

Religious Moderation In Islamic Boarding Schools: A Phenomenological Analysis of Socio-Cultural Practices and Classical Textual Foundations

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ABSTRACT

This article examines religious moderation (wasatiyyah) within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia through a phenomenological analytical framework. Using qualitative research methodology, this study explores the lived experiences, socio-cultural practices, and engagement with classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) that constitute religious moderation in pesantren environments. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 45 participants including pesantren leaders, educators (ustadz), and santri (students) across six pesantren institutions in East Java and Southeast Sulawesi, the research identifies three interconnected dimensions of religious moderation: theological foundations grounded in Qur'anic principles of wasatiyyah, socio-cultural practices manifesting tolerance and intercultural harmony, and pedagogical methods integrating classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary concerns. The findings demonstrate that religious moderation in pesantren operates as a comprehensive framework encompassing spiritual discipline, social ethics, and intellectual engagement, functioning simultaneously as a theological orientation, institutional practice, and educational outcome. The research contributes to contemporary discourse on Islamic education by providing evidence-based analysis of how traditional Islamic institutions operationalize moderation in pluralistic contexts, with implications for understanding pesantren's role in promoting social cohesion within Indonesia's diverse society..

Keywords: religious moderation, wasatiyyah, pesantren, phenomenological analysis, Islamic education

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INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation represents a critical contemporary concern in Islamic education, particularly within Asia's largest Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia. The concept of wasatiyyah—derived from Qur'anic terminology and rendered as

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"religious moderation" in English discourse—functions as both a theological principle and a practical ethical framework central to Islamic thought and practice. Qur'an 2:143 explicitly describes the Muslim community (*ummah*) as "ummatan wasatan" (a nation of the middle way), establishing moderation as a foundational Islamic principle rather than a modern concession to secularism. In contemporary contexts marked by religious polarization, ideological extremism, and communal tensions, the mechanisms through which Islamic institutions cultivate moderate orientations deserve rigorous scholarly examination.

Islamic boarding schools, known locally as *pesantrens*, constitute Indonesia's most significant indigenous Islamic educational institution, with approximately 28,000 *pesantrens* operating nationwide and serving millions of students. These institutions represent centur-old traditions of Islamic learning and spiritual development that predate modern nation-state formation. Beyond their educational functions, *pesantrens* operate as social spaces in which theological principles encounter daily realities of intercultural coexistence, economic vulnerability, and political complexity. The *pesantren* system's historical longevity, cultural embeddedness, and sustained relevance in contemporary Indonesian society warrant particular scholarly attention as scholars seek to understand how traditional Islamic institutions negotiate modernization while preserving distinctive Islamic pedagogical and spiritual characteristics (Wahab, 2025).

The emergence of religious extremism, radicalization, and communal violence in recent decades has prompted an intensive scholarly focus on Islam's relationship with moderation, tolerance, and pluralism. However, much of the existing literature privileges the discursive analysis of Islamic texts, theological argumentation, or institutional policy frameworks over ethnographic examinations of how religious moderation actually manifests within lived educational contexts. This article addresses this gap through phenomenological research focusing on how *pesantren* participants—leaders, educators, and students—experience, enact, and understand religious moderation as an embodied practice embedded within specific institutional, textual, and relational contexts. Phenomenology, as a philosophical and methodological approach emphasizing subjective meaning-making within specific lived contexts, provides particular advantages for examining how participants construct an understanding of abstract theological concepts such as *wasatiyyah* through daily educational and communal practices.

Religious moderation within the *pesantren* operates simultaneously across multiple analytical registers. At the theological level, moderation derives from specific interpretations of Qur'anic and hadith sources emphasizing balance (*tawazun*), justice (*al-adl*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), and spiritual equilibrium (*i'tidal*). At the institutional level, moderation manifests itself through *pesantren* policies, curriculum choices, pedagogical methods, and mechanisms for managing social diversity among resident student populations. At the individual level, moderation constitutes a personal orientation, behavioral disposition, and ethical commitment shaped through sustained educational participation and social interaction. At the societal level, *pesantren* engagement with moderation contributes to broader efforts to promote intercommunal harmony and to prevent religious conflict in pluralistic communities. These multiple registers require integrated analytical frameworks that neither reduce

religious moderation to abstract theological doctrine nor privilege institutional policy over lived experience (Tualeka et al., 2025).

This research situates religious moderation within the specific historical and institutional context of pesantrens' distinctive educational system, with particular attention to the classical Islamic textual tradition (*kitab kuning*) that constitutes pesantrens' intellectual foundation. The *kitab kuning* literature—so named because it is traditionally printed on yellow paper—encompasses centuries of Islamic scholarly commentary on jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*aqidah*), ethics (*akhlaq*), and Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsir*). These classical texts function not merely as historical documents but also as living resources through which contemporary pesantren communities develop religious understanding. The relationship between classical textual foundations and contemporary socio cultural practices requires a phenomenological investigation of how pesantren educators and students experience these texts as meaningful resources for navigating modern complexities.

The socio cultural practices through which pesantren enact religious moderation—interfaith dialogue, intercultural student interaction, community engagement, and curriculum integration—constitute another essential focus. Pesantren typically hosts students from diverse regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, creating what might be termed laboratories of social diversity within contained institutional environments. How pesantrens negotiate this internal diversity through daily practices, informal learning, social rituals, and institutional mechanisms offers crucial insights into the mechanisms through which religious education shapes orientations toward difference and otherness (Athoillah et al., 2024).

Previous research has established that pesantren education correlates with increased religious tolerance among university students, pesantren-based religious moderation operates through three internalization stages (transformation, transaction, and transinternalization), and pesantren's distinctive pedagogical methods—*sorogan* (individual study), *bandongan* (collective instruction), and *halaqah* (discussion circles)—facilitate theological understanding and spiritual development. However, few studies have systematically examined the phenomenological dimensions of religious moderation as lived experience, the specific mechanisms through which classical texts address contemporary concerns, or how socio cultural practices operationalize abstract theological principles. This study addresses these analytical gaps through a phenomenological investigation of six pesantren communities engaged in deliberate religious moderation.

The research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows: (1) How do pesantren participants understand and experience religious moderation as a lived reality within specific educational and communal contexts? (2) What mechanisms through which classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) facilitate religious moderation and how do educators and students engage these texts as resources for developing moderate orientations? (3) How do socio cultural practices—including interfaith dialogue, intercultural student interaction, community engagement, and curriculum integration—operationalize religious moderation? (4) What are the implications of pesantren-based religious moderation in understanding Islam's engagement with pluralism, diversity, and democratic participation in contemporary Indonesia?

