

## **Strengthening Religious Moderation Through an Asset-Based Educational Program for Islamic Boarding School Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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This community-based engagement study aims to strengthen the understanding and practices of religious moderation as a form of social capital supporting sustainable national development. Religious moderation is conceptualized not merely as a normative ideal, but as lived religious attitudes and practices that must be continuously internalized, particularly among Islamic boarding school students (santri) as future religious leaders. Baitul Mustaqim Islamic Boarding School was selected due to its strategic role in shaping students' religious perspectives and social engagement. The program seeks to enhance both conceptual understanding and practical implementation of religious moderation, enabling santri to promote inclusive, tolerant, and balanced religious values within plural social contexts. An Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach was employed, emphasizing the identification and mobilization of existing assets, capacities, and strengths within the pesantren community. This participatory approach positions santri as active agents of change rather than passive recipients. Educational activities included Building Learning Commitment (BLC), an overview of religious life in Indonesia, the conceptual framework and indicators of religious moderation, and leadership and pioneering roles of santri. Program effectiveness was assessed using pre-test and post-test instruments. The results show a significant improvement in students' understanding of religious moderation, increasing from 85.5% in the pre-test to 100% in the post-test. Students' perception of moderation as a balanced religious attitude also increased from 60.0% to 89.3%. These findings demonstrate that an ABCD-based educational program effectively strengthens religious moderation in pesantren settings and offers a participatory model that can be replicated in similar community engagement initiatives.

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## INTRODUCTION

Moderate religious understanding constitutes a fundamental necessity for Indonesian society, which exists within a multicultural and multireligious social reality. In this context, religion does not merely function as a system of personal belief, but also carries broad social implications. Misguided, narrow, and extreme religious interpretations have the potential to trigger various social problems, including horizontal conflicts that threaten social cohesion. Therefore, systematic efforts are required from an early stage to instill religious attitudes that acknowledge diversity, respect the beliefs of others, and uphold mutual respect without imposing one's will through violence (Akhmadi, 2019).

Several studies indicate that intolerance toward different religious practices in Indonesia remains relatively high. Research conducted by the Wahid Institute, for instance, reveals that intolerant attitudes toward non-Muslims reach 38.4% (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, Modul Penguatan Moderasi Beragama Jakarta: Kelompok Kerja Moderasi Beragama, Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2021). This condition is exacerbated by the massive dissemination of intolerant religious narratives through social media. The fast, open, and easily accessible nature of social media has turned digital platforms into strategic spaces for certain groups to spread radical ideologies, particularly targeting younger generations. One prominent example is the emergence of the Muslim Cyber Army Indonesia (MCAI), which has been identified as disseminating radical narratives and even openly declaring agendas of "war" on social media platforms (Wibowo, 2019).

Data released by the Directorate for Informatics Application Control under the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology further underscores the severity of this issue. The report records thousands of radicalism and terrorism-related content across various digital platforms that have been blocked by the government. These include 494 contents on websites, 502 contents on file-sharing platforms, 678 contents on Google and YouTube, and 1,384 contents on Twitter. The highest number of blocked contents was found on Facebook and Instagram, totaling 8,131 contents (Wibowo, 2019). This situation illustrates that digital spaces have become a primary arena for the dissemination of exclusive and intolerant religious ideologies.

Furthermore, issues of intolerance and radicalism not only affect the general public but have also penetrated the educational sector. Research conducted by Rangga Eka Saputra reveals that radical and intolerant attitudes are found among some religious teachers. Teachers who hold exclusive religious interpretations are likely to transmit these views to their students, thereby shaping intolerant mindsets from an early age. This condition is also potentially present within Islamic boarding school environments, considering the significant influence of teachers or caregivers in shaping students' religious understanding (Murasiln, 2010).

