

ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS MODERATION

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Abstract

This study explores the views of Islamic Religious Education on religious moderation and describes the understanding of religious moderation by three Islamic Religious Education teachers at an Islamic school in Indonesia in August 2025. Religious moderation is seen as an important approach to dealing with multicultural social dynamics. The method used is qualitative with snowball sampling technique for informant selection. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations of classes and relevant school activities. The findings show that teachers interpret religious moderation as a principle of balance between commitment to faith and tolerance, as well as social behavior that respects diversity. The implementation of religious moderation in learning practices shows a variety of strategies, such as contextual discussions, case studies of tolerance, and the integration of moderate values into teaching materials. This article proposes recommendations to strengthen the Islamic Religious Education curriculum that favors the formation of moderate attitudes, as well as the development of professional training for teachers. The implications of this research are relevant for Islamic education policymakers and curriculum practitioners.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education, religious moderation, tolerance, student understanding, teachers

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pandangan Pendidikan Agama Islam terhadap moderasi beragama serta mendeskripsikan pemahaman moderasi beragama oleh tiga guru Pendidikan Agama Islam di sebuah sekolah Islam di Indonesia pada Agustus 2025. Moderasi beragama dipandang sebagai pendekatan penting untuk menghadapi dinamika sosial multikultural. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan teknik snowball sampling untuk pemilihan informan. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi kelas serta aktivitas sekolah yang relevan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru memaknai moderasi beragama sebagai prinsip keseimbangan antara komitmen keimanan dan toleransi serta perilaku sosial yang menghormati keberagaman. Implementasi moderasi beragama dalam praktik pembelajaran menunjukkan variasi strategi seperti diskusi kontekstual, studi kasus toleransi, dan integrasi nilai moderasi dalam materi ajar. Artikel ini mengusulkan rekomendasi untuk memperkuat kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam yang berpihak pada pembentukan sikap moderat, serta pengembangan pelatihan profesional bagi guru. Implikasi hasil penelitian ini relevan bagi pembuat kebijakan pendidikan Islam dan praktisi kurikulum.

Kata kunci: Pendidikan Agama Islam, moderasi beragama, toleransi, pemahaman peserta didik, guru

INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation has occupied a strategic position in contemporary educational discourse, particularly in countries with high levels of social and religious diversity such as Indonesia. The dynamics of globalization, increasing social mobility, and the acceleration of information flow through digital technology have expanded the space for interaction across identities and beliefs. This condition has significant implications for how individuals understand and express their religiosity in the public sphere. In such a situation, religious moderation becomes an essential competency, both at the individual and social levels, to maintain harmony, prevent conflict, and build constructive relationships between community groups (Smith & Noor, 2021; Yulianti, 2023). Religious moderation is understood as the principle of balance in practicing religious teachings that emphasize tolerance, inclusiveness, and education, without compromising commitment to the values of faith (Rosenthal & Barlas, 2021).

In the Indonesian context, religious moderation has gained strong legitimacy as part of the national agenda in fostering religious life. The diversity of religions, ethnicities, and cultures that characterize Indonesian society requires a religious approach that can bridge differences and promote social cohesion. Therefore, religious moderation is not only positioned as a normative concept, but also as a strategic instrument in national character building (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020). Education is one of the key sectors in the internalization of religious moderation values, because through education these values can be instilled systematically and continuously from an early age to adulthood.

In the realm of formal education, especially Islamic Religious Education (PAI), religious moderation has a very important position. PAI is no longer understood solely as a subject that transmits religious knowledge doctrinally, but as a pedagogical space to shape the perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors of students in responding to diversity. Religious moderation in PAI is positioned as a competency that must be developed through a holistic learning process, covering cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions (Rahman, 2022; Putra, 2024). However, even though religious moderation has been normatively recognized as an important goal of Islamic education, its implementation at the practical level still leaves a number of empirical questions, particularly regarding how PAI teachers understand and translate this concept into their daily pedagogical practices.