This study contributes to three overlapping scholarly conversations. First, Islamic studies advance the understanding of how Islamic traditions specifically pesantren education negotiate modernization while maintaining religious authenticity and institutional integrity. Second, educational research demonstrates the value of phenomenological approaches in understanding how abstract ethical and theological concepts materialize through educational practice. Third, South Asian Islamic studies specifically provides an evidence-based analysis of contemporary Indonesian Islamic institutions' role in promoting social cohesion within apluralistic national context (Jasminto & Rofi'ah, 2025).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Following this introduction, the methodology section details the phenomenological research approach, participant selection, data collection, and the analytical procedures. The results section presents thematic findings organized around three major dimensions: theological foundations of religious moderation derived from classical texts and Qur'anic principles socio-cultural practices operationalizing moderation through student interaction, interfaith engagement, and community participation and pedagogical approaches through which pesantren educators facilitate moderate orientations. The Discussion section situates these findings within a broader scholarship on Islamic education, religious moderation, and social cohesion. This conclusion synthesizes key findings and articulates implications for contemporary Islamic education and intercommunal relations in pluralistic societies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design that emphasizes the understanding of how research participants construct meaning through lived experiences within specific sociocultural contexts. Phenomenology, originating from continental European philosophy through thinkers including Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and adapted for social scientific research by scholars including Max van Manen and John Creswell, provides philosophical and methodological frameworks for investigating the subjective meanings that participants ascribe to phenomena within their everyday lives. Rather than prioritizing objective measurement or causal explanation, phenomenological research focuses on how human consciousness engages with the world, how meanings emerge through experience, and how participants make sense of the situations they inhabit.

Phenomenological methodology is particularly appropriate for this research for several reasons. First, religious moderation represents an abstract concept potentially experienced differently across diverse individuals and contexts; phenomenological approaches enable the investigation of how specific individuals within specific institutional contexts understand and enact moderation. Second, phenomenology accommodates the investigation of both explicit articulations of religious moderation and implicit meanings manifest through daily practices, routines, and embodied behaviors—crucial for understanding how theological concepts shape educational practice. Third, phenomenological attention to participants' lived experiences prioritized their voices, interpretations, and meaning-making processes rather than

imposing external analytical categories, respecting participants' expertise in their own experiences.

Research Site Selection and Participant Recruitment

This study was conducted across six Islamic boarding schools located in the East Java and Southeast Sulawesi regions, representing Indonesia's largest concentrations of pesantren institutions. Pesantren were selected based on several criteria: (1) demonstrated institutional commitment to religious moderation through explicit policy statements, curriculum components, and community engagement activities; (2) a combination of traditional (salaf) and modern (khalaf) approaches to Islamic education, representing diversity of pesantren models; (3) willingness to participate in extended research engagement; (4) geographic diversity within East Java and Southeast Sulawesi regions; and (5) institutional history of at least 20 years, ensuring the establishment of institutional cultures and practices. The selected pesantrens ranged from approximately 200 to 800 resident students, with institutions serving students from diverse Indonesian regions and some accommodating non-Muslim students.

The research participants included 45 individuals across three categories: pesantren leaders and senior educators (15 individuals including pesantren directors and senior ustazd responsible for curriculum and spiritual development); educators and caregivers (15 individuals including classroom teachers, dormitory supervisors, and spiritual mentors); and santri/students (15 individuals ranging from new students (peserta dalam six months) to senior students with five years of pesantren experience). Participants were selected using purposive sampling strategies to ensure the representation of diverse perspectives, including variations across gender (approximately 40% female participants), age/experience level, educational background, and regional origin among student participants.

All participation was entirely voluntary and informed consent was obtained through a detailed explanation of research purposes, procedures, confidentiality protections, and voluntary participation rights. Particular attention was paid to protecting young participants' rights and ensuring the comprehension of consent documents. The research protocols were approved by the institutional review boards of the participating universities and pesantren institutions.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred over 18 months (January 2022 to June 2023) employing multiple complementary techniques that enabled triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data source, with 45 interviews conducted with research participants across pesantren sites. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, with an average duration of approximately 90 minutes. Interview protocols employed open-ended questioning enabling participants to narrate their experiences, understanding of religious moderation, observations of pesantren practices operationalizing moderation, and perspectives on pesantrens educational outcomes. Sample interview questions included: "Tell me about the time

you experienced or witnessed religious moderation being practiced within this pesantren"; "How do you understand the relationship between studying classical Islamic texts and developing moderate religious perspectives?" "What do you think are the most important practices or activities through which this pesantren promotes religious moderation?" "Can you describe how differences among students (regional origin, family background, prior religious understanding) are managed within this pesantren community?" "How has participating in this pesantren shaped your understanding of Islam and your relationships with people of different religious backgrounds?"

Interviews were digitally recorded with participant permission and later transcribed verbatim in written form. Transcription included notation of significant pauses, emphasis, and emotional tone, capturing not only semantic content but also affective and paralinguistic dimensions of participant communication. The interview transcripts totaled approximately 180 hours of recorded data, producing over 800 pages of transcribed material.

Observational data collection complemented interviews with researchers who conducted extended observations within pesantren communities. Observations occurred during routine daily activities (meal preparation and consumption, informal student interaction, leisure time), formal educational activities (classroom instruction, bandongan and sorogan sessions, halaqah discussions), communal religious practices (daily prayers, Qur'an recitation, Friday sermons), and special events (interfaith dialogue sessions, community service activities, and pesantren anniversaries). The researcher maintained field notes describing the observed activities, participant interactions, physical environments, and interpretive observations regarding apparent meanings and values. The observation data totaled approximately 450 hours across the six pesantren sites.

Document analysis examined pesantren institutional documents including mission statements, written policies, curriculum frameworks, student handbooks, educational materials, documentation of faith and community activities, annual reports, and published materials presenting pesantren's understandings of religious moderation. Analysis of textual materials permitted the investigation of explicit institutional positioning regarding religious moderation and the examination of formal mechanisms through which moderation is promoted. Additionally, an analysis of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) engaged in pesantren instruction examined how these texts address moderation, tolerance, diversity, and social ethics, providing a basis for understanding the relationships between classical textual traditions and contemporary moderation efforts.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed the phenomenological analytical procedures developed by Creswell and informed by hermeneutic and iterative approaches for qualitative interpretation. The analytical process involved the following steps:

First, the researcher engaged in initial coding and familiarization with the dataset, read interview transcripts and reviewed observation notes multiple times to develop a preliminary sense of emerging themes and significant participant statements. This stage involved identifying statements or passages particularly illuminating

participants experiences of religious moderation, distinctive vocabularies through which participants articulated moderation, and apparent dimensions of moderation manifesting through pesantren practices.

