

Religious moderation from the plains of the land of a seribu suluk: phenomenological experience from pesantren in Rokan Hulu Riau

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Abstract: The expanding discourse on religious moderation in Indonesia has positioned Islamic educational institutions—particularly pesantren—as pivotal actors in cultivating balanced religious outlooks. Despite their historical role in fostering *ummattan wasathan* (a just and moderate community), pesantren are frequently problematized within public narratives as potential loci of radicalism, especially in regions such as Riau, which is often associated with relatively low levels of religious tolerance. This study aims to examine and conceptualize the model of religious moderation as practiced in pesantren, and to contribute to the development of Islamic Religious Education discourse grounded in empirical realities. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research draws on data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, documentation, and literature review. The study focuses on two pesantren with supplementary insights from key stakeholders within the local Ministry of Religious Affairs. The findings demonstrate that pesantren in Rokan Hulu have substantively operationalized the principles of religious moderation, with no indication of radical or extremist orientations. The four core indicators—national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and accommodation of local culture—are generally well embedded in institutional practices. However, the dimension of cultural accommodation requires further reinforcement to enhance contextual engagement and community acceptance. These practices are underpinned by foundational Islamic ethical values, including *tawasuth* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), *‘adl* (justice), and *tasamuh* (tolerance). This study is limited to two pesantren within a specific regional context, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, it offers important implications for policymakers, educators, and scholars by highlighting the need to strengthen culturally responsive moderation practices within Islamic education. This study provides an original phenomenological account of religious moderation grounded in the lived experiences of pesantren communities in a socio-culturally distinctive region. It advances the scholarly conversation by integrating local Islamic traditions with contemporary moderation frameworks, thereby offering a nuanced model for fostering inclusive and contextually relevant Islamic education.

Keywords: Religious moderation, pesantren education, ethical-religious consciousness, cultural-spiritual integration, phenomenological approach

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Introduction

The intensifying global and national discourse on religious moderation has rendered it a critical agenda within contemporary Islamic education, particularly in Islamic boarding schools

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(pesantren), which are increasingly positioned as strategic agents in cultivating inclusive and balanced religious worldviews (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022; Tambak et al., 2025; Firdaus et al., 2025; Rasyidi et al., 2025). The urgency of this study is grounded in the need to empirically interrogate how religious moderation is not merely theorized but enacted within lived educational practices, especially amid rising concerns over ideological polarization and religious contestation in plural societies (Arifianto, 2021; Hefner, 2021; Rahman, 2022). In this regard, pesantren are expected to function not only as centers of religious transmission but also as transformative spaces where values of coexistence, inclusivity, and civic responsibility are cultivated among students (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Tan, 2023). Furthermore, the increasing visibility of identity-based conflicts and digital religious contestations amplifies the strategic importance of pesantren in shaping resilient and moderate Muslim subjectivities (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). At the same time, the institutional diversity of pesantren across Indonesia requires contextually grounded inquiries that go beyond generalizations and capture localized expressions of moderation (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Therefore, a deeper empirical investigation is essential to understand how pesantren negotiate doctrinal teachings and social realities in fostering sustainable models of religious moderation (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that pesantren possess a historically embedded capacity to transmit moderate Islamic values through integrated curricular, cultural, and spiritual traditions that emphasize *wasathiyah* (moderation), ethical formation, and communal harmony (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Tan, 2023). These traditions are often institutionalized through classical text studies, communal rituals, and kyai-centered authority structures that reinforce moral discipline and social cohesion (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022). However, contemporary studies also reveal a growing tension between traditional pesantren epistemologies and external socio-political narratives that often frame Islamic educational institutions as potential incubators of exclusivism or radicalism (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). Such representations are frequently shaped by selective cases and global security discourses, which may not accurately reflect the internal dynamics of pesantren life (Arifianto, 2021; Hefner, 2021; Rahman, 2022). This disjuncture calls for more grounded and empirically robust studies that can critically reassess prevailing assumptions about pesantren and religious moderation (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Accordingly, revisiting pesantren through a nuanced analytical lens becomes crucial to reposition them within broader debates on Islam, education, and social cohesion (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

The cultural dimension of pesantren further enriches this discourse, as these institutions are not merely educational entities but also socio-cultural hubs that negotiate Islamic teachings with local wisdom, rituals, and indigenous traditions, thereby producing contextually grounded expressions of Islam (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). This dynamic interaction enables pesantren to function as mediating institutions that bridge scriptural orthodoxy and lived cultural practices within diverse Muslim communities (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Tan, 2023). In regions such as Rokan Hulu—popularly known as the “Land of a Thousand Suluk”—the intertwining of Sufi traditions, local Malay culture, and pesantren education presents a unique cultural ecosystem for examining how moderation is embodied and transmitted (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). The strong influence of *tarekat* practices and communal religious rituals further reinforces values of spirituality, tolerance, and social harmony within the local educational landscape (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022). Moreover, the integration of local cultural symbols into pesantren pedagogy reflects an adaptive strategy that enhances the relevance and acceptance of Islamic teachings in society (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Thus, examining pesantren within this culturally embedded framework provides a richer understanding of how moderation is lived and experienced in specific socio-cultural contexts (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

Nevertheless, the Indonesian context continues to face significant challenges, as empirical reports indicate that certain provinces, including Riau, exhibit relatively low levels of religious tolerance, thereby reinforcing public suspicion toward Islamic institutions, including pesantren (Setara Institute, 2022; Wahid Foundation, 2023; PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2023). This condition reflects

broader socio-political dynamics, including identity politics, digital misinformation, and uneven educational access, which collectively shape public perceptions of religion and tolerance (Arifianto, 2021; Hefner, 2021; Rahman, 2022). Consequently, pesantren are often placed in a paradoxical position, where they are simultaneously expected to promote moderation while being scrutinized as potential sites of radicalization (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). This paradox—between the normative ideal of pesantren as guardians of moderation and their contested public image—necessitates rigorous, context-sensitive inquiry to disentangle perception from lived reality (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Without such inquiry, policy interventions and public discourse risk being based on incomplete or distorted understandings of Islamic education (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Tan, 2023). Therefore, empirical studies grounded in specific local contexts are essential to provide balanced and evidence-based insights into the role of pesantren in promoting religious moderation (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

Despite the growing body of research on religious moderation in Islamic education, a critical gap remains in phenomenological investigations that foreground the lived experiences, internal practices, and meaning-making processes of pesantren actors, particularly in culturally distinctive regions such as Rokan Hulu (Huda et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Tan, 2023). Most existing studies tend to privilege normative frameworks, policy analyses, or macro-level discussions, while insufficiently examining how moderation is operationalized and negotiated in everyday pedagogical and socio-religious practices (Ismail et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the comparative dynamics between different pesantren typologies, such as modernist and salafiyah models, in shaping diverse expressions of moderation (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). This gap highlights the need for approaches that capture subjective experiences, institutional cultures, and localized interpretations of Islamic teachings (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). A phenomenological lens is particularly relevant in this regard, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how actors perceive, interpret, and enact moderation within their lived realities (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). Hence, addressing this gap is crucial for advancing a more comprehensive and grounded understanding of religious moderation in Islamic education (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022).

