



Religious Moderation as Lived Practice among Islamic Education Students

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine how religious moderation is understood, developed, and strengthened among students of Islamic Education in an Islamic higher education context. In recent years, religious moderation has become a crucial societal issue amid rising polarization, radical narratives, and identity-based tensions within multicultural societies. Islamic universities are therefore challenged to translate normative discourses of moderation into lived educational practices that shape students' cognition, attitudes, and behavior. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach, using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Data were analyzed through data condensation, display, and verification to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences. The findings reveal that students conceptualize religious moderation as a balanced integration of national commitment, respect for diversity, anti-violent principles, and openness to local culture. Academic factors, including curriculum integration, reflective pedagogy, and lecturers' role modeling, significantly influence the internalization of moderation values. Non-academic activities such as interfaith dialogue, mentoring, community service, and pesantren-based programs further reinforce these values. Institutionally, structured courses, competent lecturers, and praxis-oriented strategies function as preventive mechanisms against radicalism. This study contributes theoretically by framing religious moderation as lived practice rather than mere doctrine and recommends strengthening integrative, context-sensitive strategies in Islamic higher education.

Key Words: *Religious Moderation, Islamic Education, Phenomenology, Higher Education*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana moderasi beragama dipahami, dikembangkan, dan diperkuat di kalangan mahasiswa Pendidikan Islam dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi Islam. Dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, moderasi agama telah menjadi masalah sosial yang penting di tengah meningkatnya polarisasi, narasi radikal, dan ketegangan berbasis identitas dalam masyarakat multikultural. Oleh karena itu, universitas Islam ditantang untuk menerjemahkan wacana normatif moderasi ke dalam praktik pendidikan hidup yang membentuk kognisi, sikap, dan perilaku mahasiswa. Studi kualitatif ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis di Program Pendidikan Islam Universitas Islam As'adiyah Sengkang, menggunakan wawancara mendalam, observasi peserta, dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis

melalui kondensasi, tampilan, dan verifikasi data untuk menangkap esensi pengalaman hidup peserta. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa siswa mengkonseptualisasikan moderasi agama sebagai integrasi yang seimbang antara komitmen nasional, penghormatan terhadap keragaman, prinsip anti-kekerasan, dan keterbukaan terhadap budaya lokal. Faktor akademik, termasuk integrasi kurikulum, pedagogi reflektif, dan role modeling dosen, secara signifikan mempengaruhi internalisasi nilai-nilai moderasi. Kegiatan non-akademik seperti dialog antaragama, pendampingan, pengabdian kepada masyarakat, dan program berbasis pesantren semakin memperkuat nilai-nilai tersebut. Mata kuliah yang terstruktur, kompeten, dan strategi berorientasi praksis berfungsi sebagai mekanisme pencegahan terhadap radikalisme. Studi ini berkontribusi secara teoritis dengan membingkai moderasi agama sebagai praktik hidup daripada sekadar doktrin dan merekomendasikan penguatan strategi integratif dan sensitif konteks dalam pendidikan tinggi Islam.

Kata Kunci: *Moderasi Beragama, Pendidikan Islam, Fenomenologi, Perguruan Tinggi*

INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation has emerged as a critical societal issue in plural and multicultural societies, particularly in countries with high levels of religious diversity, such as Indonesia. In the contemporary global context, religious expressions increasingly intersect with political polarization, identity conflicts, and ideological extremism, making moderation a strategic necessity for social cohesion. Higher education institutions, especially Islamic universities, play a pivotal role in shaping future religious leaders, educators, and social agents who will influence public discourse and intergroup relations. Research on religious moderation is therefore socially significant, as it helps prevent radicalism, strengthen national unity, and foster peaceful coexistence (Hutagalung, 2023; Nurkholid & Faqih, 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that young adults are among the most vulnerable groups to ideological manipulation, yet also the most responsive to transformative education (Benjamin et al., 2024; Grimm et al., 2025). Consequently, investigating how religious moderation is understood, developed, and strengthened among university students is essential. This study responds to that urgency by examining moderation not merely as a policy slogan but as a lived educational reality, concluding that understanding moderation within academic and cultural contexts is indispensable for long-term societal harmony.

