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Cultural Diversity Education in “Islam and Religious Moderation” Courses: Case Study in Islamic Higher Education

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji model implementasi pendidikan keberagaman budaya dalam mata kuliah “Islam dan Moderasi Beragama” di perguruan tinggi Islam. Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh urgensi yang semakin meningkat untuk menumbuhkan sikap inklusif dan toleran di kalangan mahasiswa sebagai respons atas realitas sosial-keagamaan dan kebudayaan yang plural. Berada dalam diskursus besar mengenai moderasi beragama dan transformasi pendidikan, studi ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi bagaimana strategi pedagogis dapat menumbuhkan pemahaman antarbudaya yang berakar pada nilai-nilai Islam. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis naratif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, diskusi kelompok terfokus, dan observasi pembelajaran, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model tiga tahap dari Jean Clandinin, yakni penyaringan, pengelompokan, dan interpretasi data naratif. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan model implementasi yang mencakup tiga tahapan: (1) membangun pemahaman komprehensif tentang konsep moderasi beragama dalam kerangka lokal dan global; (2) mengaitkan pengetahuan konseptual dengan pengalaman hidup melalui pembelajaran reflektif dan dialogis; dan (3) mendorong perilaku moderat melalui pembelajaran berbasis proyek, diskusi terarah, dan keterlibatan kritis terhadap studi kasus. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi keberagaman budaya dalam pendidikan agama Islam mampu memperkuat cara pandang keagamaan yang inklusif dan mendorong sikap saling menghormati dalam kehidupan kampus maupun masyarakat luas. Temuan ini memberikan wawasan pedagogis untuk menjadikan moderasi beragama sebagai kekuatan transformatif dalam kurikulum pendidikan tinggi Islam.

Kata Kunci: Keberagaman Budaya, Moderasi Beragama, Pedagogi Inklusif, Pendidikan Tinggi Islam, Naratif Inkuiri

Abstract

This study investigates the implementation model of cultural diversity education within the "Islam and Religious Moderation" courses in Islamic higher education institutions. The increasing urgency to foster inclusive and tolerant attitudes among students in response to plural religious and cultural realities drives the research. Positioned within the broader discourse on religious moderation and educational transformation, this study seeks to explore how pedagogical strategies can cultivate intercultural understanding grounded in Islamic values. Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, then analyzed using the Clandinin three-phase model of filtering, grouping, and interpreting narrative data. The findings reveal a three-stage implementation model: (1) building a comprehensive understanding of religious moderation concepts contextualized in global and local frameworks; (2) linking conceptual knowledge to lived experiences through reflective and dialogical learning; and (3) promoting moderate behavior via project-based learning, guided discussions, and critical engagement with case studies. The study concludes that integrating cultural diversity into Islamic religious education can effectively reinforce students' inclusive religious worldviews and foster mutual respect in campus life and society. These findings offer pedagogical insights for embedding religious moderation into the curriculum as a transformative force for pluralistic coexistence.

Keywords: *Cultural Diversity, Religious Moderation, Inclusive Pedagogy, Islamic Higher Education, Narrative Inquiry*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the escalation of conflicts rooted in cultural differences within university environments has become a significant concern in Indonesia's higher education. These tensions are particularly evident among immigrant and minority students who are expected to rapidly adapt to culturally unfamiliar settings (Aulia, Fitriisa, & Haqqu, 2023). Several critical incidents illustrate the gravity of this issue: the 2020 siege of the Papuan Student Dormitory in Yogyakarta, followed by a similar confrontation in Surabaya in 2021, and culminating in violent clashes between PMII and HMI students at the Muhammadiyah University of Bone in 2023 (Detik.com, 2020; Kompas.com, 2021; Datik.com, 2023). Trijono's interpretation highlights the root of these tensions stemming from students' failure to embrace differences in cultural and religious perspectives (Sabirjanovna, 2023). In such a pluralistic academic environment, efforts to cultivate cultural sensitivity and religious moderation become imperative. As Goncing (2018) emphasizes, religious moderation courses are essential to fostering tolerance and mutual respect among diverse student populations.

The theme of cultural diversity and religious moderation occupies a critical intersection in both pedagogical practice and scholarly debate. On the one hand, it

responds to the increasing heterogeneity of university student populations; on the other, it probes into the effectiveness of religious education in shaping inclusive attitudes. Contemporary discourse emphasizes that education must play a transformative role in constructing intercultural understanding and preventing the escalation of identity-based conflict. Yet, within Islamic Higher Education (PTKI), the integration of cultural diversity into religious curricula remains limited and inconsistent. This issue becomes even more pressing when religious identity is often politicized or homogenized, ignoring the cultural plurality embedded in the lived experiences of students. Hence, a deeper investigation into how religious moderation is operationalized in Islamic courses becomes not only pedagogically relevant but also theoretically significant for understanding the role of education in sustaining a multicultural society.