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological approach that seeks to uncover the lived realities of religious moderation within pesantren, integrating local cultural dimensions, institutional practices, and ethical values into a coherent analytical framework (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). By focusing on two contrasting models of pesantren—Darussalam and Al-Royyan—this study offers a nuanced comparative insight into how different educational traditions (modernist and salafiyah) negotiate and embody moderation in practice (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). This comparative design enables the identification of both convergences and divergences in moderation practices across institutional contexts (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Tan, 2023). In addition, the study contributes to bridging the gap between normative discourse and empirical reality by grounding theoretical concepts in lived experiences (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). The integration of cultural, pedagogical, and ethical dimensions further strengthens the analytical depth of this research (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). Thus, the study offers both theoretical enrichment and practical relevance for the advancement of Islamic education and religious moderation discourse (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to: (1) explore and conceptualize the model of religious moderation as practiced in pesantren in Rokan Hulu Regency; and (2) contribute to the scholarly development of Islamic Religious Education by providing an empirically grounded, culturally embedded account of moderation practices within pesantren. The focus of the study is directed toward understanding how the principles of national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and cultural accommodation are internalized and enacted within pesantren life-worlds, thereby positioning these institutions as key actors in advancing inclusive and moderate Islam in Indonesia. Furthermore, the study seeks to examine the interplay between institutional traditions and local cultural dynamics in shaping moderation practices. It also aims to generate a conceptual

model that can inform policy and pedagogical strategies in Islamic education. By doing so, the research aspires to contribute to both academic scholarship and practical interventions in promoting sustainable religious moderation. Ultimately, this study positions pesantren as vital agents in fostering a more inclusive, tolerant, and culturally grounded Islamic future in Indonesia.

Literature Review

Religious moderation and *wasathiyah* in Islamic education

Religious moderation (*wasathiyah*) has emerged as a central paradigm in contemporary Islamic education, emphasizing balance, justice, and inclusivity as foundational ethical principles (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022). Within this framework, moderation is not merely understood as a theological construct but as a lived ethos that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions in educational praxis (Ismail et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Tan, 2023). Scholars argue that Islamic educational institutions play a strategic role in internalizing these values through structured curricula, hidden curricula, and socio-religious interactions (Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023; Latif, 2021). Moreover, the concept of *ummattan wasathan* is frequently invoked to articulate the ideal Muslim community that embodies equilibrium between tradition and modernity (Arifianto, 2021; Hefner, 2021; Hosen, 2023). Recent studies also highlight that moderation serves as a counter-narrative to extremism by promoting dialogical engagement, tolerance, and civic responsibility (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Woodward et al., 2022). Consequently, religious moderation has become both an academic discourse and a policy priority in shaping the future of Islamic education in plural societies (Setara Institute, 2022; Wahid Foundation, 2023; PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2023).

From a pedagogical perspective, the operationalization of religious moderation requires integrative approaches that connect doctrinal teachings with contextual realities and lived experiences (Ismail et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Tan, 2023). This involves not only formal instruction but also the cultivation of ethical dispositions through daily practices, role modeling, and institutional culture (Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023; Latif, 2021). Furthermore, the incorporation of local wisdom and cultural traditions into Islamic education has been identified as a key strategy in fostering contextualized moderation (Woodward et al., 2022; Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022). However, challenges remain in translating abstract concepts of moderation into concrete pedagogical practices that resonate with diverse student backgrounds (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). Scholars also emphasize the need for empirical studies that examine how moderation is experienced and negotiated by learners and educators within specific institutional settings (Arifianto, 2021; Hefner, 2021; Rahman, 2022). Thus, advancing the discourse on religious moderation requires a shift from normative theorization toward grounded, practice-oriented inquiry (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022).

Pesantren as socio-cultural institutions and agents of moderation

Pesantren have long been recognized as distinctive Islamic educational institutions that integrate religious learning with socio-cultural engagement, thereby functioning as both educational and communal spaces (Azra, 2020; Latif, 2021; Zuhdi, 2023). Historically, these institutions have played a pivotal role in shaping Indonesian Islam by transmitting classical knowledge while adapting to local cultural contexts (Hefner, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Nilan et al., 2022). The authority of the *kyai* and the communal life of *santri* create a unique pedagogical environment where values are internalized through lived experience rather than abstract instruction (Ismail et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Tan, 2023). In this sense, pesantren operate as moral communities that cultivate discipline, solidarity, and spiritual consciousness among students (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). Recent studies further suggest that pesantren contribute significantly to the dissemination of moderate Islamic values by emphasizing tolerance, social harmony, and respect for diversity (Arifianto, 2021; Setara Institute, 2022; Wahid Foundation, 2023). As such, pesantren are increasingly viewed as key actors in countering radical narratives and promoting inclusive religious discourses (PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2023; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022; Huda et al., 2021).

At the same time, the diversity of pesantren typologies—including modernist, salafiyah, and hybrid models—reflects varying approaches to knowledge transmission and moderation

practices (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). This diversity underscores the importance of examining pesantren not as homogeneous entities but as dynamic institutions shaped by historical, cultural, and ideological factors (Latif, 2021; Woodward et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023). In regions such as Rokan Hulu, the interaction between pesantren and local Malay-Sufi traditions creates a distinctive cultural configuration that influences educational practices (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023). Such interactions enable pesantren to serve as mediators between Islamic orthodoxy and local cultural expressions, thereby fostering contextually grounded forms of moderation (Ismail et al., 2021; Nilan et al., 2022; Tan, 2023). However, external perceptions often overlook this complexity, reducing pesantren to monolithic representations that fail to capture their internal diversity (Arifianto, 2021; Hefner, 2021; Rahman, 2022). Therefore, a more nuanced and context-sensitive analysis is required to understand the multifaceted role of pesantren in promoting religious moderation (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022).

