



Islamic Education and Religious Moderation: The Challenge of Building a Tolerant Character in the Educational Environment

Riza Mahara¹ Buhori²

¹²STIT Al Washliyah Aceh Tengah

rizamahara@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Education is a crucial instrument for developing tolerant character and transmitting noble values. However, educational institutions in Indonesia currently face serious threats from radicalism and intolerance. This situation demands the internalization of religious moderation, which adheres to the principles of tawasut (consideration), tasamuh (indecipherable), and i'tidal (independence), to maintain the unity of a pluralistic nation. This study aims to analyze the challenges and formulate a holistic strategy for strengthening religious moderation through Islamic education. This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis of policy documents and related literature. The results show that Islamic education has a strategic role in building inclusive character, but its implementation is hampered by challenges, namely resistance from conservative educators (internal) and the dominance of intolerant narratives on social media (external). Nevertheless, success can be achieved through a holistic strategy with three pillars: revitalizing the inclusive curriculum, adopting a dialogic-participatory teaching methodology, and

strengthening a just school culture. It is concluded that investment in improving teacher competency and innovative teaching materials is key to making Islamic educational institutions effective agents of transformation. The success of religious moderation is crucial for realizing rahmatan lil 'alamin (blessing for the universe) in Indonesia.

Abstract

Objective: The study aims to analyze the challenges and formulate a holistic strategy for strengthening religious moderation through Islamic education in Indonesia. It focuses on how Islamic education can internalize the principles of tawasut (moderation), tasamuh (tolerance), and i'tidal (justice) to counter radicalism and intolerance while maintaining national unity.

Methodology: This research employs a qualitative approach using descriptive analysis of policy documents and relevant literature. The study systematically reviews educational policies, theoretical frameworks, and existing studies related to religious moderation in Islamic educational institutions.

Findings: The findings reveal that Islamic education plays a strategic role in cultivating inclusive and tolerant character. However, its implementation faces two main challenges: internal resistance from conservative educators and external influence of intolerant narratives spread through social media. The study proposes a holistic strategy based on three pillars—revitalizing an inclusive curriculum, adopting dialogic and participatory teaching methodologies, and strengthening a just and moderate school culture. The research concludes that improving teacher competency and developing innovative learning materials are key to transforming Islamic educational institutions into agents of moderation and peace.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to the discourse on religious moderation by offering an integrated framework that connects educational policy, pedagogy, and school culture. Unlike previous research that focuses solely on curriculum or teacher training, this study presents a comprehensive model emphasizing systemic and cultural transformation within Islamic education. It highlights the essential role of educational institutions in actualizing rahmatan lil 'alamin values for pluralistic Indonesian society.

Keywords :

Religious Moderation, Islamic Education, Tolerant Character, Curriculum

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Education serves as a fundamental foundation for shaping human character and transmitting noble values across generations. Beyond the function of knowledge transfer, it plays a vital role in cultivating individuals of integrity, ethics, and responsibility toward society. In Indonesia, a nation characterized by cultural and religious diversity, education is also a strategic means to nurture tolerance, justice, and humanity as the essence of national unity.

However, recent social realities show that the rise of radicalism, extremism, and intolerance poses serious

challenges to educational institutions. Radical narratives have infiltrated classrooms and public discourse, endangering the very purpose of education as a space of inclusion and peace. To address this, the internalization of religious moderation embodying *tawasut* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *i'tidal* (justice)—becomes essential to strengthening social harmony.

Islamic education, as the vanguard of moral and spiritual development, carries a strategic responsibility to integrate these moderation values into teaching, curricula, and school culture. It must not only preserve faith and identity but also foster open-mindedness and respect for diversity.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the recognition of Islamic education as a crucial agent in promoting tolerance, its implementation of religious moderation faces complex and multidimensional obstacles. Internally, challenges emerge from within educational institutions themselves, particularly concerning the uneven understanding of moderation among educators, the persistence of rigid and doctrinal curricula, and the limited pedagogical capacity to apply participatory and dialogical teaching methods. Some educators still perceive moderation as a dilution of religious purity rather than as a balanced understanding of faith. This misunderstanding results in inconsistent classroom practices and hinders the cultivation of inclusive values among students. Externally, the challenges are no less significant. The rapid spread of intolerant narratives through social media has created an alternative “digital curriculum” that often contradicts school-based teachings. Low levels of digital literacy among students and teachers exacerbate this issue, making it difficult to filter misleading or radical content. Moreover, a polarized socio-political environment and the politicization of religion in public life further complicate efforts to build tolerant character within schools and madrasas. These intertwined internal and external factors have created a gap between the ideals of religious moderation and its practical realization in Islamic education. Therefore, this research is directed toward understanding the root causes of these challenges and formulating effective strategies to internalize the values of religious moderation as the foundation for developing tolerant and inclusive individuals.