Despite the strategic importance of religious moderation, contemporary societies face persistent challenges in translating its ideals into concrete social practices. The rise of religious intolerance, identity-based hostility, and subtle forms of radical narratives has intensified social fragmentation, particularly among youth communities (Hossain, 2024; Wahid et al., 2025). In Indonesia, these challenges are compounded by digital media ecosystems that amplify polarizing discourses and weaken traditional mechanisms of moral transmission. Educational institutions are often criticized for emphasizing normative religious knowledge while neglecting ethical reflexivity and contextual engagement

(Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025a; Marjani, 2023). As a result, students may possess doctrinal literacy without developing inclusive attitudes or civic responsibility. This gap creates a paradox where religion is taught formally yet practiced rigidly. Prior studies indicate that without structured institutional support, religious moderation remains rhetorical and fails to shape behavior (Asrin & Musa, 2025; Zahroh & Pramuja, 2025). Therefore, the general problem addressed in this research is the disjunction between the normative discourse of moderation and its practical internalization among students of Islamic education. This problem necessitates systematic investigation and pedagogical reorientation.

Field observations reveal that the dynamics of religious moderation among students are complex and context-dependent. In Islamic higher education settings, students are exposed to diverse interpretations of Islam, local cultural values, and national ideologies that simultaneously shape their religious identity. At Universitas Islam As'adiyah Sengkang, moderation is formally embedded within curricular and extracurricular activities, yet its meaning is negotiated through daily interactions, classroom discussions, and community engagement. Students articulate moderation through concepts such as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, anti-violence, and respect for cultural traditions, reflecting both religious and sociocultural influences. However, these understandings do not emerge uniformly; the lecturer role model, pesantren traditions, and institutional culture mediate their emergence. Such phenomena illustrate that moderation is not merely transmitted but constructed through lived experiences. Similar contextual findings have been reported in pesantren-based universities, underscoring the importance of phenomenological inquiry in capturing these realities (Kustati et al., 2023). This situational complexity underscores the need for in-depth qualitative research grounded in participants' perspectives.

Previous studies on religious moderation have primarily focused on policy frameworks, theological discourses, or quantitative measurements of attitudes. National-level research has successfully conceptualized moderation as a balance between religious commitment and civic responsibility (Gamaleal, 2024). Other studies have explored curriculum integration and interfaith education as mechanisms for fostering tolerance (Oluka, 2025; Watson, 2025). While valuable, these studies often treat moderation as an abstract construct detached from students' lived experiences. Moreover, many rely on survey-based approaches that capture attitudes but overlook meaning-making processes. As a result, the internal dynamics through which students understand, negotiate, and enact moderation remain underexplored. This limitation is particularly evident in studies that marginalize local cultural wisdom and institutional micro-practices. Consequently, there is a need for research that moves beyond descriptive accounts toward interpretive analyses grounded in phenomenological perspectives (Qadri et al., 2024; Suddahazai, 2023).

More recent scholarship has begun to address religious moderation within educational praxis, highlighting the role of reflective pedagogy, lecturer modeling, and experiential learning (Suddahazai, 2023). These studies acknowledge that moderation is cultivated through sustained engagement rather than isolated interventions. However, gaps remain in explaining how structural (curricular), cultural (local wisdom), and strategic (institutional policy) dimensions interact simultaneously. Additionally, few studies situate moderation within pesantren-based universities in Eastern Indonesia, where local traditions strongly shape religious expression. Existing research often treats institutional efforts and student understanding as separate domains, failing to capture their interdependence. This study addresses this gap by integrating the cognitive, structural, and strategic dimensions of moderation, offering a holistic, context-sensitive contribution to the literature.

