

## POLICIES AND PRACTICES RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN PESANTREN

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Received: July, 2024. Accepted: September, 2024. Published: December, 2024.

### ABSTRACT

*Pesantren* holds a significant position in Indonesia's educational system, functioning as key institutions for religious education and cultural preservation. This study aims to examine the implementation of religious moderation policies within *pesantren* to encourage interfaith understanding and collaboration among diverse religious groups in Indonesia. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research gathered data from interviews, surveys, and document analysis across a range of *pesantren* in Indonesia. Findings reveal multiple initiatives to foster religious moderation, including incorporating interfaith education into curricula, enhancing students' critical thinking skills, and promoting gender equality practices. These efforts have been met with successes and challenges; while students benefit from a broader perspective, obstacles such as resource limitations, cultural norms, and resistance to change were notable. This study underscores the vital role of *pesantren* in promoting religious moderation, which is crucial for nurturing understanding and peace among Indonesia's religious communities. These findings offer meaningful insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders on advancing religious tolerance and empathy within Islamic education, supporting the development of a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Islamic Education, Pesantren, Religious Moderation

### INTRODUCTION

*Pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) holds a significant position within Indonesia's educational landscape, serving as cornerstones of Islamic education and cultural preservation (Mubarok, 2020). As the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, *pesantren* has played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's socio-religious fabric. These institutions embody a unique blend of tradition and innovation, maintaining indigenous educational models rooted in local culture and Islamic teachings while adapting to modern challenges (Septiadi, 2023). Their diverse physical structures and curricula categorize them into classical (*salafiyah*), modern (*khalaf* or *asriyah*), and comprehensive models, reflecting their ability to cater to varying educational needs.

Central to *pesantren's* identity are five core components: mosques, kyai (religious leaders), student dormitories, students, and the recitation of foundational Islamic texts, such as the yellow book. These elements collectively foster a holistic educational environment that integrates spiritual, academic, and communal growth. Beyond serving as centers of religious learning, *pesantren* also acts as dynamic hubs for cultural preservation and community engagement, balancing the preservation of Islamic traditions with contemporary educational practices.

Despite their critical role, *pesantren* faces significant challenges, including educational disparities and radicalization concerns. Unequal distribution of resources, particularly digital infrastructure, exacerbates these issues (Nikmatullah et al., 2023; Prayoga, 2019; Jima'ain, 2023). Moreover, some *pesantren* struggle to internalize the concept of religious moderation promoted by the Ministry of Religion due to limited access to materials such as digital content and religious moderation handbooks (Anwar et al., 2022). Additionally, isolated instances of radicalization within *pesantren* communities pose further threats to their mission of fostering moderation and

inclusivity (Armenia, 2016; Rufus, 2022).

The rise of terrorism in Indonesia, often linked to radical ideologies, underscores the urgent need for *pesantren* to champion religious moderation (Usman et al., 2014). Incidents like the 2002 Bali Bombing and the 2021 Makassar Cathedral Church Suicide Bombing highlight the consequences of extremism. Although these events are not exclusively tied to *pesantren*, they demonstrate the critical role of *pesantren* graduates in promoting tolerance and countering radicalism. Embedding religious moderation within *pesantren* curricula is essential to nurturing harmonious interfaith relations and fostering a more tolerant society.

While studies by Sutrisno (2019), Hefni (2020), Akhmadi (2019), and Faisal (2020) have explored religious moderation from various angles, such as digital manifestations and diversity management, there is a lack of research on how education system management in *pesantren* can strengthen religious moderation. This gap highlights the need to examine the management of *pesantren* education systems as a means of promoting moderation. Addressing this gap is crucial for identifying effective strategies to enhance *pesantren*'s role in cultivating tolerance. This study addresses the research gap by proposing an innovative educational framework designed to strengthen the culture of religious moderation within *pesantren*. Drawing from insights by the Ministry of Religion and scholars like Fazlur Rahman, the research integrates policy, curriculum design, and educational management practices tailored to *pesantren*. By offering practical solutions, this study aims to advance the discourse on religious education in Indonesia, providing a model for fostering tolerance and harmony in Islamic educational settings.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the promotion and practice of religious moderation in *pesantren*. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Guided by the wasatiyah (middle-path) framework, the research emphasized principles of balance, tolerance, and contextual adaptability. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including H. Jajang Apipudin, M.Ag. (Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Sumedang), K.H. Muslim Mubarak, M.Ag. (Head of Pondok Pesantren al-Majidiyah), the Head of the Education and Religious Affairs Section in Cilacap, and representatives of Pondok Pesantren Darussalam, Cilacap. Their insights highlighted how *pesantren* traditions align with religious moderation, blending theological balance with societal engagement. Observations further showcased practical applications of moderation in *pesantren*, such as curricula promoting tolerance, participation in programs like Magrib Mengaji, and interfaith dialogue initiatives.

