underpaid teachers is not driven solely by survival imperatives but is negotiated within a broader moral and professional framework. Hybrid livelihood strategies become a site where economic rationality intersects with religious values and a sense of calling. In this intersection, resilience emerges not only as a material capacity to endure hardship but also as a meaningful practice that sustains both livelihood and professional purpose.

Discussion

The sustainability of underpaid honorary teachers cannot be adequately explained through a purely economic lens. Rather, it emerges from a complex interplay between religious meaning-making, structural uncertainty, and adaptive livelihood strategies. Teachers do not remain in the profession solely out of necessity; instead, they actively construct their work as a moral and religious calling imbued with transcendental value (Perkins, 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2024). In this

sense, subjective dimensions—particularly religiosity—function as critical resources that complement, and at times substitute for, material resources.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with the broader concept of *calling*, in which work is understood as a morally meaningful vocation that transcends instrumental rationality. However, this study reveals an important contextual shift. Unlike traditions that emphasize rationalization and capital accumulation, the notion of calling in Islamic educational settings is rooted in values such as *ibadah* (worship), *barakah* (divine blessing), and *amal jariyah* (ongoing charity) (Lutfauziah et al., 2024; Rafida et al., 2024; Said & Sharif, 2023). This suggests a movement from economic rationality toward what may be termed *spiritual rationality*, in which decisions to remain in the profession are guided not by material gain but by broader moral and metaphysical orientations.

The findings on structural uncertainty further contribute to the literature on teacher precarity, which has consistently highlighted the vulnerability of educators working outside formal state systems. Teachers in this study experience unstable income, limited institutional support, and ambiguous employment status. However, this study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that such conditions are not only endured but also morally reframed (Afiah et al., 2024; Kulshreshth, 2025). Structural precarity is interpreted as part of a moral test, to be navigated through patience and perseverance. While this religious framing provides psychological stability and sustains commitment, it also raises a critical concern: the risk that moral endurance may inadvertently normalize structural inequality and obscure the need for systemic reform.

In relation to livelihood strategies, the findings align with theories of livelihood diversification in rural contexts, which emphasize the importance of multiple income streams for coping with economic vulnerability (Andari et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2022). However, the contribution of this study lies in integrating this economic perspective with moral and professional identity. Teachers do not simply diversify income for survival; they do so while preserving teaching as their core identity (Sutrisno et al., 2025). This reflects a form of *adaptive role layering*, in which multiple economic roles coexist without displacing the moral centrality of teaching. Livelihood strategies, therefore, are not purely economic responses but are negotiated within a broader framework of values and commitments.

Compared to previous studies, this research offers a more integrated perspective. Existing literature has tended to focus either on structural factors such as salary and policy, or on individual dimensions such as motivation and job satisfaction (Mahara, 2024; Nawas et al., 2025). Meanwhile, studies in Islamic education have often emphasized normative ideals without sufficiently engaging with everyday practices. By bringing together religious, economic, and professional dimensions within a single empirical framework, this study addresses a significant gap and provides a more holistic understanding of teachers' lived realities.

Building on these findings, this study proposes the concept of a *moral economy of teaching in Islamic contexts*. This concept refers to a system of meaning in which teaching practices are shaped not only by market forces or institutional policies but also by moral and religious values that guide how individuals interpret and enact their professional roles (Rosnawati et al., 2023). The model consists of three interrelated components: religious calling as the foundation of meaning, structural precarity as the constraining context, and hybrid livelihood strategies as adaptive mechanisms.

Conceptually, the interaction among these components generates what can be described as *moral resilience*—the capacity to sustain commitment and purpose under conditions of constraint. Religious calling provides moral legitimacy, structural precarity introduces pressure and limitation, and livelihood strategies offer practical means of survival (Wahyuni et al., 2024). Together, they

form a dynamic system in which endurance is not merely passive but actively constructed and meaningfully sustained. The theoretical contribution of this model lies in its integration of the moral economy perspective with studies of education and religiosity (Avdukic & Asutay, 2024; Junaidi et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2023).

From a practical standpoint, these findings carry important implications for education policy. First, recognizing the contributions of honorary teachers should go beyond moral acknowledgment and be translated into policies that ensure fair compensation and job security. Second, while religious values can serve as powerful sources of motivation, they should not be instrumentalized to justify or sustain inequality. Third, policies aimed at strengthening teachers' economic capacity—such as community-based empowerment programs or income support initiatives—may offer more contextually grounded solutions, particularly in rural settings.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative studies across different regions or national contexts to assess the broader applicability of the proposed model. The use of mixed-methods approaches may also strengthen the findings by combining qualitative depth with quantitative validation. Furthermore, exploring the roles of gender, technology, and socio-cultural change in shaping teachers' livelihood strategies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics of the profession. This discussion reaffirms that the teaching profession in contexts of economic constraint cannot be reduced to material considerations alone.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the sustainability of underpaid honorary teachers in private madrasah cannot be understood solely through an economic lens, but must be viewed as the outcome of a dynamic interplay between religious calling, structural precarity, and adaptive livelihood strategies. Its primary contribution lies in advancing the concept of a *moral economy of teaching in Islamic contexts*, highlighting how teachers cultivate resilience not only through material resources but through the integration of spiritual beliefs, moral acceptance of hardship, and the strategic orchestration of hybrid livelihoods. Teaching, therefore, is constructed as a morally meaningful practice—experienced as worship, sustained through patience, and materially supported through diversified income strategies. These findings underscore that teacher resilience is inherently multidimensional, encompassing ethical, social, and economic dimensions. At the same time, they call for a shift in education policy from symbolic recognition of teacher dedication toward more equitable structural interventions that ensure fair compensation and security, while also opening avenues for future research to test and extend this model across diverse contexts and methodological approaches.

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