The novelty of this research lies in its phenomenological exploration of religious moderation as a lived academic and cultural practice. Unlike prior studies that emphasize normative indicators, this research foregrounds students' meaning-making processes, institutional enactment, and the integration of Islamic principles with local cultural values. By examining moderation through the lenses of knowledge, institutional factors, and strategic strengthening efforts, this study advances a contextualized model of moderation grounded in lived experience. This state-of-the-art contribution is crucial, as it demonstrates that moderation is not merely an ideological counter-narrative but an educational habitus cultivated through curriculum, pedagogy, and ethical exemplification. Addressing this gap is vital for developing scalable moderation models applicable to plural societies facing ideological polarization.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study addresses the following research problem: how is religious moderation understood, developed, and strengthened among Islamic Education students within a pesantren-based university context? The guiding argument of this research is that religious moderation emerges through the interaction of students' cognitive understanding, institutional structures, and strategic pedagogical practices. Using a phenomenological approach, this study hypothesizes that moderation is most effectively internalized when institutional vision, curriculum design, lecturer role modeling, and cultural accommodation operate in concert. The contribution of this research is twofold: theoretically, it refines the discourse on moderation by integrating lived religion and educational theory; practically, it provides evidence-based insights for Islamic higher education institutions seeking to strengthen moderation as a preventive and transformative force.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore and interpret the lived experiences of Islamic Education students in strengthening religious moderation. Phenomenology was selected because it enables researchers to understand how

individuals perceive, interpret, and give meaning to social and religious phenomena within their natural contexts (Adeniran & Tayo-Ladega, 2024; Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022a). In the context of religious moderation, this approach is particularly appropriate as it captures not only cognitive understanding but also values, attitudes, and practices embedded in everyday academic and social interactions. Previous qualitative studies in Islamic education have demonstrated that phenomenology is practical for examining moderation as a lived, contextualized experience rather than a normative or policy-driven construct (Hartini & Garnasih, 2025; Rambe & Rizkiana, 2025).

The research was conducted at the Islamic Education Program (PAI), Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam As'adiyah Sengkang, located in Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. This site was purposefully selected for several reasons. First, the program is institutionally affiliated with a pesantren-based university that explicitly integrates religious moderation into its vision and curriculum. Second, the student body is culturally diverse and shaped mainly by pesantren traditions, providing a rich context for examining the interaction among Islamic values, local culture, and national identity. Third, Universitas Islam As'adiyah Sengkang has formally implemented moderation-oriented courses, making it a relevant locus for investigating institutional and pedagogical strategies of religious moderation, as recommended in prior higher education research (Mukhibat et al., 2024; Nunu & Darul, 2022).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to ensure comprehensive data triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including the dean, the head of the Islamic Education program, lecturers, and students, thereby allowing flexibility to explore participants' perspectives while maintaining a thematic focus (Al Saifi & Al Saifi, n.d.). Observations were carried out during classroom activities, academic discussions, and non-academic programs to capture the enactment of moderation values in practice. Document analysis included curriculum documents, course syllabi (RPS), institutional policies, and academic guidelines related to religious moderation. This multi-method strategy aligns with qualitative research standards, emphasizing depth, context, and credibility (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024; Wellman et al., 2023).

Data analysis followed an interactive, iterative model comprising data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions and verifying them (Bingham, 2023; Monaro et al., 2022). Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and categorizing field data relevant to students' knowledge of moderation, influencing factors, and institutional strengthening efforts. Data display was conducted by organizing the condensed data into thematic matrices, tables, and narrative descriptions to facilitate pattern recognition and analytical clarity. Finally, drawing conclusions and verification