Phenomenological approaches to understanding religious moderation

Phenomenology offers a powerful methodological framework for exploring how religious moderation is experienced, interpreted, and enacted within specific social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Neubauer et al., 2019; Zahavi, 2020). By focusing on lived experiences, phenomenological research seeks to uncover the meanings that individuals and communities attach to their practices and beliefs (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2022; van Manen, 2021). In the context of Islamic education, this approach enables researchers to move beyond abstract theorization and engage with the everyday realities of teachers, students, and institutional actors (Ismail et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Tan, 2023). Moreover, phenomenology is particularly suited to examining complex and culturally embedded phenomena such as religious moderation, which cannot be fully understood through quantitative or purely normative approaches (Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023; Latif, 2021). Recent studies have begun to apply phenomenological perspectives to Islamic education, highlighting the importance of subjective experience and contextual meaning-making (Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022; Arifianto, 2021). Consequently, phenomenology provides a robust analytical lens for capturing the depth and nuance of moderation practices in pesantren settings (Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022; Prasetyo, 2023).

Despite its potential, the application of phenomenological approaches in the study of religious moderation within pesantren remains relatively limited (Ismail et al., 2021; Rahman, 2022; Tan, 2023). Most existing research tends to prioritize policy analysis, doctrinal interpretation, or macro-level sociological perspectives, thereby overlooking the micro-level experiences of educational actors (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023). This gap highlights the need for studies that foreground the voices and experiences of pesantren communities in understanding how moderation is constructed and practiced (Nilan et al., 2022; Zuhdi, 2023; Latif, 2021). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach allows for the integration of cultural, institutional, and ethical dimensions into a holistic analytical framework (Woodward et al., 2022; Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022). By capturing the interplay between individual agency and structural context, such an approach can reveal the dynamic processes through which moderation is negotiated and embodied (Arifianto, 2021; Hefner, 2021; Rahman, 2022). Therefore, employing phenomenology in this study contributes to advancing both methodological rigor and substantive understanding of religious moderation in Islamic education (Azra, 2020; Huda et al., 2021; Rosyad & Maarif, 2022).

Method

Research design: phenomenological approach

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design aimed at exploring and interpreting the lived experiences of individuals within pesantren regarding religious moderation practices (Alhazmi, 2022; Tavakol et al., 2025; McLeod, 2024). Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for this inquiry as it seeks to uncover the essence and meaning of experiences as perceived by participants in their natural contexts (Neubauer et al., 2019; Zahavi, 2020; van Manen, 2021). Rather than testing hypotheses or generating generalizable claims, this approach

prioritizes depth, subjectivity, and contextual understanding of human experience (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Smith et al., 2022; McLeod, 2024). In this study, the focus is directed toward how religious moderation is experienced, interpreted, and enacted by actors within pesantren environments (Alhazmi, 2022; Tavakol et al., 2025; Zahavi, 2020). The phenomenological lens enables the researcher to bracket preconceived assumptions and engage deeply with participants' narratives (McLeod, 2024; van Manen, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Furthermore, this study is grounded in an interpretative phenomenological orientation that emphasizes meaning-making processes and contextual interpretation of lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022; Tavakol et al., 2025; Zahavi, 2020). This orientation allows for a "double hermeneutic" process, where the researcher interprets how participants themselves interpret their experiences (Smith et al., 2022; Alhazmi, 2022; van Manen, 2021). The design is idiographic in nature, focusing on detailed examination of specific cases rather than broad generalizations (Neubauer et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2021; Zahavi, 2020). Such an approach is particularly relevant for capturing the nuanced and culturally embedded practices of moderation within pesantren (Tavakol et al., 2025; McLeod, 2024; Alhazmi, 2022). Additionally, phenomenology facilitates the exploration of subjective consciousness and meaning structures that shape educational practices (Zahavi, 2020; van Manen, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2021). Thus, the chosen design aligns with the study's objective to generate deep, contextually grounded insights into religious moderation.

Research informants and sampling techniques

The informants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, a technique widely employed in phenomenological research to identify individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Alhazmi, 2022; Ahmed, 2025; Creswell & Poth, 2021). This approach ensures that participants possess rich, relevant, and experience-based knowledge that can illuminate the research problem (Neubauer et al., 2019; Tavakol et al., 2025; McLeod, 2024). The study focuses on key informants from two pesantren—Darussalam and Al-Royyan—including teachers, and students who are actively engaged in educational and religious practices (Smith et al., 2022; Zahavi, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2021). In addition, supporting informants from the Ministry of Religious Affairs were included to provide broader institutional perspectives (Alhazmi, 2022; Ahmed, 2025; Tavakol et al., 2025). The selection criteria emphasized participants' depth of experience, willingness to articulate their perspectives, and relevance to the study's focus (Neubauer et al., 2019; McLeod, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2021). The sampling process followed the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged (Ahmed, 2025; Alhazmi, 2022; Tavakol et al., 2025). In phenomenological studies, sample sizes are typically small but information-rich, often ranging from a few individuals to a dozen participants depending on the depth of inquiry (Neubauer et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2021). The use of homogeneous sampling ensured that participants shared common experiences related to pesantren life and religious moderation (Smith et al., 2022; Zahavi, 2020; McLeod, 2024). At the same time, variation within the sample was considered to capture diverse perspectives across institutional roles (Alhazmi, 2022; Ahmed, 2025; Tavakol et al., 2025). This balance between homogeneity and variation strengthens the credibility and richness of the data (Neubauer et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2021; Zahavi, 2020). Therefore, the sampling strategy was designed to ensure both depth and contextual relevance in understanding the phenomenon.

Data collection techniques

Data were collected through qualitative techniques, including in-depth interviews, to ensure comprehensive and triangulated insights (Alhazmi, 2022; McLeod, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2021). In-depth interviews served as the primary method, allowing participants to articulate their lived experiences and interpretations of religious moderation in their own words (Oluka, 2025; Tavakol et al., 2025; Neubauer et al., 2019). These interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, enabling flexibility while maintaining focus on key research themes (Smith et al., 2022; Zahavi, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2021). Participant observation was conducted to capture natural interactions, practices, and institutional cultures within pesantren settings (Alhazmi, 2022; McLeod, 2024; Tavakol et al., 2025). Documentation, including institutional records and

educational materials, provided additional contextual data to support analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Neubauer et al., 2019; Zahavi, 2020).

The use of multiple data sources reflects a commitment to methodological triangulation, which enhances the validity and credibility of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Ahmed, 2025; McLeod, 2024). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives (Oluka, 2025; Tavakol et al., 2025; Neubauer et al., 2019). Observational data were documented through detailed field notes capturing both verbal and non-verbal interactions (Alhazmi, 2022; McLeod, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2021). The iterative nature of data collection allowed emerging insights to inform subsequent data gathering processes (Ahmed, 2025; Tavakol et al., 2025; Neubauer et al., 2019). Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly maintained throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Zahavi, 2020; Smith et al., 2022). Thus, the data collection strategy ensured depth, rigor, and trustworthiness.