Amid these challenges, santri (Islamic boarding school students) occupy a strategic position in maintaining and transmitting values of social harmony within multireligious societies. According to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), santri refers to individuals who are earnest in studying Islamic teachings and are recognized for their pious conduct in daily life (Azizah, 2021). Generally, santri are students who pursue religious education in Islamic boarding schools, studying Islamic disciplines such as jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (tauhid), ethics (akhlaq), and mysticism (tasawuf). In addition, santri also participate in formal education from elementary to higher education levels, providing them with relatively broad insights into both religious and general knowledge.

The contemporary socio-religious landscape of Indonesia demonstrates an increasing tendency toward intolerance, exclusive religious practices, religion-based violence, and anti-national narratives promoted by certain groups. If left unaddressed, such religious practices may undermine the national

foundation that has long been built upon deliberation, mutual respect, and the spirit of cooperation in resolving social problems. Consequently, strengthening religious understanding oriented toward humanistic, inclusive, dialogical, tolerant, peaceful, and just values is imperative.

In this regard, religious moderation can be understood as a form of social capital that plays a crucial role in supporting sustainable national development. The state's normative commitment to strengthening religious moderation has been formally articulated through Presidential Regulation No. 18 of 2020 concerning the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020–2024, which explicitly positions religious moderation as a strategic development agenda.

Additional research conducted by the Ministry of Education and Culture indicates that intolerance toward different religious practices is even higher, reaching 57.6% (Hadi, 2017). Moreover, radical and intolerant attitudes have also been identified among some Islamic Religious Education teachers, who may serve as channels for reproducing exclusive religious understandings within formal educational settings (Saputra, 2018). These findings emphasize that efforts to strengthen religious moderation cannot be delayed and must target various educational sectors, including Islamic boarding schools.

Within Islamic teachings, religious moderation is closely associated with the concept of *wasatiyah*, which literally means “the middle path.” Moderation in Islam is reflected through the principle of justice (‘adl), signifying a balance between fulfilling obligations and obtaining rights; equilibrium (tawazun) between one’s relationship with Allah Swt. and relationships with fellow human beings; and tolerance (tasamuh) in interreligious life (Sirajuddin, 2020).

The selection of santri as subjects of this community service program is based on their intellectual capacity, moral formation, and ethical capital. With these attributes, santri are expected to play a pioneering role in strengthening religious moderation. Islamic boarding schools, as religious educational institutions, hold a strategic position in internalizing moderation values through enhancing both understanding and practice of religious teachings oriented toward public welfare (maslahah) (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, Modul Penguatan Moderasi Beragama, Jakarta: Kelompok Kerja Moderasi Beragama, Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2021).

Despite numerous studies and policies emphasizing the importance of religious moderation in responding to rising intolerance and radicalism, its implementation at the level of religious educational communities continues to face significant challenges. Most religious moderation programs remain normative and focus primarily on conceptual dissemination, without adopting approaches that explore and optimize the internal assets of target communities. Furthermore, religious moderation initiatives within Islamic boarding schools are often conducted in a top-down manner, positioning santri merely as passive recipients rather than active agents in the internalization process. This condition highlights a gap between the need for contextual and participatory religious moderation and prevailing community engagement practices that emphasize one-way socialization.

In response to this gap, this community service activity offers an alternative approach through the application of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) method in strengthening religious moderation within the Islamic boarding school environment. The novelty of this program lies in positioning santri as the main actors of community engagement by focusing on the identification and reinforcement of existing assets, knowledge, values, and religious practices within Baitul Mustaqim Islamic Boarding School. Through this approach, religious moderation is not merely treated as a normative discourse but is internalized as a lived and sustainable religious practice. Accordingly, this program contributes to the development of a participatory, contextual, and sustainability-oriented model of strengthening religious moderation within Islamic boarding school communities.

Based on these considerations, one strategic effort to internalize the values of religious moderation among santri at Baitul Mustaqim Islamic Boarding School is through socialization and reinforcement activities on religious moderation. Through these activities, santri are expected not only to understand the religious moderation conceptually but also to implement it in their daily religious practices. Moreover, they are anticipated to remain resilient against radical and intolerant ideologies and to actively serve as agents who promote religious moderation within the broader society.