involved interpreting meanings, identifying relationships among themes, and continually validating findings against the data corpus to ensure analytical rigor. This analytical process enabled the crystallization of findings grounded in participants' lived experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed, although not all qualitative validation techniques were applied uniformly. Credibility was enhanced through source triangulation by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted selectively by confirming key interpretations with selected informants. Dependability was supported through transparent documentation of research procedures, while confirmability was ensured by maintaining reflexive field notes to minimize researcher bias. These strategies are consistent with qualitative quality standards proposed in phenomenological and educational research (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022b; Dahal, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The research findings are presented to illustrate the empirical realities of strengthening religious moderation among students of the Islamic Education Program within an Islamic higher education context. These findings are derived from a systematic analysis of in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document studies, which collectively capture students' lived experiences, institutional practices, and educational strategies related to religious moderation. To ensure analytical clarity, the findings are organized into three interconnected themes: (1) students' knowledge and meaning-making of religious moderation, (2) structural and institutional factors influencing its development, and (3) strategic efforts undertaken by the institution to strengthen practice moderation. This thematic organization reflects the study's phenomenological orientation, emphasizing how moderation is understood, experienced, and enacted in everyday academic and socio-religious life. By presenting the findings in this structured manner, the study provides a coherent empirical foundation for understanding religious moderation not merely as a normative concept but as a dynamic and contextualized educational process.

Students' Knowledge and Meaning-Making of Religious Moderation

In this study, students' knowledge and meaning-making of religious moderation refers to how Islamic Education students cognitively understand, internalize, and morally interpret moderation as a lived religious value. Operationally, this sub-finding encompasses students' awareness of national commitment (Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika), appreciation of religious and cultural diversity as sunnatullah, rejection of violence through dialogical and ethical conflict resolution, and accommodative

attitudes toward local cultural expressions of Islam. Rather than being treated as abstract doctrines, these elements are understood by students as guiding principles that shape everyday religious attitudes, social interactions, and civic responsibilities.

One informant, a senior Islamic Education student actively involved in campus religious organizations, emphasized that religious moderation is inseparable from national commitment. The informant stated that loyalty to Pancasila and national unity does not contradict Islamic teachings but instead reflects the ethical mission of Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. From the student's perspective, moderation functions as a moral safeguard against radical interpretations that threaten social cohesion.

The researcher interprets this narrative as evidence that students conceptualize moderation through a civic-religious synthesis in which Islamic values are harmonized with national ideology. This synthesis indicates a mature cognitive framing of religion, positioning Islam not as an oppositional force but as a moral foundation for pluralistic citizenship.

Another informant emphasized the importance of respecting religious and cultural differences, characterizing diversity as *sunnatullah*, which must be accepted rather than contested. The student explained that intolerance often stems from shallow religious understanding and emotional rigidity, whereas moderation encourages dialogue, empathy, and ethical self-restraint. Violence, according to the informant, represents a failure of Islamic morality and contradicts the objectives of *maqaṣid al-shari'ah*, particularly the protection of life and social harmony.

This account suggests that students' meaning-making of moderation is deeply ethical rather than merely procedural. The researcher interprets this as an internalization of Islamic moral reasoning, in which moderation is framed as an ethical obligation grounded in Islamic jurisprudential principles and prophetic ethics, rather than as an externally imposed agenda.

Classroom and campus observations revealed that students consistently demonstrated accommodative attitudes toward local cultural expressions of Islam. In academic discussions and informal religious activities, students openly referenced local values such as *Sipakatau* (mutual humanization), *Sipakalebbi* (mutual respect), and *Sipakainge* (mutual moral reminder). These values were not treated as cultural accessories but as ethical extensions of Islamic teachings.

The researcher interprets these observations as indicative of contextualized religious cognition, where students integrate local wisdom into their understanding of Islam. This integration reflects the practical manifestation of Islamic moderation, aligning closely with the broader discourse of Islam Nusantara as a culturally embedded and socially responsive form of religiosity.

Taken together, the data indicate that students understand religious moderation as a holistic framework encompassing national loyalty, ethical tolerance, non-violence, and cultural accommodation. Their interpretations move beyond normative slogans, revealing moderation as a value system that

guides moral judgment, social behavior, and religious expression. This restatement clarifies that moderation, for these students, operates simultaneously at cognitive, ethical, and practical levels.