Data analysis techniques

The data analysis in this study followed a phenomenological thematic analysis approach aimed at identifying the essence and structure of participants' lived experiences (Alhazmi, 2022; McLeod, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2021). The process began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes to gain a holistic understanding (Neubauer et al., 2019; Tavakol et al., 2025; Zahavi, 2020). This was followed by initial coding, where significant statements and meaning units were identified and categorized (Saldaña, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2021; McLeod, 2024). The analysis then progressed to thematic development, where codes were clustered into broader themes representing core aspects of the phenomenon (Alhazmi, 2022; Tavakol et al., 2025; Neubauer et al., 2019). Throughout this process, the researcher engaged in reflexive interpretation to ensure alignment between data and emerging meanings (Zahavi, 2020; Smith et al., 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2021). In addition, the analysis incorporated the principle of bracketing (*epoché*), whereby the researcher consciously set aside personal biases and assumptions to focus on participants' perspectives (McLeod, 2024; Tavakol et al., 2025; Zahavi, 2020). The interpretative process involved iterative comparison between data segments, themes, and theoretical constructs to ensure analytical coherence (Neubauer et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2021; Ahmed, 2025). The final stage involved synthesizing themes into a comprehensive description of the essence of religious moderation as experienced within *pesantren* (Alhazmi, 2022; McLeod, 2024; Tavakol et al., 2025). To enhance trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking, triangulation, and audit trails were employed (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Zahavi, 2020; Smith et al., 2022). This rigorous analytical procedure ensures that the findings are both empirically grounded and theoretically meaningful.

Results

Internalization of moderation as ethical-religious consciousness

Both teachers and students consistently articulated religious moderation not as an abstract doctrine, but as an ethical disposition (*akhlaq*-based consciousness) embedded in daily practices. Teachers emphasized that moderation (*wasathiyah*) is cultivated through continuous moral guidance, habituation, and role modeling, rather than through formal instruction alone. Students similarly described moderation as "being fair," "not extreme," and "respecting differences," indicating a practical and experiential understanding rather than a purely conceptual one. Interestingly, teachers highlighted that values such as *tawasuth* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), *'adl* (justice), and *tasamuh* (tolerance) are implicitly integrated into teaching practices, especially through classical text studies (*kitab kuning*) and religious discussions. Students confirmed that these values are reinforced through everyday interactions—such as respecting peers from different backgrounds and avoiding rigid or judgmental attitudes. This suggests that moderation is internalized as a lived moral framework rather than a formalized curriculum component. In explaining how moderation is cultivated within the everyday life of the *pesantren*, the teacher emphasized that students are not introduced to moderation through abstract doctrinal instruction, but rather through continuous lived engagement in structured daily routines and moral discipline.

“Moderation is not something we teach as a formal concept in the classroom; instead, it is something students gradually experience through discipline, respect for others, and daily interaction within the pesantren environment, so it becomes part of their character.” (Informan 1).

This narrative illustrates that moderation is constructed as an embodied ethical practice rather than cognitive knowledge, highlighting the centrality of lived experience in value formation. The emphasis on routine and discipline suggests that habitual repetition plays a key role in internalization, aligning with character-based education models. Furthermore, this supports the argument that pesantren function as moral ecosystems where values are enacted rather than merely transmitted. While reflecting on pedagogical practices, the teacher explained how classical Islamic teachings are used as a medium to instill balanced thinking and avoid rigid interpretations of religion.

“In teaching kitab kuning, we consistently emphasize the importance of tawasuth and tawazun, so that students understand Islam as a religion of balance and avoid falling into extreme or rigid interpretations.” (Informan 2).

This excerpt shows that moderation is embedded within epistemological frameworks, particularly through interpretive plurality in classical texts. It highlights the role of intellectual moderation as a foundation for behavioral moderation, bridging cognition and action. Additionally, it indicates that pesantren pedagogy integrates traditional scholarship with contemporary moderation discourse. Discussing the influence of teachers on student behavior, the informant emphasized the importance of example over instruction.

“Students observe how we speak, how we respond to differences, and how we treat others, and from there they actually learn what moderation truly means in practice.” (Informan 3).

This highlights the operation of the hidden curriculum, where values are transmitted through social interaction rather than formal teaching. It reinforces the idea that authority figures serve as living texts, shaping ethical consciousness. Moreover, it demonstrates that moderation is socially constructed through relational dynamics. When explaining the process of moral formation, the teacher stressed the role of continuous guidance rather than structured curriculum.

“Moderation grows from continuous advice, reminders, and daily guidance, not from a structured curriculum or formal subject that we teach separately.” (Informan 4).

This indicates reliance on informal educational processes in shaping ethical awareness. It suggests that moderation is diffused across multiple interactions rather than centralized in curriculum design. This also reveals a potential gap between practice and formal pedagogical articulation. In discussing classroom dynamics, the teacher highlighted how exposure to multiple scholarly opinions fosters tolerance.

“When we teach classical texts, we show students that scholars have different opinions, and this teaches them to respect diversity and avoid claiming absolute truth.” (Informan 5).

This demonstrates that moderation is cultivated through epistemic pluralism, encouraging openness to multiple perspectives. It positions disagreement as educationally productive rather than conflictual. Consequently, moderation becomes a cognitive and ethical disposition simultaneously. Reflecting on ethical values in practice, the teacher emphasized their application in daily student interactions.

"We teach 'adl and tasamuh not only as concepts but through how students interact with each other, especially in respecting differences and avoiding conflict." (Informan 6).

This highlights the translation of abstract ethical values into lived social practices. It suggests that moderation is validated through behavior rather than discourse. Furthermore, it reinforces the integration of moral theology with social conduct. When observing student attitudes, the teacher pointed out behavioral indicators of moderation.

"You can see moderation in how students avoid judging others harshly and try to understand different perspectives before making conclusions." (Informan 7).

This indicates the emergence of moral reflexivity and critical awareness. Moderation is reflected in restraint and empathy, rather than doctrinal agreement. It also suggests a shift from reactive to reflective religiosity. On the role of habituation in education.

"Habituation is the key, because students become moderate not by memorizing concepts, but by repeatedly practicing balanced behavior in daily life." (Informan 8).

This confirms that moderation is formed through behavioral conditioning and repetition. It aligns with theories of embodied learning and character formation. Thus, moderation is performed before it is conceptualized. On classroom interaction.

"We encourage students to express their opinions freely, but also to respect and listen to others without forcing their views." (Informan 9).

This shows moderation as dialogical competence, emphasizing respectful engagement. It highlights the importance of communicative ethics in religious learning. Additionally, it reflects moderation as a practice of coexistence. On institutional perspective.

"Moderation is already embedded in our system, so we don't see it as something new, but as part of our long-standing tradition." (Informan 10).

This suggests moderation is structurally and historically embedded within pesantren. It challenges narratives that frame moderation as a recent policy construct. Thus, moderation is positioned as an organic tradition rather than imposed discourse.