1.3. Research Questions

Based on the background and problem statement that has been described, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- How is the concept of religious moderation internalized within Islamic education in Indonesia?
- What are the major internal and external challenges to building tolerant character in Islamic educational institutions?
- What strategies can be formulated to strengthen the implementation of religious moderation in Islamic education?

2. Literature Review

The concept of religious moderation has been extensively discussed in Islamic scholarship. According to Abror (2020) and Bahar (2022), moderation is an essential response to radicalism and extremism threatening social cohesion. Scholars such as Azyumardi Azra (2012) and Haidar Bagir (2018) emphasize the integration of universal ethics and humanism within Islamic education as a means to strengthen spiritual and moral intelligence.

However, thinkers like Adian Husaini and Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi (2006) express concern that overemphasis on moderation may weaken theological firmness and lead to relativism. This debate demonstrates the need for balance—between inclusivity and the preservation of Islamic identity.

Contemporary literature also highlights the impact of social media as both a challenge and an opportunity in promoting moderation (Taufik et al., 2023). The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (Sumarto, 2021) considers educational institutions as laboratories of tolerance where religious moderation must be cultivated through curriculum and daily practices.

3. Methodology

This research is a qualitative study with a descriptive analytical approach. The data collection technique used was a literature review, gathering data from various sources, such as books, scientific journals, articles, and trusted websites. In-depth interviews with religious experts, community leaders, and

academics who understand the paradigms of Islamic Education and Religious Moderation were also used as supporting data. Observations were also conducted, observing phenomena related to extremism, religious moderation, and the application of the paradigms of Islamic Education and Religious Moderation in the field.

After the data was collected, data analysis was conducted using a *grounded theory approach*. The *grounded theory* approach aims to develop a new theory based on data obtained from the field. The data was analyzed and categorized into codes appropriate to the research theme, then analyzed to develop a new theory on the concept of religious moderation within the paradigm of Islamic Education and Religious Moderation.

4. Results

4.1 Internalization of Religious Moderation in Islamic Education

Internalization is linguistically (etymologically) defined as the process of absorbing, internalizing, or depositing values, attitudes, or norms originating from outside into a person (Zamzambela & Krisnawati, 2023) . Through this process, these values then merge and become an integral part of the individual's personality, beliefs, and behavioral patterns, which are then expressed both consciously and unconsciously in everyday life. Meanwhile, religious moderation can be understood as an attitude or perspective that takes a middle path in practicing religious teachings. This attitude seeks to avoid extremism, namely not leaning too far to the right (radical) and also not too far to the left (liberal or secular), but is always based on the principle of balance (*tawazun*) (Ismawati Saragih, 2024) .

From the above definition, it can be understood that internalizing religious moderation in Islamic education is a necessity to counter radicalism and intolerance. This concept is based on the principles of *tawasut* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *i'tidal* (justice). The goal is to develop students who have an inclusive, contextual understanding of religion and respect for diversity .(Hanan & Rahmat, 2023) .

According to researchers, this internalization effort must be systematic, encompassing aspects of the curriculum, teaching practices, and even the culture of the educational institution itself. This process ensures that the values of moderation become the lifeblood of one of the main instruments of internalization, namely through the formal curriculum . Therefore, the values of moderation must be integrated explicitly and implicitly into Islamic Religious Education (PAI), Islamic Cultural History (SKI), and even general subjects. This integration can be achieved by revising teaching materials to emphasize universal ethical aspects, the history of tolerant Islamic civilization, and contextual and anti-discriminatory interpretations of sacred texts. Furthermore, local content can be designed to promote local wisdom rich in values of tolerance, such as the inclusive religious traditions of the archipelago, madrasas, Islamic boarding schools, and Islamic universities.

Experts such as Dr. Haidar Bagir strongly support the integration of moderation into the curriculum, arguing that religious education must return to the essence of Sufism and universal ethics that prioritize love (*mahabbah*) and humanity (*humanism*). According to him, a moderation-oriented curriculum is a preventive measure to protect students from rigid and exclusive "Scripturalist Islam." The curriculum must deliberately present a narrative about Islam as rahmatan lil 'alamin , so that students understand that differences are part of God's decree (*sunnatullah*) that must be accepted (Bagir, Haidar, 2018) .