The study integrated case study and literature review methods to deepen the analysis, supplemented by focus group discussions as outlined by Hennink (2013). These discussions provided thematic insights into education management and the adaptation of religious moderation frameworks in *pesantren*. The research employed systematic analysis using Dunn's (2003) policy analysis framework, Corbin and Strauss's (2014) memo-writing techniques, and Miles and Huberman's analysis matrix to ensure data reliability and validity. The Policy Implementation Framework by Sabatier & Mazmanian, (1980) was applied to evaluate how religious moderation policies are translated into practice, focusing on clarity of policy objectives, the implementation environment, and external influences. By prioritizing verifiable data sources, such as government documents and institutional records, the study illuminated the Ministry of Religion's efforts to embed religious moderation within *pesantren* education. These efforts align with Fazlur Rahman's modernist principles, fostering tolerance, balanced education, and effective educational management systems.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we present the results of our investigation into the implementation of religious moderation policies and practices within *pesantren* in Indonesia. Through a comprehensive analysis of data collected from interviews, surveys, and document analysis, we aim to provide insights into the various initiatives undertaken by *pesantren* to promote religious moderation, as well as the challenges encountered in this endeavor.

### Pesantren and Religious Moderation

*Pesantren*, a cornerstone of the Indonesian education system, consists of approximately 28,000 institutions nationwide (Dasmadi & Syamsiyah, 2021). Traditionally emphasizing religious education through the study of Islamic texts, practices, and traditions, these institutions now recognize the growing necessity of promoting religious moderation policies. This effort is pivotal for enhancing understanding and collaboration among Indonesia's diverse religious communities, ensuring harmony and inclusivity within society.

#### Islamic Education System

Islamic education, grounded in the teachings of Islam, plays a pivotal role in shaping the spiritual and intellectual development of Muslims worldwide (Sahin, 2018). The primary goal of Islamic education is to nurture a profound faith among students while equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for leading meaningful and successful lives. Rooted in the Quran and Hadith, Islamic education encompasses a comprehensive understanding of Islamic theology, ethics, law, and spirituality (Almoharby & Neal, 2013). These sacred texts serve as guiding principles, shaping the curriculum and educational practices within Islamic institutions. In essence, Islamic education serves as a cornerstone for fostering religious devotion and academic excellence, ensuring that students are not only grounded in their faith but also prepared to navigate the complexities of the modern world with wisdom and integrity.

Islamic education encompasses a holistic approach that extends beyond religious teachings to encompass moral values, societal norms, and personal development. In addition to imparting religious knowledge, Islamic education instills in students a deep appreciation for their faith and fosters respect for the beliefs and customs of others. It emphasizes the importance of honesty, fairness, and justice, guiding students to lead purposeful and meaningful lives (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012). This educational journey often begins in the home, where parents and family members introduce children to the fundamentals of Islamic beliefs and practices (T'soraya et al., 2022). Subsequently, as children progress in their education, they attend Islamic schools or madrasahs, where they receive formal instruction in various aspects of Islamic studies, such as Quranic recitation, Hadith, Islamic history, and jurisprudence. By fostering a comprehensive understanding of Islamic principles and values, Islamic education equips students with the tools necessary to navigate the complexities of contemporary society while remaining grounded in their faith and committed to ethical conduct.