While the academic discourse on religious moderation has grown, it remains segmented and thematically constrained. Most studies either focus on abstract normative frameworks (Hamid et al., 2023) or explore the relationship between moderation and anti-radicalism narratives (Murad & Rizki, 2023; Efendi et al., 2023). Others investigate the political deployment of religious moderation in state discourse or examine its implementation at the school level (Goening, 2023; Musthofa & Zabidi, 2023). However, empirical investigations that evaluate the efficacy of religious moderation courses in cultivating students' acceptance of cultural diversity are scarce. Additionally, research that adopts a qualitative lens to explore students' lived experiences within these programs is largely absent. Haris et al. (2023) argue for the necessity of positivist data to evaluate educational interventions, but qualitative inquiry remains crucial in uncovering the nuanced dynamics of identity formation. This research thus responds to a clear gap in the literature by focusing on the intersection of Islamic pedagogy, cultural diversity, and religious moderation within university settings.

This study draws upon two interrelated theoretical foundations: cultural diversity education and the pedagogical theory of religious moderation. Cultural diversity education is premised on the belief that multicultural awareness and mutual respect can be cultivated through structured learning experiences that expose students to differences, foster empathy, and encourage critical reflection. Meanwhile, the concept of religious moderation, as developed within the Indonesian context, emphasizes values such as tolerance, anti-extremism, and respect for local wisdom (Arif, 2019). These frameworks are instrumental in examining how course content, pedagogical methods, and

institutional culture work collectively to shape students' attitudes toward difference. By integrating these perspectives, this study seeks to uncover the cultural, religious, and pedagogical logics that underpin Islamic education in a diverse learning environment. The theoretical approach thereby allows for a multidimensional understanding of both curriculum design and student transformation.

This study aims to analyze how Islamic and Religious Moderation courses foster tolerance and shape cultural acceptance among students in an Islamic university setting. Specifically, the research focuses on the case of Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang, chosen for its diverse student demographics and institutional emphasis on religious moderation. The study is guided by two key questions: (1) How do these courses contribute to cultivating a culture of respect toward diversity? and (2) What are the challenges in promoting cultural tolerance through religious instruction? In addition to these aims, the research also investigates the factors influencing the success of such programs in instilling inclusive attitudes. By addressing these objectives, this study seeks to contribute both empirically and conceptually to the discourse on religious education and intercultural pedagogy, especially within the framework of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia.

This study is premised on the assumption that students' perceptions and attitudes toward cultural diversity can be significantly influenced by their exposure to religious moderation programs. Prior research suggests that key components of such programs—including the articulation of shared values, recognition of pluralism, and promotion of empathy—can effectively reduce intolerance and foster cooperation (Mumtaz et al., 2022). However, the degree to which these intended outcomes are realized in practice remains uncertain. While Arif (2019) contends that moderation reflects adaptive engagement with cultural diversity, the lived experiences of students often reflect uneven levels of tolerance. Thus, this research argues that the effectiveness of moderation education lies not merely in curriculum content but also in pedagogical execution and institutional support. The findings are expected to reveal the extent to which university-based religious education can serve as a transformative tool in promoting cultural harmony among students.

Given Indonesia's sociocultural complexity and the challenges posed by cultural fragmentation, this research offers timely insights into the role of Islamic higher education in fostering inclusive citizenship. By critically examining how religious

moderation is taught, experienced, and internalized, the study contributes to the broader discourse on peace education, curriculum reform, and interfaith understanding. The findings may inform educational policy, particularly within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, by identifying effective strategies for embedding cultural tolerance in religious education. More broadly, the study offers a model for integrating cultural diversity education into religious curricula, potentially influencing pedagogical practices in other multicultural Muslim societies. Ultimately, this research underscores the transformative power of education in shaping not only cognitive understanding but also moral and social dispositions essential for peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic world.

METHODOLOGY

The unit of analysis in this study centers on the lived experiences of lecturers and students within Islamic Higher Education who engage directly with the “Islam and Religious Moderation” course. These individuals represent critical voices in exploring cultural diversity and religious moderation in the classroom, a domain where pedagogical content intersects with sociocultural realities. The inclusion of these actors is grounded in the understanding that education is both a reflective and constitutive space for social pluralism (Banks, 2004). Their narratives allow the study to focus on how cultural and religious differences are recognized, negotiated, and internalized within Islamic academic settings. Focusing on these actors is essential because they hold key roles in interpreting and disseminating the concept of moderation amidst rising religious and cultural polarization. Lecturers bring pedagogical strategies and ideological framing, while students represent the recipients and co-constructors of meaning in a culturally dynamic context. Given the increasing salience of religious moderation discourse in Indonesia, understanding how it operates at the micro-level of classroom interaction is not only timely but academically imperative (Azra, 2020). In practice, this unit of analysis was operationalized by selecting three lecturers and three students from different faculties and backgrounds. The selection criteria focused on individuals who were actively involved in courses on Islamic studies and who had demonstrable exposure to intergroup encounters or diversity-oriented discussions. Through narrative inquiry, these informants were treated as “storytellers,” whose life experiences and interpretive reflections formed the primary data source for exploring the core issues of cultural difference and moderation.