Pesantren as a moral-educational ecosystem of moderation

The data reveal that pesantren function as holistic ecosystems where religious moderation is embedded within institutional culture, not merely classroom learning. Teachers described the pesantren environment as a "controlled social space" that shapes students' attitudes through discipline, communal living, and spiritual routines. Students reported that daily activities—such as congregational prayers, communal study, and shared responsibilities—foster mutual respect, patience, and social harmony. Both groups emphasized the central role of the *kyai* (religious leader) as a moral authority whose attitudes significantly influence students' perspectives on moderation. Teachers noted that the *kyai's* inclusive and balanced approach to religious interpretation becomes a living example for students. Students also expressed strong trust in their teachers and leaders, indicating that authority and exemplarity are key mechanisms in transmitting moderation values. This confirms that pesantren operate as moral communities where moderation is socially constructed and collectively maintained.

When reflecting on how pesantren shapes students' character beyond formal classroom instruction, the teacher emphasized that the institutional environment itself plays a central role in cultivating moderation through structured daily life and continuous interaction. Quotation informan:

"In pesantren, moderation is not only taught in the classroom, but it is formed through the entire environment, where students live together, follow discipline, and interact in ways that gradually shape their attitudes toward balance and respect." (Informan 1).

This excerpt illustrates that moderation is embedded within the total institutional environment, rather than confined to formal pedagogy. The pesantren operates as a holistic social system, where values are internalized through continuous exposure and participation in communal life. This reinforces the idea that moderation is ecologically constructed, emerging from the interaction between individuals and their structured social context. In discussing the role of communal living, the teacher highlighted how shared daily routines contribute to the development of tolerance and social harmony among students.

"Through living together in the dormitory, sharing responsibilities, and participating in daily routines, students learn patience, mutual respect, and how to deal with differences in a peaceful way." (Informan 2).

This statement shows that communal living functions as a practical laboratory for moderation, where students encounter diversity in real-time. The emphasis on shared routines indicates that moderation is cultivated through structured social interaction and collective responsibility. It also suggests that pesantren create conditions for experiential learning of social harmony, which cannot be replicated through classroom instruction alone. When explaining the role of discipline, the teacher noted that structured regulations within pesantren contribute significantly to shaping balanced behavior.

"Discipline in pesantren is not about control, but about guiding students to develop balanced habits, so they learn to regulate themselves and respect others." (Informan 3).

This highlights discipline as a mechanism for ethical self-regulation rather than coercion, aligning with moderation principles. The structured environment enables students to internalize norms through guided autonomy, rather than external enforcement. This indicates that moderation is fostered through regulated freedom, where discipline becomes a tool for moral development. In describing the spiritual dimension of pesantren life, the teacher emphasized the role of routine worship practices in shaping students' emotional and ethical dispositions.

"Daily congregational prayers and religious routines create a spiritual atmosphere that makes students calmer, more patient, and more respectful toward others." (Informan 4).

This suggests that spiritual practices contribute to emotional and psychological dimensions of moderation, not just cognitive understanding. The routine nature of worship reinforces internal discipline and ethical sensitivity. It also demonstrates that moderation is partly rooted in spiritual experience and inner transformation. When discussing leadership influence, the teacher highlighted the central role of the kyai in shaping institutional values.

"The kyai is the main reference for students; his inclusive and balanced perspective becomes an example that students naturally follow in their daily behavior." (Informan 5).

This reflects the importance of charismatic and moral authority in transmitting moderation values. The kyai functions as a living embodiment of moderation, bridging theory and practice. It also indicates that leadership plays a crucial role in legitimizing and sustaining institutional culture. On the relationship between teachers and students, the informant emphasized trust as a key factor in value transmission.

"Students trust their teachers, and because of that trust, they are more open to learning how to behave in a balanced and respectful way." (Informan 6).

This highlights trust as a relational foundation for effective moral education. Moderation is transmitted not only through instruction but through interpersonal credibility and emotional connection. It suggests that ethical learning is deeply tied to relational dynamics within the institution. When explaining institutional culture, the teacher noted that moderation is embedded in everyday practices rather than formal policies.

"We do not need special programs for moderation because it is already part of our daily culture and interactions within the pesantren." (Informan 7).

This indicates that moderation is organically embedded within institutional culture, rather than externally imposed. It reflects the strength of implicit systems in shaping behavior. However, it also suggests a potential gap in formal articulation and documentation of moderation practices. On student interaction, the teacher emphasized how daily communication fosters moderation.

"Students are used to discussing differences respectfully, so they learn that disagreement does not have to lead to conflict." (Informan 8).

This demonstrates moderation as dialogical practice, emphasizing communication ethics. It highlights the role of everyday interaction in shaping conflict resolution skills. Moderation is thus expressed through interactional competence and social awareness. In reflecting on collective responsibility, the teacher described how shared duties influence student attitudes.

"When students share responsibilities, they learn cooperation, empathy, and how to support each other, which are important aspects of moderation." (Informan 9).

This indicates that moderation is reinforced through collaborative practices and shared experiences. It shows how ethical values are developed through participation in communal responsibilities. This strengthens the idea of pesantren as a community of practice. When summarizing the pesantren system, the teacher emphasized its holistic nature.

"Pesantren is not just a school, but a complete environment where students learn how to live, interact, and practice moderation in every aspect of life." (Informan 10).

This confirms that pesantren function as a comprehensive moral-educational ecosystem. Moderation is integrated into all aspects of life, making it a total lived experience rather than segmented knowledge. This supports the conceptualization of pesantren as a "living laboratory" of religious moderation.

Integration of local culture and sufi traditions

A distinctive finding of this study is the strong integration between religious moderation and local cultural practices, particularly in the context of Rokaan Hulu as the "Land of a Thousand Suluk." Teachers explained that Sufi-oriented practices (*tarekat*, *zikir*, and *suluk*) play a significant role in cultivating humility, self-control, and spiritual balance. Students also reported that participation in these practices strengthens their sense of inner peace and tolerance toward others. However, while teachers viewed cultural accommodation as essential to moderation, some students expressed that not all cultural practices are equally emphasized in formal learning. This indicates a partial gap between cultural richness and pedagogical articulation, particularly in how local traditions are systematically integrated into the curriculum. Nevertheless, both teachers and students agreed that the presence of local cultural values enhances the relevance and acceptance of Islamic teachings in the community. Thus, moderation in pesantren is deeply intertwined with culturally embedded spiritual practices. When discussing the distinctive cultural identity of Rokaan Hulu as the "Land of a Thousand Suluk," the teacher emphasized how local Sufi traditions are

deeply embedded in pesantren life and shape students' moral and spiritual orientation beyond formal instruction.