Second, the researcher conducted focused thematic coding, systematically reviewed all data and assigned codes (brief thematic labels) to segments of text capturing meaningful ideas. The initial coding generated approximately 120 distinct codes reflecting diverse aspects of moderation, teaching practices, student experiences, and institutional approaches. The codes were organized hierarchically, with higher-level codes representing broader thematic categories and subordinate codes representing specific manifestations or dimensions of broader themes.

Third, thematic analysis involves identifying patterns across codes and organizing related codes into broader thematic clusters. Through iterative processes comparing codes, examining relationships among codes, and refining thematic categories, the researcher identified three major analytical themes, each encompassing multiple subordinate sub-themes: theological foundations of religious moderation, socio-cultural practices operationalizing moderation, and pedagogical approaches facilitating moderate orientations.

Fourth, the researcher developed thick descriptions of each major theme, drawing on participant interview quotations and observational data to create detailed narrative accounts illuminating how participants experienced and enacted each thematic dimension. This stage produced narrative summaries for each theme, incorporating participant voices and concrete examples that could communicate the qualitative character of the participant experience to readers.

Fifth, the researcher examined connections among themes, investigating how theological foundations, socio cultural practices, and pedagogical approaches interrelated and reinforced each other within pesantren contexts. This stage enabled the identification of integrative insights into how diverse dimensions of religious moderation operated together as comprehensive institutional and educational systems.

The researcher employed several quality assurance procedures throughout the analysis. Member checking involved presenting preliminary findings to selected research participants and pesantren leaders, soliciting their feedback regarding whether the findings accurately represented their understanding and experiences. To elicit critical feedback and alternative interpretations, peer debriefing involved discussing findings with academic colleagues not involved in the research. Reflexivity involves maintaining awareness of how the researcher's own background, assumptions, and interpretive lenses influence data interpretation, with documentation of analytical decisions and potential alternative interpretations.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has several important limitations. First, the research focused on six pesantrens in two Indonesian regions; findings may not generalize to pesantrens in other regions with different historical, cultural, or institutional characteristics. Second, the research examined pesantren institutions that had explicitly embraced religious moderation frameworks; the findings may not represent pesantrens lacking such explicit commitments. Third, the research involved alimited temporal scope;

longitudinal research tracking changes in participants understanding over extended periods would strengthen the understanding of how pesantren education shapes moderate orientations across longer time horizons. Fourth, the measurement of actual behavioral outcomes (interfaith interaction, community participation) involved reliance on self-report data rather than behavioral observation; independent assessment of behavioral manifestations of moderation would strengthen the understanding of moderation's actual effects.

Despite these limitations, this research provides an in-depth phenomenological examination of religious moderation within Indonesian pesantrens, contributing valuable insights into the mechanisms through which traditional Islamic institutions operationalize moderation in contemporary contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings organized around three major thematic dimensions: theological foundations of religious moderation derived from classical Islamic texts and Qur'anic principles socio-cultural practices operationalizing moderation through student interaction, interfaith engagement, and community participation and pedagogical approaches through which pesantren educators facilitate moderate orientations. Throughout this section, the findings are illustrated through participant interview quotations and observational data, permitting readers to assess how research participants understood and experienced religious moderation.

Theological Foundations of Religious Moderation in Classical Texts and Qur'anic Principles

Religious moderation within the pesantren is ultimately derived from theological foundations grounded in specific Qur'anic principles and classical Islamic scholarly interpretations. Research participants consistently articulated the understanding of moderation (wasatiyyah) as rooted in Qur'anic terminology and theological principles, with classical texts (kitab kuning) serving as mechanisms through which this theological understanding is transmitted and interpreted in contemporary contexts.

The foundational Qur'anic reference is Surah 2:143, in which Allah addresses the Muslim community: "ummatan wasatan" (you are a nation of the middle way), designated as witnesses to humanity ("shuhada 'ala al-nas"). This verse establishes moderation not as prudent compromise but as a positive theological position—the "best way" (ahsan al-turuk) through which Muslims understand and practice Islam. Research participants understood this verse as establishing the theological foundation for comprehensive modern, extending across all dimensions of Islamic life.

One pesantren director articulated this understanding: "The concept of wasatiyyah was not something new that we invented. It comes directly from Qur'an itself. Allah tells us that we are middle people and people of balance. This means that in our understanding of Islam, in our approach to religion, and in our relationships with other people, we must seek balance. However, it cannot be excessive or deficient. This is the essence of what we try to teach here in the pesantren."

Classical Islamic texts consulted within pesantren education elaborate on and specify these Qur'anic principles. The Kitab Kuning literature addressing moderation emphasizes what participants termed the "principle of balance" (tawazun) operating across multiple domains. In matters of jurisprudence (fiqh), moderation means avoiding both rigid literalism and excessive interpretive flexibility, instead seeking middle positions accounting for textual evidence, scholarly consensus, and legitimate differences of opinion. In matters of theology (aqidah), moderation means avoiding both anthropomorphic God-concepts that compromise divine transcendence and rationalist positions that deny the possibility of divine revelation. In matters of ethics (akhlaq), moderation means developing virtuous character that is neither deficient in necessary virtues nor excessive in ways that produce pathological outcomes.

An ustaz (Islamic educator) specializing in classical texts explained this principle: "When we study kitab kuning, we examine how the early Islamic scholars approached different questions. We see that they did not use only one method or principle. Sometimes they emphasized the literal text, sometimes the principles underlying the text, and sometimes the social contexts. Scholars have understood that Islam must address real human situations, and this requires wisdom and discernment. This is moderation—knowing how to apply Islamic principles with wisdom."

Theological moderation within pesantren education entails what participants termed "theological awareness" (kesadaran ilahiah)—a disposition in which religious understanding and daily actions remain consciously oriented toward divine will and Qur'anic ethical principles. This contrasts with what educators termed "mechanical Islam" or "ritualistic Islam" in which external religious practices occur without conscious spiritual orientation. One educator explained We teach students that religion is not just doing actions. It is about cultivating an awareness of God and understanding why we do what we do. When students understand this, when they feel this connection to Allah, they naturally practice moderation because they understand that excessive behavior distances them from Allah and that neglecting obligations harms their spiritual state."

Crucial to theological moderation is the principle of justice (al-adl), which extends beyond specific legal prescriptions to constitute a comprehensive ethical orientation. Surah 16:90 states: "Allah commands justice (al-adl), the doing of good (ihsan), and liberality to kith and kin." Research participants understood justice as requiring fair treatment of others, consideration of the broader consequences of one's actions, and avoidance of harm. One pesantren director noted: "Justice is the foundation of peace. When we teach students about justice in Islam, they understand that treating others fairly, respecting their rights, and listening to their perspectives—these are Islamic duties, not merely worldly ethics. This understanding is what enables them to live peacefully with people of different faiths and backgrounds."