Therefore, this community service program aims to strengthen the understanding and practice of religious moderation among santri at Baitul Mustaqim Islamic Boarding School through an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach. The novelty of this program lies in positioning santri as active agents rather than passive recipients, emphasizing the utilization of existing religious, cultural, and social assets within the pesantren to foster sustainable moderation practices.

## METHOD

This community engagement program was implemented using the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach. This approach was selected because it aligns with the nature of community service activities that position the community as the main subject of development. ABCD emphasizes strengthening community capacity by identifying and utilizing existing assets, including human resources, values, and socio-religious practices that have already developed within the Islamic boarding school environment. Through this approach, students are not treated merely as recipients of the program but are recognized as strategic assets who actively participate in the process of strengthening religious moderation.

The community engagement activity was conducted at Baitul Mustaqim Islamic Boarding School, and took place in the main hall of the pesantren. The participants consisted of 100 students who were currently enrolled in or had completed Madrasah Diniyah Ula (upper level) and Madrasah Diniyah Wustho (intermediate level). The selection of students as the primary participants was based on their strategic role as future religious actors who possess the potential to become agents of religious moderation within both the pesantren environment and the wider community.

The implementation of the program was carried out through several interrelated stages, namely preparation, implementation, and reflection. During the preparation stage, the community service team coordinated with the pesantren authorities and conducted an initial mapping of student assets, particularly their existing knowledge, experiences, and religious perspectives. Based on this mapping, the team prepared administrative requirements and designed educational materials on religious moderation that were contextualized to the pesantren setting.

The implementation stage was conducted through socialization and strengthening activities using an educational and dialogical approach. The program began with a pre-test to assess the students' initial understanding and practices related to religious moderation. Subsequently, students participated in a series of learning sessions, including Building Center Learning, an overview of religious life in Indonesia, the concept of religious moderation, as well as the leadership and pioneering roles of students. The learning process was designed to be interactive to encourage active participation, dialogue, and critical reflection on contemporary religious and social realities. At the end of the program, a post-test was administered to identify changes in students' understanding and attitudes after completing the entire series of activities. The pre-test and post-test instruments consisted of structured questionnaires designed to measure students' understanding of religious moderation, its indicators, and its application

in daily life. Data were analyzed descriptively using percentage comparisons to identify changes before and after the intervention.

The reflection stage served as an evaluative component of the community engagement process. This stage focused on assessing the internalization of religious moderation values and exploring the potential integration of these values into the educational practices and curriculum of the pesantren. Through this reflective process, the community engagement activity was not limited to short-term socialization but was oriented toward the sustainable formation of students' religious character, emphasizing moderation, inclusivity, and contextual awareness.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This community service program was conducted to enhance the understanding and practice of religious moderation among students of Baitul Mustaqim Islamic Boarding School. Religious moderation is understood as a perspective, attitude, and practice of religiosity in communal life that emphasizes the substantive values of religious teachings which uphold human dignity and promote public welfare, grounded in the principles of justice, balance, and adherence to the constitution as a national consensus (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021).

Religious moderation requires a balanced approach between the internal practice of one's own religious beliefs and respect for the religious practices of others who hold different faiths. A moderate religious attitude represents a middle path that prevents individuals from falling into extreme tendencies, whether in the form of ultraconservatism or excessive liberalism. In this context, religious moderation functions as a constructive response to extreme polarization that often triggers social conflict and interreligious tension.

As prospective religious communicators, santri occupy a strategic position in internalizing and disseminating the values of religious moderation within Islamic educational institutions and wider society. International studies on religious education emphasize that moderation functions as a framework for balancing religious commitment with plural social realities, enabling individuals to uphold faith-based values while engaging constructively with diversity (Jackson, 2014). In Islamic scholarship, religious moderation is closely associated with the concept of *wasatiyyah*, which promotes equilibrium between reason and revelation, individual rights and communal responsibilities, as well as textual authority and contextual interpretation (*ijtihad*) (Kamali, 2015).