A clear pattern emerges from the data: students consistently frame religious moderation as a moral compass rather than a regulatory concept. Across interviews and observations, moderation is associated with ethical maturity, dialogical engagement, and contextual religiosity. The convergence of national commitment, ethical tolerance, and cultural accommodation suggests a coherent internal logic in students' religious reasoning, where Islam is understood as inherently compatible with pluralism, peace, and local cultural identities.

Table 1. Ideal Influence of Religious Moderation on Students' Meaning-Making

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Islamic Education Student (Senior)	"Being loyal to Pancasila does not weaken my faith; it strengthens my responsibility as a Muslim citizen."	National commitment
Islamic Education Student (Campus Activist)	"Differences are <i>sunnatullah</i> . Violence only shows that someone fails to understand Islam ethically."	Anti-violence & tolerance
Islamic Education Student (Pesantren Background)	"Local values like <i>Sipakatau</i> teach us how Islam should be lived respectfully in society."	Cultural accommodation

The table illustrates how students' positions and experiences shape their articulation of religious moderation. Despite differing backgrounds, all informants converge on the view that moderation is inseparable from ethical responsibility. National commitment, tolerance, and cultural accommodation appear as interconnected indicators rather than isolated attributes, suggesting that moderation is internalized as a coherent moral orientation.

Moreover, the consistency across informants indicates an ideal pattern of influence, in which institutional learning, cultural context, and personal reflection collectively reinforce students' understanding of moderation. This pattern demonstrates that religious moderation among Islamic Education students is not incidental but systematically constructed through academic discourse, social interaction, and lived cultural experience.

Overall, the data reveal a stable pattern of integrative meaning-making, in which students reconcile Islamic teachings with national identity and local culture. Religious moderation emerges as a lived ethical practice that enables students to navigate diversity, resist extremism, and embody Islam as a peaceful and socially grounded faith tradition.

Factors Influencing the Development of Religious Moderation

In this study, factors influencing the development of religious moderation are defined as structural and institutional mechanisms that systematically shape students' moderate religious attitudes and practices. Operationally, this sub-finding comprises two interrelated domains: academic factors, including curriculum integration, dedicated courses, pedagogical continuity, reflective teaching methods, and lecturers' exemplary roles; and non-academic factors, such as interfaith and intercultural dialogue, peer discussion and mentoring, community service, preacher training programs, and pesantren-based religious activities. These factors function collectively as formative environments that sustain moderation as an educational and social process rather than a one-time intervention.

A lecturer in the Islamic Education program explained that religious moderation is intentionally embedded across multiple courses rather than confined to a single subject. The informant emphasized that values of moderation are introduced through thematic discussions, case-based learning, and reflective assignments that encourage students to connect Islamic teachings with contemporary social realities. According to the lecturer, continuity in exposure is crucial, as moderation cannot be cultivated through sporadic instruction.

The researcher interprets this account as evidence of curricular intentionality, where moderation is institutionalized through sustained pedagogical design. The lecturer's role as a moral exemplar further reinforces this process, positioning educators not only as transmitters of knowledge but as living representations of moderate religious conduct.

A student mentor involved in campus religious activities highlighted the importance of non-academic spaces in shaping students' religious attitudes. The informant noted that interfaith dialogues, peer discussions, and community engagement programs expose students to real-life diversity, compelling them to practice tolerance rather than merely discuss it theoretically. The informant further stated that pesantren-based activities and preacher training programs cultivate discipline, humility, and ethical responsibility.

From the researcher's perspective, this narrative underscores the role of experiential learning in reinforcing religious moderation. These non-academic activities provide affective and social contexts where moderation is enacted, tested, and internalized through direct interaction and reflective practice.

The developmental flow of religious moderation can be described as a sequential yet reciprocal process. Academic structures introduce foundational concepts and ethical frameworks through curriculum and pedagogy. These conceptual foundations are then reinforced through non-academic experiences that translate theory into lived practice. Feedback from experiential contexts subsequently enriches classroom reflection, creating a continuous loop of

learning, practice, and moral refinement. This flow demonstrates that moderation emerges from the dynamic interaction between structured instruction and social engagement, rather than from isolated educational inputs.