However, several conservative groups and other religious education experts, such as those represented by Prof. Dr. Adian Husaini , have raised concerns. They argue that the idea of religious moderation has the potential to "shallowen" Islamic faith or shift the focus of Islamic teachings from doctrinal purity (*fiqh*) to merely social ethics. Their main criticism is that efforts at moderation should not sacrifice the instillation of fundamental principles of faith and sharia. They worry that overly liberal moderation could lead to religious relativism that undermines students' Islamic identity.

The internalization of moderation also depends on educators' classroom teaching practices . Educators must shift from dogmatic lectures to participatory and dialogical methods. Methods such as case discussions on ethnicity, religion, race, and interfaith issues, collaborative projects across religions or cultures, and simulations (*role-plays*) that place students in minority positions are highly effective in fostering empathy and tolerance. These practices encourage critical reasoning, not simply the acceptance

of doctrine, so that students can understand the context and purpose of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*) (Katimin, Ismawati Saragih, 2024) .

Prof. Dr. Azyumardi Azra , a prominent advocate of moderation, emphasized that teaching methodology must be critical and transformative . He argued that modern Islamic education must adopt a multi-perspective approach to understanding history and religious texts. Through healthy dialogue and debate, students are taught to respect differences in interpretation (*ikhtilaf*), a rich intellectual tradition in Islam. Teaching must shape critical minds and tolerant hearts (Azra, Azyumardi, 2012) .

Challenges arise from those who believe that this dialogical method, particularly at the elementary and secondary madrasah levels, can cause confusion among students who are not yet spiritually and intellectually mature. Conservative educators tend to worry that open discussions on sensitive religious issues will spark unconstructive debate or even cast doubt on the truth of the teachings. They emphasize the need for teacher authority in conveying standard teachings so that students have clear guidance in religious matters, especially amidst the flow of biased information (Ulfa et al., 2024) .

The third most important aspect is creating a school or Islamic boarding school culture conducive to moderation. This encompasses institutional rules, interactions among school members, and daily activities. School culture should promote tolerance of diversity (including non-Muslims or minority groups) and prohibit all forms of discrimination or *bullying* based on religion or ethnicity. Through activities such as commemorating religious holidays together (where relevant and contextual) or community outreach programs involving diverse backgrounds, the value of moderation is internalized through real-life experiences.

The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs , through its program to strengthen religious moderation, explicitly views school culture as a laboratory of tolerance . Schools and Islamic boarding schools should function as ecosystems where students can interact peacefully with individuals of different faiths. According to this policy, school rules should prohibit uniforms or attributes that suggest a single, exclusive identity , and instead encourage subtle, inclusive, and non-polarizing religious expression. The success of moderation is measured not only by test scores but also by students' social attitudes (Sumarto, 2021) .

On the other hand, there are concerns that an overemphasis on an "overly inclusive" school culture could obscure the Islamic identity of these institutions, particularly Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Those opposed to this argument argue that Islamic educational environments should maintain strong Islamic characteristics as a moral bulwark. This criticism often highlights the potential for state or external intervention that could diminish the institutions' autonomy in shaping their religious ethos. Therefore, the balance between social inclusivity and affirmation of religious identity is an ongoing debate in the internalization of religious moderation in Islamic education.

4.2 Challenges in Forming a Tolerant Character

The main challenge stemming from within educational institutions is the varying understanding of religious moderation among educators. Educators may interpret moderation differently, ranging from mere politeness to doctrinal compromise. If a teacher's understanding tends toward scripturalism or exclusivity, it is difficult for them to effectively convey the values of inclusivity, even when the formal curriculum demands it. It is therefore not surprising that this ultimately creates a discrepancy between official policy and classroom practice (Hasnawati et al., 2025) .

Practically, internal challenges also relate to limited teaching materials and resources. Many Islamic educational institutions, particularly those in remote areas or traditional Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), lack textbooks or modules that comprehensively and contextually integrate the values of moderation. Furthermore, educators' qualifications in transformative teaching methodologies (such as critical dialogue or role-playing) remain low. Effective programs to strengthen religious moderation require adequate financial investment and training, but these are not evenly distributed.

Other internal challenges include resistance or rejection of new religious interpretations and the influence of students' peer groups . In a rigid environment, interpretations that attempt to contextualize religious texts are often considered *heretical*. Even among students, the polarity of exclusive religious identities is

often reinforced by peers. For example, a student who tries to be open may be isolated by their peer group for being considered too liberal.