This balanced position does not imply theological compromise or indecisiveness; rather, it reflects a principled commitment to justice, human dignity, and peaceful coexistence without negating religious identity. Empirical studies demonstrate that Islamic educational environments that integrate moderation-oriented pedagogy are more effective in fostering tolerant attitudes and social cohesion among students (Bano, 2018; Sahin, 2013). Accordingly, santri who internalize these moderation principles are well-positioned to act as agents of harmony and ethical religious communication in increasingly plural societies.

To identify moderate attitudes in the religious practices of santri, four indicators of religious moderation were employed: national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and acceptance of local culture. National commitment serves as a crucial indicator in assessing whether religious perspectives and practices align with the acceptance of Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, and other foundational principles of the Indonesian nation-state (Indonesia & Indonesia, 2019). Tolerance, as explained by Quraish Shihab, represents the acceptable degree of flexibility in religious attitudes necessary to maintain unity amid diversity (Khoirun Sirin, 2021). The non-violence indicator is reflected in attitudes

and actions that reject the use of violence—whether verbal, physical, or ideological—in the name of religion. Meanwhile, acceptance of local culture signifies the compatibility of religious moderation with the values of diversity and local wisdom embedded within society.

After completing their education in pesantren, santri return to society, and some of them assume roles as religious leaders. The intellectual capacity and moral authority possessed by santri constitute significant potential for preventing religion-based social conflicts. Their direct engagement with communities enables them to understand local socio-religious dynamics and to contribute as mediators, communicators, and facilitators of reconciliation when conflicts arise. Nevertheless, not all santri or religious figures possess equal capacities, highlighting the need for systematic efforts to strengthen the understanding and practice of religious moderation from an early stage.

The program to enhance understanding and practice of religious moderation began with the administration of a pre-test, facilitated by Mila Widiastuti, to measure the students' initial level of knowledge regarding religious moderation. This was followed by a Building Center Learning session conducted by the community service team, aimed at fostering initial commitment and readiness among the santri to engage in the religious moderation strengthening program.



**FIGURE 1.** Presenting material on the concept of religious moderation

The first material session was delivered by Dewi Masitoh, M.Pd., under the theme Sketches of Religious Life in Indonesia. This session provided an overview of the complexity of religious life in Indonesia and the increasing challenges it faces, thereby emphasizing the urgency of promoting religious moderation across various social spheres, including Islamic boarding schools. The subsequent session was delivered by Siti Mustaghfiyah, M.Phil., who discussed The Concept of Religious Moderation, covering its definition, the boundaries of extremism, legal foundations, principles, and indicators of religious moderation. The next session was presented by Nency Dela Oktora, M.Sy., on Leadership and Pioneering, which aimed to motivate santri to become pioneers of religious moderation both within the pesantren environment and in the broader community.



**FIGURE 2.** Presenting material on the sketch of religious life in Indonesia

Following the completion of all sessions, the program concluded with the administration of a post-test facilitated by Shifa Aulia Zahra to assess changes in the students' understanding and practice of religious moderation. The evaluation results indicated a significant improvement. Before the program, 14.5% of santri had not yet understood the concepts, boundaries, and indicators of religious moderation. After the program, all participants (100%) demonstrated an understanding of religious moderation. Moreover, the percentage of santri who perceived religious moderation as a middle-path approach to religiosity increased to 89.3%.



**FIGURE 3.** Religious moderation campaign

These findings demonstrate that educational and participatory community service activities are effective in enhancing students' understanding and awareness of the importance of religious moderation. Accordingly, Islamic boarding schools hold substantial potential as strategic spaces for cultivating agents of religious moderation who are committed to peace, tolerance, and the sustainability of social harmony.

The increase in students' understanding of religious moderation, as reflected in the pre-test and post-test results, indicates the effectiveness of the educational approach employed in this community service program. The improvement in students' comprehension was not limited to the conceptual level but also extended to their interpretation of religious moderation as a middle-path approach to religious life. This finding suggests that strengthening religious moderation does not merely result in definitional mastery, but also contributes to a shift in students' perspectives on how religion is positioned within a plural social reality.