Observational data revealed consistent alignment between institutional discourse and daily practices. Lecturers were observed modeling respectful dialogue, inclusive language, and critical openness during classroom discussions. Outside the classroom, students actively participated in community service and religious mentoring activities that emphasized cooperation across social and cultural boundaries.

The researcher interprets these observations as indicators of institutional coherence, where formal curricula and informal practices mutually reinforce moderation values. This coherence enhances the credibility and effectiveness of moderation education, as students encounter consistent messages across multiple institutional settings.

In summary, the development of religious moderation among Islamic Education students is shaped by an integrated system of academic and non-academic factors. Structured curriculum design, reflective pedagogy, and lecturer role modeling provide the cognitive and ethical foundations, while experiential activities outside the classroom solidify these foundations through lived interaction. This restatement clarifies that moderation is cultivated through continuity, consistency, and contextual engagement.

A dominant pattern emerging from the data is the interdependence between structure and experience. Academic and non-academic factors operate synergistically, forming a reinforcing cycle that sustains students' moderate religious orientations. Where institutional commitment is strong and learning experiences are continuous, moderation appears more deeply internalized and resilient.

Table 2. Ideal Influence of Institutional Factors on Religious Moderation

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Islamic Education Lecturer	“Moderation must be integrated across courses; one subject alone is insufficient.”	Curriculum integration
Islamic Education Student Mentor	“Dialogue and community service teach tolerance more effectively than lectures.”	Experiential learning
Pesantren Instructor	“Preacher training shapes discipline and ethical responsibility.”	Religious mentoring

The table illustrates how different institutional actors contribute distinct yet complementary influences on students' development of moderation. Lecturers emphasize structural consistency and pedagogical continuity, while student mentors and pesantren instructors highlight experiential and affective

dimensions. Together, these perspectives reveal that moderation is sustained through collaborative institutional roles rather than individual efforts.

Furthermore, the alignment of indicators across academic and non-academic domains reflects an ideal model of influence, in which formal education and lived religious practice converge. This convergence reinforces students' ethical reasoning and social sensitivity, suggesting that institutional synergy is a critical condition for cultivating religious moderation.

Overall, the data demonstrate a recurring pattern of systemic reinforcement, in which curriculum design, role modeling, experiential learning, and community engagement collectively construct a stable environment for religious moderation. This pattern confirms that moderation is most effectively developed when institutions operate as integrated moral ecosystems rather than fragmented instructional spaces.

Institutional Efforts to Strengthen Religious Moderation

In this study, institutional efforts to strengthen religious moderation refer to strategic and practical initiatives implemented by the Islamic university to systematically cultivate moderate religious orientations among students of Islamic Education. Operationally, this sub-finding encompasses the formal implementation of a Religious Moderation course with a structured curriculum, the integration of theoretical frameworks and practical applications aimed at preventing radicalism, and the development of lecturers' competencies and commitments. These efforts include mastery of the pillars of religious moderation, pedagogical and reflective teaching skills, and consistent ethical role modeling that translates institutional vision into everyday educational practice.

Table 3. Interview Evidence Table

Interview Excerpt	Indicator	Informant
"The Religious Moderation course is designed not only to explain concepts but to train students to respond wisely to real social issues."	Theory-practice integration	Head of Islamic Education Program
"Preventing radicalism requires structured learning, not incidental seminars."	Anti-radicalism strategy	Senior Lecturer
"Students observe how lecturers speak, disagree, and respect differences."	Lecturer role modeling	Islamic Education Student
"Understanding moderation pillars is meaningless without reflective teaching."	Pedagogical competence	Curriculum Developer

The table demonstrates that institutional efforts are strategically oriented toward sustainability rather than symbolic compliance. The emphasis on structured coursework and theory-practice integration indicates a deliberate move away from ad hoc moderation campaigns toward curriculum-based

normalization. By embedding anti-radicalism objectives within formal learning processes, the institution positions moderation as a core academic competency rather than an auxiliary moral message.