Questions regarding PAI teachers' understanding and implementation of religious moderation are crucial, given that teachers are the main actors in the learning process. Teachers not only play a role as conveyors of material, but also as shapers of students' values, attitudes, and religious orientation. The way teachers interpret religious moderation will greatly influence how these values are taught, internalized, and practiced by students. Therefore, a study that explores the perspective of Islamic Religious Education on religious moderation, Islamic Religious Education teachers' understanding of the concept, and its implementation in Islamic schools is relevant and urgent. This

study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of how Islamic Religious Education views religious moderation as a basic principle in shaping students' religious attitudes. In addition, this study also seeks to describe Islamic Education teachers' understanding of religious moderation and identify various forms of implementation of the value of religious moderation in teaching practices in Islamic schools. Thus, this study focuses not only on conceptual aspects but also on the practical dimensions of Islamic education in the context of a pluralistic society.

Theoretically, studies on religious moderation show that this concept stems from efforts to avoid two extremes in religiousness, namely exclusivism, which tends to be closed-minded and reject differences, and relativism, which is too permissive to the point of blurring the boundaries of belief (Rosenthal & Barlas, 2021). Religious moderation is understood as a middle ground that prioritizes a balance between commitment to religious teachings and openness to the reality of social plurality. From this perspective, religious moderation is not a form of theological compromise, but rather an ethical and social approach to expressing religiosity in the public sphere.

Anwar (2020) and Lestari (2023) mention that religious moderation encompasses at least three main aspects, namely strong commitment to faith, tolerance towards differences, and willingness to build interfaith and intergroup dialogue. These three aspects are interrelated and form a complete framework of religious moderation. Commitment to faith is the foundation that maintains an individual's religious identity, tolerance allows individuals to coexist peacefully with others, while dialogue is a means of building mutual understanding and managing differences constructively.

In the context of education, religious moderation has a strategic role in creating a learning environment that respects plurality and encourages the development of students' social awareness. Huda (2021) emphasizes that education oriented towards religious moderation equips students with the ability to understand differences as an inevitable social reality, as well as an opportunity to enrich their perspectives and learning experiences. Such education not only emphasizes cognitive aspects but also shapes attitudes of empathy, justice, and social responsibility.

A number of recent studies also place religious moderation as an important competency in 21st-century education. Safitri and Dewantara (2022) state that amid the complexity of social change, education is required to produce individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also socially and emotionally mature. Religious moderation, in this case, becomes part of the character competency that enables students to respond to differences and conflicts in a mature and constructive manner. A similar view is expressed by Maulana and Siregar (2023), who place religious moderation as part of global citizenship competency, especially in the context of a multicultural society.

Islamic Religious Education, as one of the core subjects in the Indonesian education system, has a major responsibility in internalizing the values of religious moderation. The objectives of PAI are not only limited to mastering Islamic knowledge, but also include

the formation of tolerant, fair, and responsible attitudes in social life (Mansur, 2020). From this perspective, PAI is seen as a strategic means of instilling Islamic values of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, or Islam that brings mercy to all of creation.

The development of a PAI curriculum integrated with the values of religious moderation is one of the keys to the successful internalization of this concept. Arifin and Zahra (2024) show that a PAI curriculum that explicitly includes religious moderation modules can help students understand the importance of living together in diversity. Through a contextual and socially relevant curriculum approach, PAI can play an active role in shaping inclusive and dialogical religious attitudes.

However, various studies in Indonesia also show that the implementation of religious moderation in Islamic education still faces significant challenges. Jamaluddin (2023) and Nugraha (2024) found that there are significant variations in the application of religious moderation values in schools, which are influenced by the institutional context, the background of the students, and the competence of the teachers. In many cases, teachers are a determining factor in the success or failure of the internalization of religious moderation. Teachers who have a comprehensive understanding and an open attitude tend to be able to develop inclusive learning, while teachers' limited understanding can hinder this process.

Based on this description, it can be concluded that studies on religious moderation in Islamic Religious Education need to be placed within a strong and contextual theoretical framework. This study uses the Theory of Religious Moderation developed by Rosenthal and Barlas (2021) as its main analytical basis. This theory views religious moderation as a form of normative mediation between fundamentalism and liberalism, emphasizing three main dimensions, namely strong internal beliefs, an inclusive attitude towards plurality, and a dialogical orientation in social interactions. This theoretical framework is relevant for analyzing how PAI teachers understand and implement religious moderation in learning practices, as well as how these values contribute to the formation of students' religious attitudes in Islamic schools. Thus, this study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of Islamic education oriented towards religious moderation. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on religious moderation in the context of Islamic education. Practically, the findings of this study can be used as a reference for curriculum development, teacher competency improvement, and the formulation of educational policies that support the strengthening of religious moderation in Islamic schools.