"In this region, suluk is not just a ritual, but a way of life that teaches students humility, patience, and spiritual awareness, which are essential elements of religious moderation." (Informan 1).

This statement indicates that Sufi practices function as a core moral-spiritual framework in shaping moderation, rather than as supplementary rituals. The emphasis on humility and patience suggests that moderation is cultivated through inner transformation and disciplined spirituality. Furthermore, it positions local culture as an active epistemic and ethical resource, rather than a passive cultural backdrop. In explaining the role of zikir in daily pesantren routines, the teacher highlighted how repetitive spiritual practices influence students' emotional stability and interpersonal behavior.

"Through regular zikir, students develop inner calmness and self-control, which naturally makes them more tolerant and less reactive in dealing with differences." (Informan 2).

This reflects the role of spirituality in fostering affective dimensions of moderation, particularly emotional regulation and self-restraint. The practice of zikir contributes to a psychological foundation for tolerance, linking spirituality with social behavior. It also suggests that moderation is partly an outcome of spiritual discipline that shapes emotional intelligence. When describing the integration of tarekat practices, the teacher emphasized their influence on students' ethical development and worldview.

"Tarekat practices teach students to control their desires and avoid extreme behavior, so they become more balanced in both religious and social life." (Informan 3).

This highlights the role of Sufi traditions in cultivating self-regulation and moderation as ethical discipline. It suggests that moderation is grounded in internal control mechanisms, not merely external norms. Additionally, it reinforces the connection between spiritual practices and behavioral moderation. In reflecting on the relationship between Islam and local culture, the teacher stressed that cultural practices are not contradictory but complementary to religious teachings.

"Local traditions here do not contradict Islam; instead, they strengthen students' understanding of tolerance and harmony in a real and meaningful way." (Informan 4).

This demonstrates a harmonization paradigm between religion and culture, challenging dichotomous views that separate the two. It positions local culture as a contextual medium for expressing Islamic values, particularly moderation. This also supports the idea that moderation is culturally grounded and socially relevant. When discussing student participation in cultural-religious activities, the teacher highlighted how these experiences shape students' perspectives on diversity and coexistence.

"By participating in local religious traditions, students learn that Islam can be practiced in a peaceful and culturally rooted way, which makes them more open and accepting of others." (Informan 5).

This suggests that experiential engagement with culture enhances inclusivity and openness, reinforcing moderation. Participation acts as a pedagogical tool for internalizing values, even without formal instruction. It also indicates that moderation is strengthened through lived cultural experience. On the relevance of local culture to Islamic education, the teacher emphasized its importance in making religious teachings more accessible and meaningful.

“When Islamic teachings are connected with local culture, students understand them more deeply and feel that religion is part of their everyday life.” (Informan 6).

This highlights the role of culture in enhancing the contextual relevance of religious education. It suggests that moderation is more effectively internalized when teachings are situated within familiar cultural frameworks. This reinforces the importance of context-sensitive pedagogy. When addressing the gap between practice and formal curriculum, the teacher acknowledged limitations in pedagogical integration.

“Cultural practices like suluk and zikir are strong in daily life, but they are not always systematically included in formal teaching materials.” (Informan 7).

This identifies a disconnect between lived practice and formal pedagogy, which may limit knowledge transmission. While culture is strong in practice, its lack of formal articulation reduces its institutional visibility. This suggests a need for curricular integration of cultural-spiritual elements. In discussing teaching strategies, the teacher explained how cultural values are implicitly conveyed rather than explicitly structured.

“We teach cultural values indirectly through examples and activities, but not through a structured curriculum.” (Informan 8).

This reflects reliance on implicit pedagogy, where values are transmitted through experience rather than formal instruction. While effective in shaping attitudes, it may lack consistency and scalability. This highlights the tension between organic learning and systematic education. When reflecting on community acceptance, the teacher emphasized the role of culture in strengthening pesantren’s relationship with society.

“The presence of local cultural values makes pesantren more accepted by the community, because people see Islam as part of their own tradition.” (Informan 9).

This shows that cultural integration enhances social legitimacy and community trust. It positions pesantren as a bridge between religion and local society. This also reinforces moderation as a socially embedded and accepted practice. In summarizing the relationship between culture, spirituality, and moderation, the teacher emphasized their inseparability.

“In pesantren, moderation cannot be separated from culture and spirituality, because both are the foundation of how students understand and practice Islam.” (Informan 10).

This confirms that moderation is holistically constructed through the integration of culture and spirituality. It highlights the inseparability of these dimensions in shaping religious understanding. This supports the conceptualization of moderation as a culturally embedded spiritual practice.

The findings confirm that the four key indicators of religious moderation—national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and cultural accommodation—are actively practiced within pesantren life. Teachers emphasized national commitment through the integration of civic values, respect for the Indonesian state ideology, and participation in national events. Students demonstrated this commitment through their acceptance of diversity and recognition of Indonesia’s pluralistic identity. Tolerance emerged as a dominant theme, with both teachers and students highlighting respect for different religious interpretations and social backgrounds. Non-violence was reflected in conflict resolution practices that prioritize dialogue, patience, and ethical conduct. However, the dimension of cultural accommodation was identified as the least systematically developed, particularly in formal pedagogical structures. This suggests that while moderation is broadly practiced, its articulation across all four dimensions remains uneven and requires further strengthening. The results of this research can be visualized in Figure 1 below.

Religious moderation from the plains of the land of a *seribu suluk*: phenomenological experience from pesantren