Islamic education advocates for the pursuit of knowledge across diverse fields, promoting a well-rounded understanding of the world. This study's findings, based on interviews and observations in various *pesantren*, affirm that the tradition of religious moderation (*wasatiyah*) is deeply embedded in the ethos of Islamic education in Indonesia. Islamic teachings in *pesantren* encompass not only religious studies but also broader disciplines, encouraging critical thinking and tolerance (Muslim Mubarak, personal communication, July 2023). Observations reveal that *pesantren* curricula prioritize balanced approaches to theology, jurisprudence, and ethics, fostering intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth in students. Programs like *Magrib Mengaji*, initiated by local governments, further underscore the collaborative efforts between *pesantren* and authorities to promote religious moderation, enhance understanding, and address societal challenges. By integrating holistic learning with cultural practices rooted in moderation, Islamic

education in *pesantren* equips students with the knowledge and values needed to contribute positively to their communities. Thus, the findings reaffirm that Islamic education serves as a guiding beacon, illuminating the path toward intellectual growth, moral integrity, and spiritual enlightenment, while instilling a profound sense of responsibility to utilize knowledge and talents for the betterment of humanity.

Extremism often arises from a narrow and literal interpretation of religious teachings, leading individuals to become ensnared in the ideologies of fanatical groups. Research by Usman et al. (2014) indicates that the propagation of extremist sentiments is fueled by a textual understanding of religion, perpetuated through information disseminated on social media platforms. Similarly, Khamid's findings in 2016 echo this sentiment, highlighting how terrorism propaganda predominantly stems from the literal interpretations of certain segments of society, influenced by textual content circulated on social media. This phenomenon is exacerbated by factors such as limited access to comprehensive information and low levels of education among the Indonesian populace. Furthermore, economic hardships and political instability contribute to a pervasive sense of disillusionment within society, leading to a lack of trust in governmental and religious institutions. The emergence of terrorism thus becomes a manifestation of societal grievances and distrust, rather than solely rooted in religious ideology.

In response to the challenges posed by extremism, there has been a concerted effort to promote religious moderation within Islamic education institutions, particularly *pesantren*. These schools, exemplified by the salaf model, aim to negotiate Islamic identity by presenting a moderate and peaceful interpretation of Islam (Setia & Rahman, 2022; Susilo & Dalimunthe, 2019). Drawing from the Quran, Hadith, and interpretations of previous scholars, these institutions emphasize a balanced approach to religious practice, focusing on worship, independence, and simplicity. The Ministry of Religion has endorsed this approach by framing religious moderation as a key initiative to prevent acts of terrorism and other crimes stemming from misunderstandings or differing interpretations of religion. By promoting religious moderation as a central tenet of Islamic education, these institutions and initiatives aim to counteract extremist ideologies and foster a climate of tolerance and peace within society.

### **Education Management in Pesantren**

Strategic long-term planning is vital for the sustainable development of *pesantren*, enabling focused growth in both infrastructure and educational programs. By adopting rational-ideal frameworks, *pesantren* can achieve purposeful outcomes beyond ad-hoc approaches. Collaboration with alumni, experts, scholars, sponsors, and community leaders is integral to the formulation and acceptance of long-term plans (RENSTRA), ensuring alignment with community needs and widespread support. K.H. Muslim Mubarak, M.Ag., leader of Pondok Pesantren Al-Majidiyah, emphasized the importance of regular consultations with alumni and stakeholders, noting that annual meetings help align strategic goals with both internal aspirations and external realities. This inclusive process fosters stakeholder ownership, enhancing the feasibility and success of long-term initiatives while guiding the development of annual activities to achieve sustained excellence (Fathurrochman et al., 2020; personal communication, July 2023).

The structural framework of *pesantren*, strengthened by constitutional amendments enacted in 2001 and 2004, offers these institutions a platform to align their management practices with contemporary standards (Kosim et al., 2023). This modern evolution emphasizes scientific and ethical management principles, particularly in optimizing human resource placement and empowerment. Effective staffing strategies ensure individuals are assigned roles matching their skills and competencies, while continuous professional development through training and coaching programs fosters ongoing improvement (Bashori, 2022). However,

managing Islamic boarding schools as private educational institutions presents unique challenges, such as balancing traditional values with modern management practices. Addressing these challenges may involve adopting incentive mechanisms, such as promotions and transfers, to encourage professional growth. Additionally, practices like rotating or transferring management roles not only act as disciplinary measures but also provide opportunities for organizational rejuvenation and capacity building.