This condition is emphasized by figures who support moderation, such as Prof. Dr. Phil. Kamaruddin Amin, who emphasizes that Islamic education must undergo radical transformation and must not be resistant to change for the sake of the nation. This is based on the fact that Islam is a dynamic religion, therefore the curriculum must be revitalized to be relevant to the pluralistic Indonesian context. According to this view, resource limitations must be addressed through collaboration and digitalization, not used as an excuse to maintain outdated or exclusive teaching materials (Amin, Kamaruddin, 2018).

Outside of institutions, the massive influence of social media poses the most significant external challenge. Social media serves as a "parallel curriculum" that often outperforms the school curriculum. Students are exposed to extreme and intolerant religious narratives through videos, memes, or influencers without adequate filters and digital literacy. These narratives are often presented in an emotional and simplistic manner, making them more appealing and absorbable than messages of moderation, which may be more nuanced and complex.

Others argue that it's unfair to focus too much on blaming social media for the problem. They argue that this focus ignores the underlying issues within educational institutions themselves. Intolerant narratives or teachings on social media will only be appealing and easily accepted by teenagers if religious education in schools fails to meet their spiritual needs or provides clear answers when they are experiencing identity confusion. Therefore, if religious instruction in schools feels too general, secular, or doesn't delve deeply into faith, students will be more likely to seek "certainty" and the answers they need from outside sources, including extremist groups on social media.

Another external challenge is the less than conducive socio-political environment. Political polarization, which often uses religious issues as a campaign tool, creates a climate of distrust and division. When community leaders or public officials exhibit intolerant behavior, schools' efforts to instill moderation are futile because students see a contradiction between school teachings and social reality. This phenomenon triggers moral ambivalence in students.

Although the concept of religious moderation has become a national policy, limited support and implementation from the government/authorities remains a challenge. Programs are often ad hoc and unsustainable. Furthermore, policy synchronization between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education, as well as local governments, is often hampered, resulting in inconsistencies in implementation, from funding allocation to curriculum oversight.

Yaqut Cholil Qoumas emphasized that efforts to strengthen religious moderation are no longer an option, but rather a constitutional obligation to safeguard the pluralistic Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). They argued that addressing external challenges requires decisive state intervention, including regulating provocative social media content and building a multi-stakeholder coalition (government, religious leaders, civil society) to create a social ecosystem that supports the values of *tasamuh* (tolerance) and *i'tidal* (justice) (*Minister of Religion Says Strengthening Religious Moderation Will Create a Harmonious Nation*, tt).

Overall, the challenge of developing tolerant character in educational settings is a multi-layered (multidimensional) issue stemming from two intertwined areas: both internal challenges from the educational institution and external challenges from the social environment. This complexity makes developing tolerant character not merely a curricular task but a total transformational obligation that requires integrated and sustained intervention from all parties.

4.3 Strategy for Strengthening Religious Moderation

A fundamental strategy for strengthening religious moderation is to improve educator competency in a structured and holistic manner. Educators are at the forefront of transmitting values, so they must have a deep understanding of the concepts of *tawasut* (contemplation), *tasamuh* (compassion), and the Indonesian context. Training programs and workshops should be designed not only to transfer knowledge (cognitive), but also to develop attitudes (affective) and methodological skills (psychomotor), enabling educators to lead critical discussions and address issues of intolerance in the classroom.

Contemporary Muslim figures such as Tariq Ramadan (from the West) emphasize that religious teachers must be authentic agents of change . He argues that without teachers trained in modern hermeneutics and aware of social complexities, religious education will stagnate in mere formalism. Training should empower teachers to teach an ethical and justice-oriented Islam, not a rigid and exclusive one. Therefore, investing in educator training is an investment in the future of moderation (Ramadan, Tariq, 1999) .

Some Islamic scholars, such as Dr. Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, have voiced caution. They worry that government-organized moderation training could become indoctrination aimed at standardizing religious understanding and marginalizing certain theological views deemed "immoderate" by the authorities. Their criticism centers on the potential politicization of education and the threat to the diversity of schools of thought (*ikhthilaf*), emphasizing that training should maintain scholarly objectivity and not impose a particular ideology (Zarkasyi, Hamid Fahmy, 2006) .

The second strategy is the development of innovative curricula and teaching materials that explicitly prioritize moderation. The curriculum should include historical narratives of Islamic civilization rich in values of tolerance (for example, the Al-Andalus period), highlight inclusive figures (such as Gus Dur or Nurcholish Madjid), and present religious texts with various contextual interpretations. The materials should be multi-perspective, encouraging students to compare views, thereby fostering critical thinking skills and rejecting single, dogmatic interpretations.