Classical texts provide extensive discussions on justice as an Islamic ethical principle. The jurisprudential principle of maslahah (public interest) permits juristic flexibility when textual prescriptions may produce harmful outcomes a principle extensively discussed in classical texts and incorporated into contemporary pesantren teaching. As one educator explained: "The Islamic scholars understood that sometimes applying a ruling literally might harm people or the community. The principle of

maslahah allows us to prioritize the welfare and interests of the community when necessary. This is not abandoning Islamic principles but applying them with wisdom."

The theological principle of tolerance (tasamuh) constitutes another essential dimension of moderation derived from classical sources. Islamic theological traditions include extensive discussions of acceptable doctrinal diversity, permissible disagreement among scholars, and proper etiquette in theological disagreement. Classical texts examine the principles through which scholars might legitimately differ (ikhtilaf) while maintaining mutual respect and recognition of Islamic legitimacy. One educator described: "The classical Islamic scholars had different schools of jurisprudence, different theological positions, different spiritual approaches. They recognized each other as Muslims, as people following the Qur'an and Sunnah even when disagreeing. We teach students that disagreement is normal in Islam. What matters is how we disagree—with respect, with honest engagement with others' positions, with recognition that sincere scholars can reach different conclusions."

Pesantren education emphasizes that moderation is not mere pragmatism but rather a deep theological conviction regarding Islam's relationship to human diversity, social complexity, and historical change. Moderation reflects the Islamic understanding of human nature as inherently diverse, knowledge as incomplete and evolving, and community as requiring mutual accommodation. As one senior student explained: "At first I thought moderation meant not taking Islam seriously, being lazy about religion. However studying here, I understand that moderation actually requires more thought, more careful analysis, and more responsibility. I have to deeply understand Islamic principles and think about how to apply them wisely in different situations. That is harder than just following rules mechanically."

Socio-Cultural Practices Operationalizing Religious Moderation

Beyond theological foundations, religious moderation manifests through deliberate socio-cultural practices that create specific institutional environments and social relationships that operationalize moderate orientations. These practices constitute the everyday enactment of theological principles, embedding abstract religious concepts within concrete social interactions and institutional life.

Student Diversity Management and Intercultural Interaction

Pesantren necessarily accommodates students from diverse regional origins, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and prior religious understanding. This internal diversity constitutes the primary raw material through which socio cultural practices of moderation operate. Rather than viewing diversity as a problem requiring conformity, pesantren educators deliberately structure student interactions to facilitate intercultural understanding and tolerance.

One pesantren director explained: When students come here from different regions, from different cultures, from different family traditions, they bring different understandings of Islam, different practices, and different ways of being Muslim. Many families worry that their children will lose their local traditions. We tell them that this diversity is the strength of the pesantren. Students learned that Islam is large

enough to accommodate diverse approaches. They learn that being a good Muslim does not require erasing local culture or rejecting other people's approaches."

Observations of student dormitory life revealed systematic practices that facilitated intercultural interactions. Dormitory room assignments deliberately mixed students from different regions rather than grouping students from the same origin together. One dormitory supervisor explained When we assign rooms, we try to mix students. A student from Sumatra may have room with a student from Sulawesi. A student from a wealthy family might have room with a student from a poor family. This creates natural opportunities to learn from one another. Students share food, stories about their families and communities, and teach each other regional songs and customs. Through these interactions, they develop an appreciation for differences."

The students interviewed consistently described dormitory living as formative for developing tolerance. One senior female student recounted When I arrived, my family's Islamic tradition was quite conservative. I knew about Islam but did not have much contact with different Muslim approaches. My roommate came from a very different tradition. First it was uncomfortable. However over time, by living together, talking, and comparing, I realized that both of us were sincere Muslims. We simply understood and practiced Islam in different ways. This changed how I see Islam—not as one right way but as a tradition big enough for different authentic approaches."

Pesantren educators have deliberately incorporated discussions of cultural diversity into formal curricula. One educator described classroom practices: When we teach Islamic jurisprudence, we examine how different schools of Islamic law approached the same issues. We study Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali schools and discuss why these differences existed—different geographic contexts, different social conditions, and different understandings of textual evidence. Students begin to understand that diversity in Islamic jurisprudence is not weakness but strength, showing Islam's flexibility in addressing diverse human situations."

Interfaith Dialogue and Non-Muslim Engagement

Several participating pesantren deliberately engaged in interfaith dialogue and accommodated non-Muslim students, creating contexts in which students directly experienced religious otherness and practiced tolerance across religious boundaries. These interactions exemplified moderation as the most challenging, requiring students to recognize legitimate religious perspectives that are different from Islam.

One pesantren located in a region with a significant Christian community invited Christian clergy and educators to pesantren for formal dialogue sessions. Observation of one interfaith dialogue event revealed careful pedagogical structure: initial presentation of Islamic teaching on religious tolerance from Islamic textual sources; Christian presenter's explanation of Christian faith and Christian values; structured Q&A session in which Muslim students asked respectful questions; facilitated small-group discussions in which Muslim and Christian participants discussed shared values and ethical commitments.

A senior student described her experience: "Before this, I did not really talk to Christians about their faith. I was nervous. However, this Christian pastor explained

why he believed what he believed and his reasoning was sincere. He did not attack Islam or try to convert. He explained his faith to him. I realized that we share similar commitments—Christianity and Islam emphasize justice, mercy, family, and community. These differences are real however, the similarities are also real. This helped me understand that you can disagree about religion while respecting others."

Several pesantrens accommodated non-Muslim students, creating daily contexts in which Muslim students practiced religious tolerance. One pesantren with several Christian and Hindu students developed explicit policies to ensure respectful accommodations. Muslim student observers noted: "The pesantren respected their religion. During prayer, they were not forced to pray to us. The kitchen maintains separate utensils for food in order to respect their dietary laws. We learn about their holidays and about them. Having non-Muslim students has taught us that Islam means respecting other religions."

Community Service and Social Engagement

Pesantren engaged in community service activities creating contexts in which students extended moderate orientations beyond pesantren boundaries to broader community relationships. Service activities included healthcare outreach, disaster relief, agricultural assistance, educational tutoring, and aith community development projects.

One pesantren in Southeast Sulawesi conducted regular community health clinics that provided free medical services to the surrounding villages. Observations revealed that this activity involved diverse religious communities—both Muslim and non-Muslim villagers—receiving medical care from pesantren students. A health clinic supervisor explained: "We emphasize to students that Islam teaches compassion and justice. These principles apply to all people regardless of religion. Therefore when providinge medical care, we do not discriminate between them. All thepatients were treated with equal respect and care. Through this work, students learn that Islamic values are universal."

Students reflected on how the service transformed their understanding: "I did not expect that helping other people would change me so much. When I provide medical care or teach a child, I am not thinking about whether they are Muslim or Christian. I am thinking about their need and responsibilities to help. This is what Islam teaches—seeing humanity in others and respondin with compassion. Service work has made my faith more real to me."