Observations at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam in Cilacap reveal the practical implementation of leadership rotations as a strategic organizational tool. The administrative head emphasized that these rotations go beyond discipline, functioning as mechanisms for knowledge transfer and skill enhancement among staff members. This approach aligns with Bashori's (2022) advocacy for dynamic and adaptable management structures within educational settings. By integrating modern management principles with adaptive practices, *pesantren* can foster a culture of excellence, ensuring the continuous development of their educational environment. Such efforts enrich the learning experience for students while enhancing the professional satisfaction and growth of staff members, ultimately securing *pesantren*'s relevance and effectiveness in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

Meetings are a cornerstone of collective decision-making and formal direction within *pesantren*, facilitating movement and aligning institutional objectives (Marjanovic-Shane et al., 2023). These gatherings are typically categorized as plenary, coordination, or special meetings, offering dynamic forums for discussion and resolution. Leadership can also initiate movement through directives, though such measures are reserved for critical situations requiring alignment with *pesantren* principles (Trinova et al., 2022). Beyond formal methods, movement is fostered through coaching, inspiration, and other informal strategies. An observed coordination meeting at Pondok Pesantren Al-Majidiyah demonstrated the effectiveness of these forums in achieving staff alignment, focusing on the implementation of Magrib Mengaji, a program promoting religious moderation as part of their community engagement initiatives. This example underscores the role of collective decision-making in driving *pesantren* programs while highlighting the flexibility and adaptability required to accommodate cultural and organizational factors.

Control and supervision are critical management functions that ensure actual outcomes align with planned objectives, typically involving the review of routine reports such as quarterly, semester, or annual accountability reports (LPJ), focusing on program implementation and budget adherence. Non-formal methods, including activities outside meetings and formal programs, may also be employed as necessary, and in some cases, covert control measures are used (Kovacova & Lăzăroiu, 2021). These practices are essential for maintaining accountability and ensuring effective implementation within Islamic boarding schools, offering flexibility to address deviations from established goals. The Ministry of Religious Affairs emphasizes the importance of regular evaluations using tools like key performance indicators (KPIs) and periodic reviews to maintain strategic alignment (Kementerian Agama, 2020; 2023). At Pondok Pesantren Darussalam, routine evaluations are conducted each semester, with reports submitted to the local Ministry of Religious Affairs office, reflecting Kovacova & Lăzăroiu's (2021) recommendations for effective control mechanisms.

### Religious Moderation Policies in Pesantren

*Pesantren* is vital to Indonesia's education system, with approximately 28,000 operating across the country (Dasmadi & Syamsiyah, 2021). Traditionally focused on Islamic education, these institutions have increasingly acknowledged the need to promote religious moderation. Fostering religious moderation in *pesantren* is essential for enhancing understanding and cooperation among diverse religious communities, promoting harmony and inclusivity in

Indonesian society. Thus, *pesantren* plays a critical role in fostering a more tolerant and inclusive society through the implementation of religious moderation policies.

One key initiative for promoting religious moderation in *pesantren* is interfaith education (Ramdhani et al., 2021). Many *pesantren* have introduced programs aimed at facilitating dialogue among students from different religious backgrounds, helping to dismantle stereotypes and promote shared values. These interfaith initiatives help cultivate mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation. In this context, interfaith education is a crucial measure to advance religious moderation, fostering empathy and compassion among students from diverse religious communities.

Critical thinking and analysis of religious texts is another essential strategy for promoting religious moderation (Syahri, 2022). *Pesantren* is encouraged to develop students' ability to question assumptions and engage in nuanced interpretations of religious teachings. This approach helps students develop a reasoned understanding of religion, moving beyond dogma and promoting peaceful coexistence. Additionally, many *pesantren* have integrated peace education and conflict resolution programs to equip students with skills for non-violent coexistence, further advancing religious moderation.