METHODS

Research Approach

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the phenomenon of the meaning of religious moderation by PAI teachers in depth. This approach is appropriate for capturing the meaning, experience, and social practices of informants (Creswell, 2022).

Location and Time

The research was conducted at SMA Islam Medan, an Islamic school in East Java, Indonesia. Data collection takes place in August 2025.

Informant and Sampling Techniques

The main informants consisted of three Islamic Religious Education teachers who were selected through snowball sampling techniques. The criteria for informants are teachers who actively teach PAI and are willing to be resource persons.

Table 1. Profile Informa

THEY REPORT	AGE	EDUCATION	TEACHING EXPERIENCE	LONG TEACHING PAI
I1	38	S.Pd.I	12 years	8 years
I2	44	M.Pd	15 years	10 years
I3	35	S.Ag	10 years	7 years

Data Collection Techniques

1. In-Depth Interviews: Conducted with semi-structured guidance on the concepts of religious moderation and learning practices.
2. Participatory Observation: Observations were made in several PAI learning sessions to see the practice of religious moderation in the classroom and school activities.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis uses the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019) model which includes: (1) data reduction, (2) data presentation, and (3) conclusion drawn. The validity of the data was strengthened through source triangulation (interviews and observations).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Islamic Religious Education's View on Religious Moderation

Based on the findings of the interviews, all informants view religious moderation as a very important principle in the context of education. Teacher I1 states:

"Religious moderation for me is how we teach students to remain strong in their Islamic beliefs, but also to be able to respect and cooperate with friends of different faiths." (Interview, August 12, 2025)

Teacher I2 added that religious moderation is the foundation of ethics in the school community:

"Islamic schools are not only about internal religious knowledge, but also about how students can live in harmony in a diverse society. This is the essence of religious moderation." (Interview, August 14, 2025)

Teacher I3 emphasizes the practical aspect:

"In learning, I always include real examples of tolerance and an inclusive attitude, because moderation is not just a theory, but an attitude that must be reflected in students' behavior." (Interview, August 16, 2025)

From classroom observation, the practice of religious moderation can be seen through the use of plurality case studies, group discussions on conflicts and resolutions between religious communities, and students' reflections on the value of tolerance. In one discussion session, students were asked to analyze value conflict scenarios in a pluralistic society and offer moderate solutions.

Understanding of Religious Moderation by PAI Teachers

Teachers' understanding of religious moderation contains three main dimensions:

1. Strong Internal Beliefs

The informant stated that attachment to Islamic teachings is the basis for understanding religious moderation. Teacher I1:

"Before talking about tolerance, students must have a strong understanding of religion, so that tolerance is not understood as relativism." (Interview, August 12, 2025)

This is in accordance with Anwar's (2020) opinion that moderation must be rooted in solid beliefs so as not to lose religious identity.

2. Tolerance for Differences

All informants emphasized the importance of tolerance as the core of religious moderation. Teacher I2:

"Tolerance in the classroom not only respects religious differences, but also respects different viewpoints in moral and social contexts." (Interview, August 14, 2025)

Observations show that teachers actively encourage students to exchange views without judgment, especially in cross-value discussions.

3. Constructive Dialogue and Interaction

Teacher I3 describes the dialogue approach in the classroom:

"I often ask students to discuss in heterogeneous groups about contemporary ethical issues. They learn to listen and respond politely." (Interview, August 16, 2025)

This approach is in line with Huda (2021) who emphasized that dialogue is an important element in religious moderation.

Implementation of Religious Moderation in Learning

Learning Strategies

Some of the strategies that teachers apply in integrating religious moderation are:

- *Contextual Discussion:* Relating teaching materials to real cases of social plurality.

- *Analysis of Religious Texts:* Using verses of the Qur'an and hadith that emphasize tolerance and equality.
- *Individual Reflection:* Students are asked to write a reflection about their tolerance experience.