Curriculum Integration and Textual Engagement

Pesantren deliberately integrated religious moderation into its curriculum across diverse subjects. Religious stud classes examined classical Islamic texts that addressed tolerance and justice. History and social studies classes contextualized Islamic development within broader world history, examining how Islam encountered diverse cultures, how Muslims negotiated differences, and how historical periods of pluralism and coexistence contrasted with periods of conflict. Literature and language classes examined texts that addressed ethical themes and diverse perspectives.

One Islamic history educator explained the pedagogical approach: When we teach about Islamic history, we do not present it as simple triumphalism or decline. We

show complex realities times when Muslims and non-Muslims coexisted peacefully, times of conflict, times of synthesis and cultural exchange. We examined how different Islamic societies handle diversity. Students learn that Islam has a long history of engaging with diverse populations and that moderation represents Islamic tradition, not departure from it."

Table 1 summarizes the key socio-cultural practices identified through research, illustrating the diverse mechanisms through which pesantrens operationalize religious moderation:

Table 1. Socio-Cultural Practices

Practice Category	Specific Practice	Mechanism for Promoting Moderation	Student Outcomes Reported
Student Diversity Management	Mixed-origin room assignments	Natural intercultural contact, shared living, peer learning	Increased tolerance, reduced stereotyping, appreciation of difference
Student Diversity Management	Joint cultural activities	Cultural exchange, mutual respect, appreciation of diversity	Pride in diverse Islamic expressions, reduced insularity
Student Diversity Management	Cross-regional student mentoring	Experienced students model tolerance and cross-cultural competence	Development of mentoring skills, cross-cultural competence
Interfaith Engagement	Formal interfaith dialogue sessions	Structured dialogue, direct encounter with religious others, shared reflection	Respectful engagement across religious boundaries, shared values recognition
Interfaith Engagement	Non-Muslim student accommodation	Daily coexistence requiring mutual respect and practical tolerance	Practical understanding of religious tolerance in daily life
Interfaith Engagement	Interreligious joint service projects	Collaborative work toward common goals transcending religious boundaries	Experienced cooperation with religious others, reduced prejudice

Practice Category	Specific Practice	Mechanism for Promoting Moderation	Student Outcomes Reported
Community Service	Healthcare outreach clinics	Direct service to diverse populations, recognition of shared humanity	Empathy for vulnerable populations, universal human concern
Community Service	Disaster relief programs	Community participation across religious boundaries	Compassion, sense of social responsibility
Community Service	Educational tutoring services	Engagement with students from diverse faith traditions	Understanding diversity as Islamic value
Curriculum Integration	Comparative religious studies curriculum	Scholarly examination of diversity within Islamic tradition	Intellectual understanding of Islamic pluralism
Curriculum Integration	Islamic history contextualization	Understanding Islam within world history and cross-cultural contexts	Historical awareness of Islamic encounter with diversity
Curriculum Integration	Ethics and justice seminars	Grounding abstract principles in concrete ethical situations	Moral reasoning applied to contemporary contexts

Pedagogical Approaches Facilitating Religious Moderation

Beyond theological foundations and socio cultural practices, religious moderation in pesantrens depends on distinctive pedagogical approaches specifically designed to facilitate moderate orientations. These approaches draw on pesantren's traditional pedagogical methods—Sorogan, Bandongan, and Halaqah —adapted for contemporary contexts while maintaining distinctive characteristics.

Sorogan (Individual Study) and Personal Spiritual Development

Sorogan, in which individual students study classical texts directly with senior educators, is one of the most distinctive and intimate pedagogical methods. This face-to-face interaction between students and educators creates a context for personalized spiritual guidance for attending to individual student development. Through Sorogan,

educators assess individual student understanding, identify areas of spiritual or intellectual struggle, and provide guidance responsive to individual needs.

One senior educator described sorogan's role in fostering moderation: "In sorogan, I can teach the student not just the intellectual content but also the spiritual dimensions. I can see whether a student is struggling with pride, excessive fear, or narrow-mindedness. We have addressed these internal conditions by discussing the text together. Moderation is not just an intellectual understanding but a transformation of the heart. Sorogan provides an intimate context for this transformation."

Students described sorogans as formative for developing moderate perspectives. One student explained In sorogan with my teacher, we discuss not just the meaning of the text but also why it matters. The teacher knows me as a person, and knows my struggles and questions. When I wrestle with difficult questions—about tolerance and how to practice Islam authentically—I can discuss this directly with my teacher. The teacher guides me but does not give me simple answers. I have to think about these issues and develop my own understanding. This has helped me develop convictions about moderation that are really my own, not just what others told me to believe."

Bandongan (Collective Instruction) and Shared Textual Engagement

Bandongan, in which educators present classical texts to groups of students who listen and take notes, constitutes the pesantren's most recognizable pedagogical method. While less interactive than Sorogan, Bandongan creates a community of learning in which students collectively engage with shared textual traditions. The educator's explanations, interpretations, and emphasis signal which aspects of the texts are most significant in contemporary contexts.

Educators utilized the bandongan to explicitly address moderation. One Bandongan instructor explained: "When I teach a classical text, I explain its historical context, the issues the scholar was addressing, and how the text relates to contemporary situations. Students see that Islamic scholars throughout history have been engaged in social complexity. This helps them understand that Islam has resources for addressing contemporary challenges without abandoning classical sources."

Observations of bandongan sessions revealed that educators consciously emphasized moderate positions of classical authors. When texts addressed jurisprudential disagreements, educators highlighted the principle of ikhtilaf (legitimate difference) and the mutual respect among scholars. When texts address social ethics, educators connect historical teaching to contemporary situations, illustrating how Islamic principles address modern realities. The instructor explained a difficult jurisprudential question from the classical text, presented multiple scholarly positions, and noted that Islamic jurisprudence permitted legitimate differences. She emphasized that scholars respected each other despite disagreement. She then connected this to students' contemporary contexts: 'You will encounter Muslims with different understandings. The patient was healthy. What matters is that you discuss with respect.'

Halaqah (Discussion Circles) and Critical Engagement

Halaqah (discussion circles) constitutes small-group forums in which students discuss Islamic texts, contemporary issues, and spiritual questions. Unlike Bandongans more hierarchical structure, Halaqah emphasizes participant dialogue, with educators facilitating discussion rather than delivering lectures. This pedagogical format enables students to develop critical thinking skills and articulate their own understanding through dialogue with peers and educators.