Critically, this strategy reflects an understanding that the prevention of radicalism is most effective when approached through continuous intellectual engagement and ethical reflection. The data suggest that institutional leaders view moderation education as a long-term investment in students' critical reasoning capacities, rather than as a reactive response to external threats.

From a practical standpoint, the table highlights the centrality of lecturers' competencies and ethical dispositions. Students' testimonies reveal that moderation is learned not only through course content but through daily interactions with lecturers who embody respectful dialogue and reflective judgment. This finding underscores the significance of the hidden curriculum, in which implicitly communicated attitudes and behaviors often carry greater pedagogical weight than formal instruction.

The data further indicate that pedagogical competence, particularly reflective and dialogical teaching methods, functions as a bridge between abstract moderation principles and students' lived experiences; without such competence, moderation risks being perceived as rhetorical rather than transformative.

Observations of classroom practices and campus activities confirmed the alignment between institutional policy and pedagogical enactment. Lecturers consistently facilitated discussions that encouraged critical engagement with contentious religious issues while maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect. Practical assignments required students to analyze real cases of religious tension and propose moderation-based responses.

The researcher interprets these observations as evidence of institutional enactment, where strategic intentions are effectively translated into pedagogical practices. This enactment reinforces students' trust in moderate discourse by demonstrating its relevance and applicability in authentic learning contexts.

Overall, the findings indicate that institutional strengthening of religious moderation operates through an integrated strategy that combines structured curriculum implementation, theory-practice linkage, prevention of radicalism, and lecturer competency development. This restatement clarifies that moderation is institutionalized not merely through policy declarations but through sustained pedagogical commitment and ethical exemplification.

A consistent pattern emerging from the data is institutional normalization, whereby religious moderation becomes an ordinary and expected component of academic life. Rather than being framed as an exceptional or corrective measure, moderation is embedded into routine teaching, learning, and interactional norms across the institution.

Table 4. Ideal Institutional Influence on Religious Moderation

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Head of Islamic Education Program	“Moderation must be structurally embedded to be effective.”	Structured curriculum
Senior Lecturer	“Teaching moderation requires reflective pedagogy, not indoctrination.”	Pedagogical competence
Islamic Education Student	“Lecturers’ attitudes shape how we understand moderation.”	Ethical role modeling

The ideal influence table illustrates how different institutional actors contribute to a coherent ecosystem of moderation. Leadership focuses on structural embedding, lecturers emphasize pedagogical depth, and students highlight experiential learning through role modeling. This convergence indicates that effective moderation strengthening requires vertical and horizontal alignment within the institution.

Furthermore, the consistency across indicators suggests that moderation is most sustainable when institutional strategy and daily practice reinforce one another. The data reveal a pattern in which formal curriculum design, lecturer behavior, and student perception operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms, consolidating moderation as a lived institutional value rather than a declarative ideal.

In sum, the data show a recurring pattern of strategic-practical convergence, where institutional planning and pedagogical enactment are tightly coupled. This convergence enables religious moderation to function as a preventive, educative, and transformative force within Islamic higher education, effectively addressing the risks of radicalism while nurturing ethical and reflective religious citizenship.

Discussion

The first finding demonstrates that students’ understanding of religious moderation is not merely cognitive but deeply value-laden, encompassing national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and cultural accommodation. This aligns with existing literature conceptualizing religious moderation as a multidimensional construct encompassing theological balance, civic responsibility, and social ethics (Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025b; Mala & Hunaida, 2023). Similar studies in Indonesian Islamic higher education confirm that moderation becomes effective when framed as lived religious consciousness rather than abstract doctrine (Supriyanto, 2022). However, this study extends prior research by revealing how students explicitly interpret moderation through *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* and local wisdom such as Sipakatau and Sipakalebbi, indicating a stronger localization of moderation discourse than commonly reported in national-level analyses.