A Multi-Layered Conceptual Model

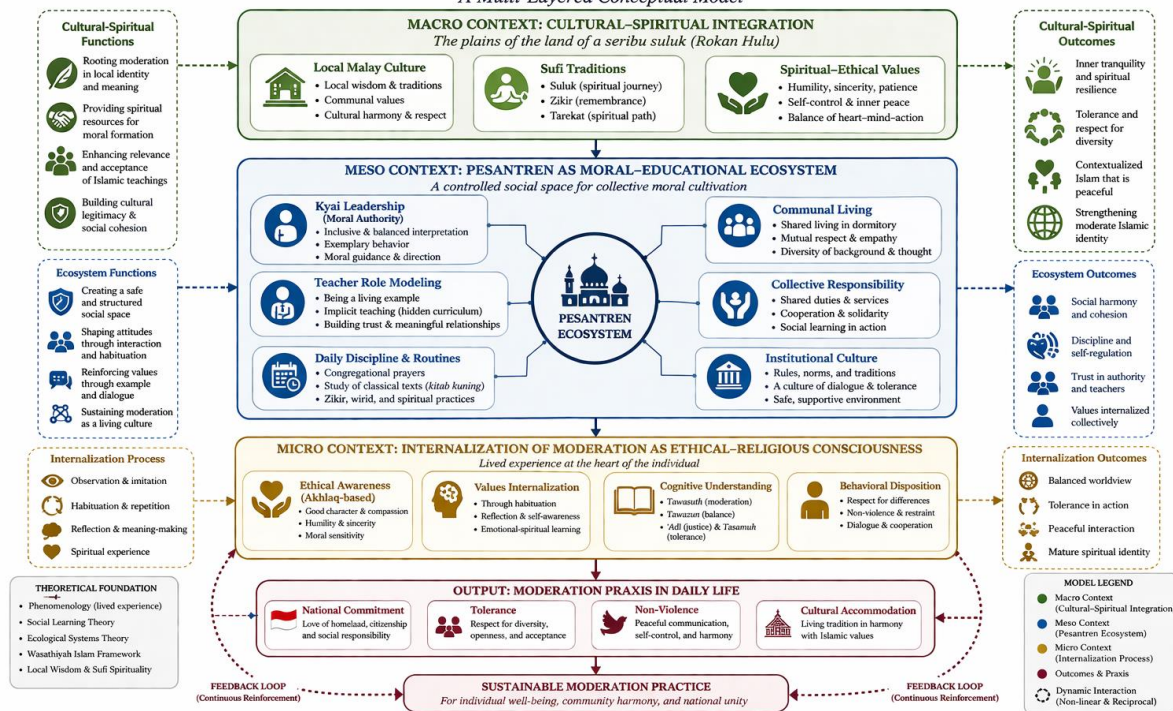


Figure 1. Visuale diagram of religious moderation in pesantren

Discussion

This study demonstrates that religious moderation in pesantren is not primarily transmitted as a formalized body of knowledge, but rather internalized as an ethical-religious consciousness (akhlak-based awareness) embedded within everyday practices and social interactions. The findings indicate that moderation is experienced as a lived reality, cultivated through discipline, habituation, and relational engagement rather than through explicit doctrinal instruction (Yasin et al., 2025; Tambak et al., 2024). This aligns with broader scholarship on Indonesian Islam, which positions pesantren as moral communities that nurture *wasathiyah* values through experiential learning and ethical formation (Azra, 2020; Hefner, 2021; Huda et al., 2021; Tambak et al., 2025; Firdaus et al., 2025). The emphasis on lived experience suggests that moderation operates as a practical moral framework, guiding behavior in concrete situations rather than remaining at the level of abstract ideals. Furthermore, the internalization process reflects a deep integration between cognitive understanding and affective disposition, indicating that moderation is simultaneously known, felt, and practiced (Abdullah et al., 2025; Tambak et al., 2018; Chapakiya et al., 2025). Consequently, this study reinforces the argument that religious moderation should be understood as a process of moral embodiment, rather than merely a discursive or policy-driven construct.

Moreover, the findings reveal that the internalization of moderation is fundamentally shaped by habitual practice and repetitive socialization, which function as key mechanisms of ethical formation within pesantren. Daily routines—such as communal prayers, shared living arrangements, and structured discipline—create a consistent environment in which moderation becomes normalized and internalized over time. This supports theories of character education and embodied learning, which emphasize the role of repetition and practice in shaping moral dispositions (Nilan et al., 2022; Tan, 2023; Rahman, 2022; Tambak et al., 2021). In this context, moderation is not imposed externally but gradually formed through continuous engagement with institutional norms and values. The findings also highlight that such habituation fosters a sense of moral reflexivity, enabling students to regulate their attitudes and behaviors in response to diverse social situations. This suggests that pesantren cultivate moderation not only as a value but

as a capacity for ethical self-regulation, which is essential in pluralistic societies (Tambak et al., 2022). Therefore, the process of internalization can be understood as both socially structured and individually appropriated, bridging collective norms and personal agency.

Another key insight of this study is the central role of implicit pedagogy and the hidden curriculum in transmitting moderation values. Teachers' role modeling, interpersonal interactions, and everyday conduct emerge as powerful sources of moral learning, often surpassing the influence of formal instruction. This finding corroborates previous research that underscores the significance of relational authority and exemplarity in pesantren education (Bruinessen, 2021; Hamayotsu, 2022; Hosen, 2023; Tambak, Sukenti, & Firdaus, 2024). Students' narratives further confirm that moderation is often learned indirectly, through observing how teachers respond to differences, manage conflict, and engage in dialogue. Such processes illustrate how moderation is embedded within the social fabric of the institution, rather than confined to specific lessons or curricular components. From a phenomenological perspective, this reflects the idea that meaning is constructed through lived experience and social interaction (Zahavi, 2020; van Manen, 2021; Smith et al., 2022; Rasyidi et al., 2025). Consequently, moderation emerges as a relational and situated practice, shaped by the dynamics of everyday life within the pesantren community.

In addition, the study highlights the importance of epistemic moderation, particularly through the teaching of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) that expose students to diverse scholarly interpretations. This pedagogical approach encourages students to recognize plurality within Islamic tradition, thereby fostering intellectual humility and openness. By engaging with multiple viewpoints, students learn to appreciate difference as an inherent aspect of religious knowledge, rather than as a source of conflict. This aligns with the concept of *tawasuth* and *tawazun*, which emphasize balance and proportionality in both thought and action (Ismail et al., 2021; Zuhdi, 2023; Latif, 2021; Sukenti & Tambak, 2023). The findings suggest that epistemic moderation serves as a foundation for broader ethical moderation, linking cognitive flexibility with social tolerance. Furthermore, this approach challenges rigid and absolutist interpretations of religion, positioning pesantren as spaces of critical yet respectful engagement with tradition (Tambak, Amril, & Sukenti, 2021). Thus, moderation is constructed not only as a moral virtue but also as an intellectual orientation that shapes how knowledge is understood and applied.

A significant contribution of this study lies in its identification of the cultural-spiritual grounding of moderation, particularly through the integration of local Malay traditions and Sufi practices such as *suluk* and *zikir*. These practices cultivate inner discipline, emotional regulation, and spiritual awareness, which are essential dimensions of moderation but often overlooked in formal educational discourse. The findings indicate that moderation is not solely a social or cognitive phenomenon but also a spiritual-psychological process, rooted in practices that nurture self-control and humility (Woodward et al., 2022; Sukenti & Tambak, 2024; Fakhri, 2021; Mahyuddin, 2022). This highlights the importance of local cultural contexts in shaping the expression of Islamic values, demonstrating that moderation is deeply embedded in the interaction between religion and culture. At the same time, the study reveals that while these cultural and spiritual elements are strongly present in practice, they are not systematically integrated into formal curricula. This suggests a gap between lived cultural richness and pedagogical formalization, which may limit the broader dissemination of these practices. Therefore, integrating cultural-spiritual dimensions into structured educational frameworks becomes an important implication for future development.