Researchers have explicitly observed halaqah discussions that address moderation. In one session facilitated by a senior educator, the students discussed Islamic responses to religious extremism. The educator presented scriptural evidence emphasizing Islam's rejection of religious coercion and excessive severity, then invited student discussion: "What does the Qur'an teach about respecting others' religious choices? How should Muslims respond to this extremism? What are our responsibilities?" Student responses revealed developing critical engagement: some cited Qur'anic verses others drew connections to historical examples and others raised challenging questions about how moderation applies to contemporary conflicts.

One educator described halaqah's significance: "In halaqah, students developed their own voices. They learn to think critically, question, and engage respectfully in others' ideas. When students develop their own understanding through dialogue and critical thinking, they are more likely to hold moderate positions because they have deeply examined them. If I just tell them to be moderate, they might not truly believe in it. But when they work through issues themselves, when they see the evidence and reasoning, they develop genuine conviction."

Educators' Roles and Spiritual Mentorship

Through diverse pedagogical approaches, educators function not only as content transmitters but also as spiritual mentors embodying moderate Islamic orientations. Educators' personal exemplification of moderation—their respect for diverse perspectives, acknowledgment of theological uncertainty and complexity, practices of intercultural dialogue, and commitment to justice—constitute powerful pedagogical influences on students.

Students consistently identified educators' personal examples as significant. One student reflected My teacher practices what he teaches. He is deeply knowledgeable about Islamic texts, yet he does not claim certainty about everything. He respects scholars who disagreed with him. He treats all students, including those from different religions, with equal respect. By watching how he lives Islam, I am learning how to live it myself."

An educator acknowledged this responsibility: "We know that students watch us and learn from how we live. If we claim to teach moderation but ourselves are dogmatic or disrespectful, students will not believe us. Therefore, we must embody what has been taught. This is demanding but essential. The student-teacher relationship is a relationship of trust, and we must honor that trust by living what we teach."

Limitations and Challenges

While this section emphasizes the dimensions of religious moderation present within the pesantren, the research also identified limitations and challenges. Some

pesantrens lacked deliberate moderation efforts or actively promoted conservative theological positions limiting engagement from diverse perspectives. Even within pesantrens emphasizing moderation, individual educators and students sometimes adopted positions or practices that were inconsistent with moderation principles. External pressures—from conservative religious movements, political ideologies, and media discourse—sometimes challenged pesantren's moderation efforts. Economic pressures and resource constraints sometimes limit the pesantrens capacity to fully implement moderation initiatives.

Nevertheless, the systematic research across six pesantrens identified consistent patterns of deliberate institutional effort to operationalize religious moderation through multiple complementary mechanisms: theological grounding in Qur'anic principles and classical texts socio-cultural practices promoting student diversity, interfaith engagement, and community service and pedagogical approaches enabling critical engagement with texts and spiritual transformation.

Table 2 presents a qualitative data matrix summarizing key findings regarding how theological foundations, socio cultural practices, and pedagogical approaches interrelate in operationalizing religious moderation

Table 2. Integrated Dimension

Dimension	Specific Element	How It Promotes Moderation	Reinforces
Theological Foundation	Qur'anic concept: ummatan wasatan (middle community)	Establishes moderation as divine command and Islamic ideal	All three dimensions; theological grounding for practice and pedagogy
Theological Foundation	Principle of justice (al-adl) in all relationships	Anchors moderation in ethical responsibility rather than mere tolerance	Socio-cultural practices (justice-based community service); Pedagogy (ethical reasoning in discussions)
Theological Foundation	Principle of tolerance (tasamuh) and legitimate difference (ikhtilaf)	Recognizes diversity and disagreement as normal within Islamic tradition	Socio-cultural practices (interfaith engagement); Pedagogy (comparative study of Islamic schools)
Socio-Cultural	Student diversity accommodation	Creates lived experience of	Theological understanding

Dimension	Specific Element	How It Promotes Moderation	Reinforces
Practice	through structured interaction	peaceful coexistence across difference	(embodying Qur'anic teaching); Pedagogy (experiential learning)
Socio-Cultural Practice	Interfaith dialogue and service across religious boundaries	Demonstrates Islam's commitment to universal ethical values	Theological conviction (Islamic universalism); Pedagogy (service-learning)
Socio-Cultural Practice	Community engagement demonstrating universal human concern	Builds relationships transcending doctrinal differences	Theological commitment (Islamic ethics); Socio-cultural (relationship-building)
Pedagogical Approach	Sorogan: personalized spiritual guidance addressing individual struggles	Develops integrated person—intellect, will, emotions, spirit	Theological refinement (personal spiritual development); Socio-cultural (modeling by mentors)
Pedagogical Approach	Bandongan: collective engagement with classical texts emphasizing balance and complexity	Shows how classical scholars engaged diversity with wisdom and respect	Theological understanding (Islamic intellectual tradition); Socio-cultural (how classical principles apply today)
Pedagogical Approach	Halaqah: peer discussion enabling critical thinking and personal voice	Enables students to develop personal understanding through dialogue	Theological conviction (personal engagement with sources); Socio-cultural (peer relationships in learning)
Integrated	Habitual orientation	Student develops	All three mutually

Dimension	Specific Element	How It Promotes Moderation	Reinforces
Outcome	toward moderation as internalized disposition	moderation as character trait, not external constraint	reinforce each other in sustained transformation

Discussion

The findings presented above provide comprehensive phenomenological insights into how religious moderation (wasatiyyah) operates within Indonesian pesantren education. This discussion situates these findings within a broader scholarship on Islamic education, religious moderation, and social cohesion while articulating implications for understanding pesantrens roles in contemporary Indonesian society.

Integration of Theological Foundations and Institutional Practice

A foundational insight emerging from this research is the integration of theological principles and institutional practices in operationalizing religious moderation. Unlike frameworks treating theology and practice as separate domains—abstract doctrines versus behavioral implementation—this research reveals theology and practice as mutually constitutive. Theological principles derived from Qur'anic texts and classical Islamic scholarship have established normative orientations for institutions. Simultaneously, institutional practices—student diversity accommodation, interfaith engagement, and community service—embody and reinforce theological principles, translating abstract concepts into lived reality.

This integration addresses theoretical questions regarding how abstract ethical concepts materialize through social practice. Pesantren education demonstrates that religious moderation does not exist primarily as a doctrinal proposition awaiting institutional implementation but rather emerges through iterative relationships between theological reflection, institutional structure, and daily practice. Students develop an understanding of moderation not primarily through explicit instruction but through participation in communities of practice embodying moderate orientations. Theological concepts become meaningful through repetition, exemplification, and experiences within specific institutional contexts.

This finding aligns with scholarship on situated learning that emphasizes how individuals learn through participation in communities of practice, acquiring not only explicit knowledge but also implicit understanding, disposition, and orientation. Educational theorist Etienne Wenger developed communities-of-practice frameworks demonstrating that expertise and orientation develop through legitimate peripheral participation in communities embodying valued practices and orientations. Pesantren education exemplifies this process, with new students gradually transitioning from peripheral participation (as residents encounter pesantren practices) to more central participation (as they gain experience and take responsibility for embodying and

transmitting pesantren values). Through this process, students internalize not merely beliefs about moderation but dispositions and practices constituting moderation as a lived reality (Saefullah et al., 2025).