Observations show productive interactions in the classroom, where students actively discuss practical examples of moderation such as interfaith community service and community social contribution.

Challenges and Obstacles

The informant also identified several obstacles:

- **Heterogeneous Student Perception:** Some students still interpret tolerance superficially as "giving in."
- **Curriculum Time Constraints:** The integration of religious moderation is often hampered by the pressures of a dense curriculum.

Teacher I2 states:

"Sometimes it is difficult to include all the themes of moderation when the curriculum material is very strict on the traditional PAI syllabus." (Interview, August 14, 2025).

DISCUSSION

Religious Moderation as a Key Competency in Islamic Education

The results of this study confirm that religious moderation is understood by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers as a multidimensional competency that includes strong religious beliefs, tolerance towards differences, and the ability to engage in constructive dialogue. This understanding shows that religious moderation is not interpreted as a compromise of Islamic principles, but rather as a proportional and balanced way of practicing religion in a diverse social life. In the context of Islamic education, religious moderation serves as a bridge between the formation of students' religious identity and the demands of peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society.

This finding is in line with the views of Rosenthal and Barlas (2021), who place religious moderation as a form of normative mediation between exclusive and inclusive attitudes, where individuals hold on to strong internal beliefs without denying the existence and rights of others. PAI teachers in this study emphasized that a deep understanding of religion is a key prerequisite for the development of moderate attitudes. Students with a solid theological foundation tend to be more open-minded, less reactive to differences, and less easily provoked by extreme religious narratives. Religious moderation as a key competency is also relevant to the 21st-century education paradigm, which emphasizes character development, social literacy, and life skills.

Safitri and Dewantara (2022) state that pluralistic education requires a pedagogical approach that not only transmits knowledge but also shapes attitudes and values that

enable students to live harmoniously in diversity. In this framework, religious moderation functions as a socio-religious competency that helps students navigate differences in beliefs, cultures, and worldviews in a mature and responsible manner.

Furthermore, Maulana and Siregar (2023) argue that religious moderation is part of global citizenship competencies that need to be developed through formal education. The findings of this study reinforce this argument by showing that PAI teachers view religious moderation as a long-term goal of Islamic education, not just an additional theme in the curriculum. Teachers strive to instill the value of moderation through contextual, reflective, and dialogical learning processes, so that students not only understand the concept of tolerance cognitively but also internalize it in their daily attitudes and behaviors.

Thus, religious moderation in Islamic education can be positioned as an integrative key competency, connecting theological, pedagogical, and social dimensions. This competency is the foundation for the formation of a Muslim generation that is religious, inclusive, and contributes positively to society. These findings reinforce the literature that places Islamic education as a strategic arena in efforts to build a culture of peace and social cohesion amid diversity.

The Role of Teachers as Agents of Moderation

The role of PAI teachers in this study is not limited to delivering teaching materials, but also as agents of moderation who actively shape students' perspectives and attitudes towards diversity. Teachers are positioned as facilitators of dialogue, mediators of values, and role models in the practice of religious moderation. These findings confirm that the success of internalizing religious moderation is highly dependent on the capacity of teachers to manage an inclusive and reflective learning process. As facilitators of dialogue, PAI teachers encourage students to discuss religious and social issues openly, critically, and with mutual respect.

Class discussions are not directed at winning a particular point of view, but rather at training students to understand diversity of perspectives and build ethical arguments. This practice is in line with Jamaluddin's (2023) view that teachers are key actors in building spaces for dialogue in schools, especially in the context of religious education, which is often sensitive to differences in interpretation and belief. In addition to being facilitators of dialogue, teachers also play a role in sparking reflection on values. Teachers in this study consistently linked PAI teaching materials to the social realities faced by students, such as issues of tolerance, identity-based conflicts, and cross-group cooperation. Through a reflective approach, students were invited to evaluate their own attitudes and views and to understand the ethical implications of religious teachings in real life.

This approach reinforces the function of Islamic education as a vehicle for character building and moral awareness. The role of teachers as agents of moderation is also reflected in their exemplary attitudes. Teachers not only teach religious moderation verbally, but also practice it in their daily interactions with students and colleagues. The

open, fair, and respectful attitudes demonstrated by teachers serve as concrete models for students in understanding how religious moderation is manifested in action. This supports previous research findings that emphasize the importance of teacher role modeling in values education (Rahman, 2022).