The Indonesian government has also supported initiatives aimed at fostering religious moderation within *pesantren* (Razak & Mundzir, 2019). Programs like the *Pesantren Plus* initiative seek to enhance access to education while promoting interfaith understanding and gender equality. Several *pesantren* have implemented programs to empower women, such as encouraging women's education and entrepreneurship, aligned with gender-sensitive Islamic teachings. These initiatives reflect a broader effort to integrate religious moderation policies within the educational framework.

Based on interviews and observations at Pondok Pesantren Al-Majidiyah, it is clear that gender equality and women's empowerment are significant priorities in *pesantren* curricula. As K.H. Muslim Mubarak, M.Ag stated, gender equality is now integrated into the curriculum to create a more inclusive environment (personal communication, July 2023). Female students at Pondok Pesantren Al-Majidiyah actively participate in programs like entrepreneurship workshops, demonstrating the success of these initiatives in promoting empowerment and self-sufficiency. Overall, the integration of religious moderation policies through interfaith education, critical thinking, and gender equality initiatives plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive religious practices among students (Pranyoto, 2022). These policies help create a safe and supportive learning environment where students can engage with diverse worldviews. By promoting tolerance, peace, and non-violence, *pesantren* contribute to a more harmonious society, fostering mutual respect and cooperation among students from various religious backgrounds.

### **Islamic Religious Modernization**

Islamic religious modernization is a dynamic process that adapts Islamic beliefs, practices, and institutions to contemporary contexts while preserving core principles (Husna & Thohir, 2020; Supriatin, & Nasution, 2017)). This process includes reinterpreting traditional Islamic teachings in light of modern knowledge and addressing challenges posed by modernity (Bushra & Pakeeza, 2022). One critical aspect of modernization is integrating new technologies and methodologies into the study and dissemination of Islamic knowledge. Digital media, social platforms, and communication tools expand outreach and engagement, while innovative teaching methods enhance learning experiences. As noted by H. Jajang Apipudin, M.Ag., Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Sumedang, "The use of technology in *pesantren* has been transformative, allowing students to access broader resources while staying grounded in traditional Islamic values" (Jajang, personal communication, 2023). At Pondok Pesantren Al-

Majidiyah, the incorporation of online learning modules and interactive classes has significantly improved student participation and understanding of Islamic studies.

A crucial element of Islamic religious modernization is the reevaluation of traditional institutions and practices, such as women's roles, the relationship between religion and politics, and interpretations of Islamic law (Sharia) (Ibrahim, 2022). This process involves engaging in critical dialogue with diverse perspectives, including secular and non-Muslim viewpoints, to foster a more inclusive understanding of Islam (Hefner, 2020). Modernization also requires addressing contemporary challenges like globalization, terrorism, and human rights concerns, demanding introspection and critical thinking within Islamic communities. At Pondok Pesantren Darussalam, leaders emphasized the importance of critical discussions on current events, stating that "students are encouraged to debate and critically analyze contemporary issues through an Islamic lens." This approach fosters an inclusive environment where diverse opinions are respected and constructively engaged. Ultimately, Islamic religious modernization is an ongoing journey that harmonizes tradition with the demands of modernity, ensuring Islam's continued relevance and vitality in today's world.

### **Practical Application of Religious Moderation Policies**

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### **CONCLUSION**

This study has illuminated the importance of implementing religious moderation policies within *pesantren* in Indonesia. Through initiatives such as interfaith education, critical thinking promotion, peaceful coexistence practices, and efforts to enhance gender equality and women's

rights, pesantren have emerged as pivotal institutions in fostering greater understanding and cooperation among diverse religious communities. By acknowledging the significance of promoting religious tolerance and empathy within educational settings, this study underscores the critical role of *pesantren* in nurturing a more inclusive and harmonious society. Moreover, the findings highlight the need for continued efforts to advance religious moderation policies and initiatives within *pesantren*, ultimately contributing to the creation of a more peaceful and prosperous Indonesia where mutual respect and cooperation among individuals of various religious backgrounds prevail. Moving forward, it is imperative for policymakers, educational institutions, and community leaders to prioritize the implementation of religious moderation policies and sustain efforts aimed at promoting interreligious understanding and cooperation within *pesantren*.

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