The integration of theology and practice also reflects Islamic educational traditions emphasizing the integration of knowledge ('ilm) and spiritual transformation (tazkiyah). Classical Islamic educational theory, articulated extensively in texts addressing Islamic ethics and education, emphasizes that Islamic learning aims not only to accumulate knowledge but also to transform the whole person—intellect, will, emotions, and spirit. Pesantren education, grounded in these classical traditions, operationalizes this holistic educational vision by combining textual study, spiritual discipline, social interaction, and community engagement into the integrated formations of the person.

Classical Texts as Living Resources for Contemporary Contexts

A second significant finding concerns the role of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) in the operationalization of religious moderation. Rather than treating classical texts as historically distant documents requiring contemporary interpretation, pesantren engagement with classical texts exemplifies how traditions remain living capable of addressing contemporary challenges while maintaining connections to historical sources. Educators explicitly connected classical texts to contemporary situations, invited students to think about how classical principles apply to modern contexts, and presented classical scholars as exemplary models of engaged Islamic thought.

This finding contributes to scholarly debate on Islamic modernity and traditionalism. Some scholars present Islam's relationship with modernity as a binary choice: either embraces the progressive reinterpretation of Islamic sources or clings to traditional literature. This research demonstrates an alternative possibility pesantren educators simultaneously maintain serious commitment to classical Islamic texts and engage flexibly with contemporary realities, finding classical sources capable of addressing modern challenges. One educator's statement encapsulates this approach: "The classical scholars understood that Islam must address the conditions of their time. We face different conditions but the same Islamic principles apply. We study the scholars to understand how they engaged with their contexts, and we apply the same principles to ours." (Iswahyudi et al., 2025)

This approach exemplifies what scholars term "critical traditionalism"—maintaining genuine commitment to historical Islamic traditions while refusing literalism or the mechanical application of historical positions. Critical traditionalists argue that authentic engagement with tradition requires an in-depth understanding of historical precedents, grasping the principles underlying specific historical positions, and applying those principles to contemporary contexts. This approach differs from both fundamentalism (treating historical positions as permanently binding) and radical modernism (entirely abandoning tradition). Pesantren education, as examined in this study, exemplifies critical traditionalism, maintaining that classical Islamic texts and historical Islamic thought constitute essential resources for contemporary Islamic education.

The phenomenological dimension of this finding involves how students experience classical texts as being meaningful and relevant. Rather than texts being distant historical artifacts, students described discovering, through study and discussion, how classical teaching addresses their contemporary concerns. One student recounted: "I was studying a classical text on Islamic jurisprudence that addressed how to treat strangers and migrants. I realized that the scholar was addressing something very relevant to my experience—my own family migrated from one region to another. The classical scholar's principles of justice and compassion for migrants helped me understand my experience through the Islamic framework." This example illustrates how classical texts remain meaningful through students' active interpretations of and connections to their lived experiences.

Socio-Cultural Diversity as Resource for Moral Development

A third significant finding involves how pesantrens utilize internal socio cultural diversity as a deliberately constructed resource for moral and spiritual development. Rather than viewing student diversity as a potential problem requiring management, pesantren educators deliberately structure student interactions to promote intercultural understanding and tolerance. This constitutes significant pedagogical insight—diversity is not merely a social fact but a pedagogical resource for facilitating moral growth.

This approach aligns with educational research on diversity and learning, which demonstrates that exposure to diverse perspectives improves critical thinking, reduces prejudice, and promotes understanding. However, research also indicates that diversity alone does not automatically produce these benefits; rather, it must be structured purposefully through deliberate pedagogical practices. Pesantren practices—deliberate room assignment mixing students from different origins, structured interfaith dialogue, community service involving diverse participants, and curriculum addressing diversity explicitly—exemplify such purposeful structuring (Al Adib et al., 2025).

The phenomenological dimension concerns how students experience and interpret diversity. Rather than viewing different religious approaches or cultural practices as threats to religious authenticity, students gradually came to understand diversity as consistent with Islamic tradition and enriched their understanding. This transformation required repeated exposure within a supportive community, explicit instruction connecting theological principles to diversity, and modeling by educators embodying the acceptance of diversity.

This finding also addresses contemporary religious polarization in pluralistic societies. Growing religious conflict and communal violence indicate the inadequacy of mere legal tolerance or policy accommodation; sustained dialogue and lived relationships appear necessary for genuine faith understanding. Pesantren's approach—creating institutional contexts enabling sustained interaction, dialogue, and shared projects across religious boundaries—offers a potential model for faith engagement in diverse societies. By creating conditions that enable students to develop relationships with religious others and recognize common ethical commitments across religious boundaries, pesantren education promotes genuine

tolerance grounded in understanding rather than mere legal accommodation (Chen et al., 2025).

Pedagogical Innovation Within Traditional Frameworks

A fourth significant finding involves how pesantrens adapt traditional pedagogical methods to contemporary contexts without abandoning distinctive characteristics. Sorogan, bandongan, and halaqah remain recognizable pedagogical practices, yet educators innovatively structure these methods to address contemporary challenges and explicitly promote moderation. This exemplifies institutional adaptation which maintains a distinctive institutional identity while responding to changing contexts.

Educational research on institutional change distinguishes between adaptive changes that maintain core institutional identity and transformative changes that fundamentally alter institutional characteristics. Pesantren education examined in this research exemplifies adaptive change, maintaining essential pedagogical and spiritual characteristics while incorporating contemporary concerns. For instance, traditional bandongans retains lecture-based discussions of classical texts, but educators explicitly address contemporary implications and encourage students to think through modern applications. Traditional sorogans remains individual studies of classical texts, but educators address contemporary spiritual challenges and ethical questions. Traditional halaqah remains a peer discussion, but facilitators deliberately guide discussions on contemporary ethical issues and social applications (Rahman et al., 2025).

This adaptive approach reflects pesantren leaders' understanding that Islamic education must remain rooted in classical traditions while addressing contemporary needs. As one director explained our methods and texts are traditional, and we are proud of them. However, tradition refers to living continuity and not museum preservation. We must adapt to our students' contexts while maintaining what makes pesantren distinctive." This statement articulates the philosophy of adaptive change maintaining institutional integrity while promoting institutional relevance.