However, the strategic role of teachers as agents of moderation also faces various challenges. Teachers are required to have adequate pedagogical competence, comprehensive religious understanding, and high social sensitivity. An imbalance in any of these aspects has the potential to hinder the effectiveness of the internalization of religious moderation. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity is an important prerequisite in optimizing their role as agents of social change through Islamic education.

Curriculum and Teacher Training in Strengthening Religious Moderation

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of religious moderation in Islamic schools still faces structural obstacles, particularly related to the curriculum and professional development of teachers. Although teachers have a relatively good understanding of religious moderation, limited space in the curriculum often hinders the systematic and sustainable integration of moderate values. Religious moderation is often implicitly inserted into teaching materials, without explicit and structured curriculum guidance. Putra (2024) emphasizes that strengthening religious moderation in education requires a curriculum design that clearly includes moderation competencies as learning outcomes.

A curriculum that is responsive to diversity issues needs to provide space for critical discussion, case-based learning, and reflection on values relevant to the social context of students. The findings of this study reinforce this argument by showing that teachers need a supportive curriculum framework so that efforts to internalize religious moderation do not depend entirely on individual initiatives. In addition to strengthening the curriculum, professional teacher training is a crucial aspect in the development of religious moderation. PAI teachers need training that not only deepens their theological understanding but also equips them with effective pedagogical strategies for teaching the values of moderation. Training based on value pedagogy, dialogic learning, and inclusive classroom management can increase teachers' capacity to manage diversity in the school environment.

Furthermore, teacher training also needs to pay attention to contemporary dynamics, such as the influence of digital media and religious narratives in the public sphere. Today's students are exposed to a variety of religious information from diverse sources, including social media, which does not always present moderate perspectives. In this context, PAI teachers play the role of critical mentors who help students sort through information and build a balanced understanding of religion. Strengthening digital literacy and religious literacy is an integral part of religious moderation training for teachers. Overall, the results of this study confirm that the successful strengthening of religious moderation in Islamic education requires a systemic approach involving the curriculum, teachers, and education

policy. Religious moderation cannot be treated as an incidental theme, but rather as a core competency that is designed, taught, and evaluated on an ongoing basis. With the support of a clear curriculum and adequate teacher training, Islamic education has great potential to be at the forefront of building a religious, tolerant, and harmonious society amid diversity.

CONCLUSION

Islamic religious education in Islamic schools views religious moderation as a fundamental principle that balances between strengthening religious beliefs and developing tolerant attitudes in pluralistic social life. Religious moderation is not interpreted as a reduction in commitment to Islamic teachings, but rather as a proportionate and balanced way of religion, so that students are able to carry out their religious teachings consistently while respecting the existence and rights of others. In this context, Islamic Religious Education serves as a strategic vehicle to form religious awareness that is inclusive, dialogical, and relevant to the reality of a multicultural society.

Islamic Religious Education teachers understand religious moderation through three main dimensions, namely internal beliefs, tolerance for differences, and constructive dialogue. Internal beliefs are seen as the main foundation that allows students to have a strong religious identity and not be easily influenced by extreme beliefs. Tolerance for differences is understood as the ability to respect a diversity of beliefs, views, and social practices without sacrificing the principles of religious teachings. Meanwhile, constructive dialogue is positioned as a means to build mutual understanding, manage differences peacefully, and foster mutual respect in social interactions. These three dimensions are interrelated and form a complete framework for understanding religious moderation in Islamic education.

The implementation of religious moderation in Islamic Religious Education learning is realized through various pedagogic strategies, such as contextual discussions, socio-religious case analysis, reflection on values, and integration of teaching materials with the reality of students' lives. Through this strategy, teachers try to instill the value of moderation in an applicative and meaningful way. However, this practice still faces a number of challenges, especially the limited space in the curriculum and the variation in students' level of understanding of the concept of religious moderation. This challenge shows the need to strengthen the curriculum and improve the competence of teachers so that religious moderation can be internalized more systematically and sustainably in Islamic education.

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