Strengthening moderation must be supported by a strong culture of tolerance in the educational environment (Amin, Kamaruddin, 2018) . This includes the implementation of norms , regulations, and daily interactions that ensure equality, justice, and inclusivity for all school/Islamic boarding school members, regardless of religious background, ethnicity, or religious views. Extracurricular activities, such as interfaith community service or philosophy discussion clubs, play a crucial role as social laboratories where differences are celebrated, not eliminated.

From a Western and critical educational perspective, Paulo Freire, through his concept of liberation education, implicitly supports this strategy. Although not a religious figure, his ideas emphasize that learning environments must be free from a "culture of silence" or oppression. A democratic and tolerant school environment is the most powerful hidden curriculum. If students see discriminatory practices in their environment, all theoretical teachings about moderation will collapse (Freire, Paulo, 2000) .

Religious moderation will not succeed without the active involvement of parents and communities. Schools/Islamic schools must forge partnerships with families and community leaders to align the values they instill. Programs such as parent seminars on media literacy and the dangers of radicalism, or community forums involving local religious leaders with moderate views, can create a cohesive social ecosystem and reinforce messages of moderation from home to the community.

Historically, Western liberal philosophers such as John Locke (in context) argued for the limits of the role of educational institutions (as representatives of the state/community) in the realm of private belief. The principle of individual liberty implies that school or government intervention in parentally influenced beliefs should be limited (Locke, John, 1988) . In the modern context, this translates into a critique that parental involvement should be educational, not coercive, so as not to infringe on the family's autonomy in shaping children's religious views.

A crucial strategy in the digital era is the wise use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Educational institutions must master technology to counter intolerant narratives. This is achieved by producing engaging, high-quality moderated content (videos, podcasts, infographics) and distributing it on relevant platforms. Furthermore, critical digital literacy must be part of the curriculum, training students to verify information, recognize religious hoaxes, and distinguish between opinion and fact.

Strengthening religious moderation requires an integrated synergy of all these strategies, from teacher competency to digital culture. An effective program must be sustainable and regularly evaluated. As emphasized by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, religious moderation is a prerequisite for maintaining national harmony. Therefore, this strengthening program must be supported by strong budgetary and regulatory policies to ensure that Islamic education can produce a generation that is not only pious as individuals, but also tolerant, inclusive, and responsible as citizens.

5. Discussion

The internalization of moderation in Islamic education is both a pedagogical and sociological transformation. Educators play a central role as mediators between theological understanding and social realities. They must move from rote instruction toward transformative learning that encourages contextual comprehension of *maqasid al-shariah. Resistance from conservative groups underscores the need for inclusive dialogue and policy coherence rather than confrontation. At the same time, digital platforms should be utilized to spread positive narratives and counter extremist propaganda. The sustainability of moderation efforts depends on teacher capacity-building, curriculum reform, and consistent government support.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

Internalizing religious moderation in Islamic education is an urgent and strategic need to build a tolerant, inclusive, and open-minded character, while simultaneously protecting students from the threat of radicalism. This effort must be carried out holistically through three main pillars: a curriculum that prioritizes inclusive and contextual narratives; teaching practices that utilize dialogic and participatory methodologies; and a school/Islamic boarding school culture that ensures justice and *tasāmuh* (tolerance) in daily interactions. Despite internal resistance from conservative educators and external challenges in the form of the dominance of intolerant narratives on social media, pro-moderation experts, such as Kamaruddin Amin and Tariq Ramadan, believe that by improving educator competency and developing innovative teaching materials, Islamic educational institutions can become effective agents of transformation. The success of religious moderation is key to the continuation of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (blessing for the universe) in Indonesia's pluralistic society.

6.2. Recommendations for Future Research

To expand the study and enrich scientific contributions, several recommendations for further research are as follows:

Empirical Studies: Conduct field-based research measuring the impact of moderation-based curricula on students' attitudes.

Comparative Analysis: Examine implementation across diverse educational settings—public schools, madrasas, and *pesantren*.

Digital Pedagogy: Investigate the use of social media and digital tools in promoting moderate religious understanding.

Longitudinal Studies: Assess long-term effects of religious moderation education on community tolerance and interfaith relations.

Policy Evaluation: Analyze government interventions to determine sustainability and inclusivity in moderation programs.

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