More specifically, Table 1 shows that before the implementation of the community service activities, a proportion of students had not yet fully understood the concepts, indicators, and boundaries of religious moderation. Although most students already possessed a basic level of understanding, their perception of religious moderation as a balanced religious attitude remained relatively low. Following the implementation of the program, all indicators demonstrated significant improvement, with conceptual understanding and knowledge of moderation indicators reaching 100%, alongside a substantial increase in the understanding of moderation as a middle-path religious attitude.

**TABLE 1.** Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results on Students' Understanding of Religious Moderation

Indicator of Understanding	Pre-Test (%)	Post-Test (%)
Understanding of Religious Moderation	85.5	100
Understanding of Moderation Indicators and Boundaries	85.5	100
Moderation as a Middle-Path Religious Attitude	60.0	89.3

Compared to previous studies on religious moderation that primarily emphasize normative socialization and conceptual dissemination, the findings of this program demonstrate a stronger internalization of moderation values. For instance, studies on moderation education in pesantren often report increased awareness but limited behavioral transformation due to top-down delivery models. In contrast, the present program achieved a substantial improvement in both understanding and attitudinal dimensions, particularly regarding moderation as a middle-path religious stance. This outcome aligns with Rinawati et al. (2022), who found that asset-based community approaches foster deeper value internalization than directive or instruction-centered interventions.

The effectiveness of this program can be attributed to the use of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, which shifts the focus from problem-based intervention to asset mobilization. By recognizing students as holders of religious knowledge, lived experiences, and socio-cultural values already embedded within the pesantren environment, ABCD creates a sense of ownership and relevance. Similar findings have been reported in international community engagement studies, where asset-based approaches have been shown to enhance participation, sustainability, and value-based learning (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). These studies emphasize that community members are more likely to adopt and sustain social values when they are actively involved in identifying and strengthening their own capacities.

Furthermore, the participatory and dialogical learning process employed in this program resonates with international research on transformative religious education. Studies indicate that dialogical and reflective pedagogies are more effective in shaping moderate religious attitudes than one-way transmission models, particularly in plural societies (Jackson, 2014; Gearon, 2013). Through interactive sessions and reflective discussions, students were encouraged to critically engage with contemporary religious and social challenges, thereby strengthening their capacity to practice moderation in real-life contexts.

The implications of these findings underscore the strategic role of Islamic boarding schools in promoting sustainable religious moderation. Santri who possess both moderate religious understanding and strong social legitimacy are well-positioned to act as agents of peace and conflict prevention within their communities. This reinforces previous research highlighting the importance of religious educational institutions in fostering social cohesion and preventing radicalization (Bano, 2018).

Overall, this study confirms that strengthening religious moderation through an ABCD-based approach is not only conceptually sound but also empirically effective. By integrating asset-based participation with contextual religious education, this community engagement model offers a replicable

framework for pesantren and similar religious institutions seeking to cultivate inclusive, moderate, and socially responsive religious practices.

## CONCLUSION

The community service program entitled “Strengthening Religious Moderation through an Asset-Based Educational Program for Islamic Boarding School Students” was successfully implemented in line with its objectives. The activities were conducted systematically with active student involvement, ensuring that the strengthening of religious moderation was participatory and reflective rather than merely informative.

The program effectively improved students’ knowledge, understanding, and attitudes toward religious moderation. Students not only comprehended religious moderation as a normative concept but also began to internalize it as a balanced religious attitude that emphasizes tolerance, inclusivity, and respect for diversity in social life. This finding highlights the contribution of education-based community service in fostering moderate religious perspectives within the pesantren environment.

Despite these positive outcomes, this program was limited to a single pesantren and a relatively short implementation period, which may affect the sustainability and generalizability of its impact. Therefore, future programs are recommended to incorporate longitudinal mentoring, multi-site implementation, and follow-up evaluations to strengthen long-term outcomes.

Overall, this community service activity contributes a participatory and context-sensitive pesantren-based model for strengthening religious moderation through the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, which may serve as a reference for similar initiatives in other Islamic boarding schools.

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