Furthermore, the findings reveal an uneven institutionalization of the four key dimensions of religious moderation—national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and cultural accommodation. While the first three dimensions are relatively well established within pesantren practices, the cultural dimension appears less systematically articulated in pedagogical terms (Sukenti & Tambak, 2020). This imbalance reflects broader challenges in translating implicit cultural practices into explicit educational frameworks that can be replicated and evaluated. The study suggests that cultural accommodation, although present in everyday life, requires stronger conceptualization and integration within teaching and learning processes. This finding contributes to the literature by highlighting the need for a more holistic and balanced approach to moderation, one that equally emphasizes all dimensions. It also underscores the importance of

aligning practice, policy, and pedagogy to ensure the sustainability of moderation initiatives. Consequently, strengthening the cultural dimension of moderation represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Islamic education (Tambak et al., 2024).

Based on the synthesis of participants' lived experiences, this study proposes a contextually grounded model of religious moderation in pesantren, consisting of three interconnected layers: (1) ethical foundation (*akhlaq and wasathiyah values*), (2) institutional culture (pesantren ecosystem and leadership), and (3) cultural-spiritual integration (local traditions and Sufi practices). Teachers emphasized the importance of aligning these layers to sustain moderation practices, while students highlighted the role of daily experience in shaping their understanding. This model demonstrates that religious moderation in pesantren is not a static concept but a dynamic, lived process shaped by interaction between values, practices, and cultural context (Sukenti & Tambak, 2024; Namora et al., 2025; Firdaus et al., 2025). Importantly, the findings challenge dominant external narratives that associate pesantren with radicalism, showing instead that they function as agents of moderation and social cohesion. At the same time, the study identifies areas for development, particularly in strengthening the pedagogical integration of local culture.

Finally, this study advances a multi-layered conceptual model of religious moderation, integrating micro (ethical consciousness), meso (institutional culture), and macro (cultural-spiritual context) dimensions into a coherent analytical framework. This model provides a more comprehensive understanding of how moderation is produced, sustained, and experienced within pesantren, moving beyond reductionist approaches that focus solely on normative indicators. The findings challenge dominant external narratives that associate pesantren with radicalism, instead demonstrating their role as agents of moderation, social cohesion, and ethical formation (Setara Institute, 2022; Wahid Foundation, 2023; PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2023; Sukenti & Fauzan, 2024). However, the study also acknowledges its limitations, particularly its focus on a specific regional context, which may not capture the full diversity of pesantren across Indonesia. Future research should therefore explore comparative and cross-regional perspectives to enrich understanding of moderation practices in different socio-cultural settings. Overall, this study contributes to both theory and practice by reframing religious moderation as a lived, culturally embedded, and pedagogically mediated phenomenon, offering valuable insights for the advancement of Islamic Religious Education in plural societies.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore and conceptualize the model of religious moderation as practiced in pesantren in Rokan Hulu Regency and to contribute an empirically grounded, culturally embedded account to the field of Islamic Religious Education. The findings demonstrate that religious moderation in pesantren is not primarily transmitted as a formalized or curriculum-driven construct, but rather internalized as an ethical-religious consciousness (*akhlaq-based awareness*) that is lived, practiced, and embodied in everyday interactions. Moderation is cultivated through continuous processes of habituation, role modeling, communal life, and moral guidance, positioning pesantren as holistic moral-educational ecosystems rather than merely instructional institutions. This confirms that moderation operates as a lived moral framework, integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions within the life-worlds of students and teachers. The study further reveals that the internalization of moderation is shaped by the interplay of implicit pedagogy (hidden curriculum), epistemic engagement with classical Islamic scholarship, and cultural-spiritual practices rooted in local traditions. The teaching of *kitab kuning* fosters epistemic openness and interpretive plurality, while Sufi-oriented practices such as *suluk* and *zikir* strengthen emotional regulation, humility, and ethical sensitivity. Together, these elements form a multi-dimensional process of moderation, in which intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions are deeply interconnected. Importantly, the findings highlight that moderation is not merely a social or political agenda but a holistic process of moral and spiritual formation, grounded in both Islamic tradition and local cultural context. In addition, the study identifies that the four core dimensions of religious moderation—national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and cultural accommodation—are substantively present within pesantren practices, although not equally institutionalized. While national commitment,

tolerance, and non-violence are relatively well integrated into daily practices, the dimension of cultural accommodation remains less systematically articulated within formal pedagogical frameworks. This indicates a critical gap between lived cultural practices and their curricular formalization, suggesting the need for more structured integration of local cultural values into Islamic educational design. Addressing this gap is essential to ensure the sustainability, scalability, and broader impact of moderation practices within and beyond pesantren contexts.

Theoretically, this study contributes by advancing a multi-layered conceptual model of religious moderation, integrating three interrelated dimensions: (1) micro-level ethical consciousness (akhlaq and wasathiyah values), (2) meso-level institutional culture (pesantren environment, leadership, and communal practices), and (3) macro-level cultural-spiritual context (local traditions and Sufi practices). This integrative framework offers a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of moderation, moving beyond reductionist and policy-driven approaches that treat moderation as a static or purely normative concept. It also provides a phenomenological perspective that foregrounds lived experience as a central analytical lens in the study of Islamic education. Practically, the findings underscore the strategic role of pesantren as agents of religious moderation, social cohesion, and ethical formation in plural societies such as Indonesia. They challenge dominant external narratives that associate Islamic boarding schools with radicalism by demonstrating their capacity to cultivate inclusive, balanced, and contextually grounded religious identities. However, the study is limited by its focus on a specific regional context (Rokan Hulu), which may not fully represent the diversity of pesantren across Indonesia. Therefore, future research is encouraged to conduct comparative and cross-regional studies, as well as to explore the integration of cultural and spiritual dimensions into formal curricula.

In conclusion, this study affirms that religious moderation in pesantren is best understood as a lived, culturally embedded, and pedagogically mediated phenomenon, shaped by the dynamic interaction between ethical values, institutional practices, and local traditions. By reframing moderation as a process of moral embodiment rather than a mere policy construct, this research provides significant theoretical and practical insights for the advancement of Islamic Religious Education and the promotion of inclusive and moderate Islam in contemporary society.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Contributions of the authors in this article: First and second author contributed as concepts and drafters of the article, data analyzers, interpreters, writing the manuscript and critically revising the article; Third and fourth author, as the critically revising the article, and editing of the language of manuscript, collecting data and critically revising the article. Sixth and fifth author, as the critically revising the article, and editing of the language of manuscript. All authors agree to take responsibility for all aspects of this work. Both authors contributed equally and approved the final version of the article for publication.

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The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of use artificial intelligence

The author uses generative artificial intelligence in this paper for the data analysis process.

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