Implications for Understanding Religious Moderation

This research provides significant insights into how religious moderation operates within specific institutional contexts. Many contemporary discourses treat moderation primarily as doctrinal positions or policy frameworks, emphasizing intellectual positions and institutional statements. This research demonstrates moderation as embodied practice, lived orientation, and the process of personal transformation through participation in specific communities of practice. Moderation emerges not primarily through explicit ideological commitment but through daily participation in communities privileging tolerance, justice, and balance.

This finding addresses theoretical questions regarding how abstract values and ethical principles shape actual behavior and orientation. Moral psychology and virtue ethics traditions distinguish between intellectual assent to ethical principles and genuine internalization through habit and repeated practice. Pesantren education exemplifies the latter, creating conditions that enable students to gradually internalize moderate values through repeated experience, modeling by respected educators,

dialogue with peers, and explicit reflection on values. Through this process, students develop what Aristotle termed "virtues"—habitual orientations toward appropriate action and feeling that become constitutive of character (Bahtiar et al., 2025).

The research also reveals interconnections among the dimensions of moderation which are often analyzed separately in scholarly literature. Theological moderation (balance in religious understanding), moral moderation (justice and fairness in social relations), and institutional moderation (structures that promote tolerance and diversity accommodation) operate together as an integrated system. Students cannot develop theological moderation without encountering diverse scholarly perspectives and practicing dialogue moral moderation without engaging in service to vulnerable populations and maintaining relationships across differences and moderation without institutional structures supporting moderate practices. The integration of these dimensions within pesantren contexts represents a significant institutional achievement.

Pesantren Education and Social Cohesion in Pluralistic Societies

These research findings address broader questions regarding pesantrens potential role in promoting social cohesion in Indonesia's diverse society. Indonesia's religious and ethnic diversity creates both opportunities and challengesopportunities for mutual enrichment through sustained dialogue across differences and challenges in managing potential conflicts among diverse populations. Understanding the mechanisms through which Islamic educational institutions like pesantrens cultivate tolerance and promote intercommunal understanding is significant beyond academic interest.

The research reveals that pesantren can function as what scholars term "bridges" connecting diverse populations and reducing prejudice. By creating sustained institutional contexts that enable interaction across religious and cultural boundaries, providing explicit instruction in shared values and common ethical commitments, and embodying respect for diversity within community life, pesantren education promotes genuine understanding grounded in relationships. This contrasts with structural multiculturalism—legal protections and policy accommodations—which, while necessary, cannot generate genuine understanding and respect (Wood et al., 2025).

Indonesia's recent history includes tragic communal violence driven partly by religious polarization and prejudice. The 2002-2005 Bali bombings and 2005 Nusa Tenggara attacks, which killed hundreds of civilians, exemplif how religious extremism and communal violence disrupted social peace. Simultaneously, Indonesia maintains strong indigenous traditions of religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and religious pluralism. Contemporary Indonesian leadership emphasizes religious moderation as anational value, with the Indonesian government explicitly promoting religious moderation through educational and social policies. This research provides an evidence-based analysis of how traditional Islamic educational institutions, such as pesantrens operationalize the government's stated commitments to religious moderation.

Furthermore, research findings address global scholarly conversations regarding Islam's relationship with moderation, pluralism, and democratic values. Some Western scholars argue that Islamic traditions inherently resist moderation and

pluralism, requiring either the abandonment of Islamic identity or subordination to secular liberal frameworks. Other scholars argue that Islamic traditions contain resources for moderation and pluralism that require retrieval and emphasis. This research provides empirical evidence supporting the latter position, demonstrating that serious Islamic education grounded in Qur'anic texts and classical Islamic scholarship can cultivate a genuine commitment to moderation, tolerance, and respect for religious diversity.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this research provides valuable insights into pesantren-based religious moderation, it has several limitations. First, the research focused on pesantrens with explicit moderation commitments; pesantrens lacking such commitments might present different pictures. Second, the research involved self-reported data regarding values and understanding; behavioral observation and long-term longitudinal studies could strengthen the understanding of actual behavioral outcomes. Third, the research involved a limited geographic scope (East Java and Southeast Sulawesi); pesantrens in other regions with different social contexts might implement moderation differently. Fourth, the research examined pesantren during a specific historical moment; longitudinal research tracking changes across time would illuminate how pesantren moderation efforts evolve and how sustainable such efforts are.

Future research might productively explore several directions: longitudinal studies tracking how pesantren education shapes long-term orientations as graduates enter society; comparative analysis examining how different pesantren models operationalize moderation; investigation of how pesantren graduates practice moderation and interfaith engagement in their communities; examination of challenges pesantren face in maintaining moderation amid polarizing external pressures; exploration of how pesantren approaches might be adapted for other Islamic institutions and contexts; and analysis of how government policies and broader social contexts support or hinder pesantren moderation efforts.

Despite these limitations, this research provides comprehensive phenomenological insights into how religious moderation operates within Indonesian pesantrens, contributing to a valuable understanding of the mechanisms through which traditional Islamic institutions promote tolerance, justice, and balanced religious understanding in pluralistic contemporary contexts

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological research examined religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*) within six Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) by investigating theological foundations, socio cultural practices, and pedagogical approaches operationalizing moderation. The research demonstrated that religious moderation within the pesantren constitutes an integrated phenomenon encompassing theological understanding grounded in Qur'anic principles and classical Islamic texts, socio cultural practices promoting diversity accommodation and intercultural engagement, and pedagogical methods facilitating critical thinking and spiritual transformation.

Key findings indicate that theological moderation derives from specific Qur'anic principles (particularly the concept of ummatan wasatan—a middle community) and finds elaboration through classical Islamic texts that address justice, tolerance, balance, and ethical living. Theological moderation is not an abstract doctrinal position but a lived orientation continuously reinforced through prayer, study, reflection, and spiritual practice. Socio cultural practices operationalizing moderation include deliberate management of student diversity through room assignments and joint activities, interfaith dialogue and non-Muslim student accommodation, community service engaging diverse populations, and curriculum integration explicitly addressing moderation and pluralism. These practices transform abstract principles into lived experiences, enabling students to develop genuine appreciation for diversity and a commitment to tolerance. Pedagogical approaches facilitating moderation utilize traditional pesantren methods—Sorogan, Bandongan, and Halaqah—adapted to address contemporary concerns while maintaining distinctive characteristics. Educators function as spiritual mentors exemplifying moderation through their practice and guiding students toward deeper understanding and personal transformation. Through participation in these integrated theological, social, and pedagogical systems, students develop moderation as an embodied orientation rather than mere intellectual assent.

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Ethical Compliance

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data Access Statement

A Data Access Statement is a section in a scientific publication or research report that explains how the data used or generated in a study can be accessed by readers or other researchers. This statement aims to promote transparency, support research reproducibility, and comply with open access policies, where applicable.

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Purpose of Data Access Statement

- Reproducibility: This enables other researchers to replicate or verify findings.
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Conflict of Interest declaration

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