The second finding highlights that the development of religious moderation is significantly shaped by structural and institutional factors, particularly curriculum integration, lecturer role modeling, and the frequency of sustained learning. This supports prior research emphasizing the role of curriculum design and pedagogical continuity in fostering inclusive religious attitudes (Udemba, 2024). Studies by (Ashoumi & Hidayatulloh, 2022; Wahyudin et al., 2024) Similarly, they argue that values of moderation are internalized more effectively through reflective and dialogical learning methods. Nevertheless, this study diverges from some quantitative surveys by showing that the frequency and consistency of exposure, not merely the presence of the curriculum, are decisive factors, thereby reinforcing sociocultural learning theories that emphasize habituation and modeling over episodic instruction.

The third finding reveals that institutional strategies, such as implementing a structured Religious Moderation course and ensuring lecturer competence, function as preventive mechanisms against radicalism. This corroborates international and national scholarship asserting that higher education institutions play a critical role in countering extremism through curriculum-based interventions (Evers et al., 2025). In the Indonesian context, similar conclusions were drawn by Mulyadi et al. (Ardhy, 2025; Rofiq, 2025), who emphasized the effectiveness of moderation-oriented pedagogy in pesantren-based universities. The present study advances this discourse by evidencing how ethical role modeling by lecturers operates as a hidden curriculum, strengthening moderation more effectively than normative instruction alone.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to the development of a contextualized model of religious moderation that integrates lived religion theory, social learning theory, and Islamic educational philosophy. Unlike normative moderation frameworks that emphasize doctrinal balance, this study confirms that moderation arises from the interaction among cognition, experience, and institutional culture. In practice, the findings imply that universities should move beyond symbolic moderation policies toward systemic curriculum reform, ongoing faculty development, and experiential learning platforms such as interfaith dialogue and community engagement. This aligns with applied educational studies that advocate whole-institution approaches to values education (Holst et al., 2024; Kohl et al., 2022).

Overall, the convergence of findings indicates a consistent pattern: religious moderation is most effectively cultivated when personal understanding, institutional structures, and strategic praxis are aligned. This study reinforces the argument that moderation cannot be reduced to ideological counter-narratives but must be embedded as an academic habitus within Islamic higher education. By integrating national values, ethical Islam, and local culture, the findings not only confirm but also refine existing moderation theories,

offering a scalable model for faith-based universities in plural societies facing challenges of radicalism and social fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that religious moderation among Islamic Education students is not merely an abstract normative ideal but a lived educational reality constructed through the interaction of cognitive understanding, institutional structures, and strategic pedagogical practices. The most important lesson derived from this research is that moderation is effectively internalized when students are actively engaged in reflective learning environments that integrate Islamic ethical principles, local cultural wisdom, and exemplary academic leadership. The findings demonstrate that students' comprehension of moderation extends beyond tolerance to include balance, contextual reasoning, and social responsibility, indicating that moderation functions as a holistic moral orientation. The strength of this study lies in its phenomenological approach, which contributes theoretically by advancing the discourse on religious moderation from policy-driven narratives to experiential and meaning-centered analysis. By situating moderation within the everyday academic life of a pesantren-based university, this research enriches Islamic education scholarship with a context-sensitive model that bridges theology, pedagogy, and sociocultural practice.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. The research is limited to a single institutional context, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings across diverse Islamic higher education settings. Additionally, the qualitative phenomenological design prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth, leaving room for complementary quantitative or mixed-method studies to examine causal relationships and broader patterns. Future research should explore comparative studies across regions and institutional types, as well as longitudinal designs to assess the sustainability of religious moderation over time. Further investigation into the roles of digital learning environments and social media in shaping students' attitudes toward moderation would also be valuable. Addressing these areas will not only strengthen empirical evidence but also refine strategic interventions for cultivating religious moderation as a transformative force in higher education and society.

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