This research adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry design to deeply explore personal and communal stories of religious and cultural moderation. Narrative inquiry is an interpretive research approach that emphasizes temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is ideal for capturing the evolving and contextually situated experiences of Muslim educators and learners in higher education. This design allows the study to attend to “what” is said and “how” experiences are structured and remembered, uncovering the moral and ideological dimensions of religious moderation as lived practice. The choice of this design is theoretically anchored in the need to understand how individual stories reflect and refract broader cultural dynamics within Islamic education. In contrast to quantitative or even thematic qualitative methods, narrative inquiry foregrounds meaning-making over measurement, which is vital in a study concerned with pluralistic values and subjective engagements with difference. In particular, it allows participants to present counter-narratives or reframe dominant discourses on religious identity and multiculturalism (Riessman, 2008). The research design was implemented through several stages: identifying key informants with diverse backgrounds, conducting in-depth interviews in multiple sessions, and collecting supplementary documents such as reflective essays, course syllabi, and personal notes. The data were then sequenced chronologically and thematically to map out how informants narrate their journey through religious learning and cultural interaction, and how moderation is understood, internalized, and practiced.

The data sources in this study include in-depth interviews and supporting documents from lecturers and students participating in the “Islam and Religious Moderation” course. The richness of narrative inquiry rests on accessing firsthand stories and interpretive reflections (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), and the voices of these informants provide multilayered insights into how religious moderation is taught and embodied. Documents such as lecture materials, reflective writings, and forum discussions were also gathered to supplement the oral accounts and provide a triangulated understanding of the discourse and praxis of moderation. These sources were selected based on the assumption that formal (curricular) and informal (experiential) texts are essential for understanding how religious moderation is framed within Islamic educational settings. Given the socio-political sensitivity of religious identity in Indonesia, students’ and lecturers’ self-narratives are often shaped by doctrinal knowledge and lived encounters with diversity. Therefore, incorporating online content such as

institutional websites and social media reflections offers additional layers of context (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In practice, the researchers conducted six semi-structured interviews (three lecturers and three students), lasting 60–90 minutes each. These were complemented with textual artifacts obtained through institutional access and informants' consent. Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded to identify thematic intersections across participant narratives. The use of multiple sources ensures depth, validity, and contextual sensitivity in the portrayal of lived experiences.

The primary data collection method was semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person and via online platforms such as Zoom. This flexible approach allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words, fostering openness and depth in storytelling. Narrative inquiry emphasizes co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant (Wells, 2011), and the interviews were designed to encourage reflection on both personal history and socio-cultural engagement with religious difference. This method was selected to align with the study's aim of uncovering participants' sense-making processes. Semi-structured interviews provided a balance between guiding the conversation toward relevant themes (such as cultural conflict, inter-religious dialogue, and institutional pluralism) and allowing for unexpected insights to emerge. The openness of this technique is especially pertinent for exploring contested and evolving topics like religious moderation (Barrett, 2009). The data collection process began with obtaining ethical clearance and participant consent. Interview protocols were developed around three thematic domains: experiences with diversity, classroom discussions on moderation, and intergroup relations. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Supplementary data such as written reflections and institutional documents were collected through online repositories and personal sharing. The iterative nature of the process ensured that data were responsive to emergent insights and evolving questions.

Data analysis in this study followed the threefold process central to narrative inquiry: restatement, description, and interpretation (Polkinghorne, 1995). Restatement involved reorganizing stories into coherent narratives, capturing key experiences related to religious and cultural encounters. Description focused on identifying patterns, recurring themes, and contrasts across different informants. Interpretation then explored how these themes reveal underlying ideologies, values, and educational paradigms concerning religious moderation and cultural pluralism. The use of this interpretive model

is rooted in the need to move beyond surface-level thematic coding and toward deeper engagement with how meaning is constructed and communicated. Narrative analysis provides a holistic and human-centered understanding of how religious moderation is lived, not merely articulated. It also allows critical reflection on the sociopolitical and institutional contexts shaping participants' narratives (Bell, 2002). The analytical process began with familiarization and coding of transcripts using narrative frames. Researchers constructed narrative profiles for each informant, then conducted cross-case analysis to map convergences and divergences. The analysis paid close attention to metaphors, turning points, and identity positions in the stories. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, prolonged engagement, and triangulation with document analysis. This multilayered approach helped generate a nuanced and contextually embedded understanding of the dynamics of cultural diversity education in Islamic higher education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Moderation Program in Forming Tolerant Character Against Other Cultures

The results of this study indicate that tolerance education in forming an attitude of respect for other cultures has been implemented in various moderation programs at Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang, Indonesia. This is indicated by policies that intersect with strengthening the values of diversity in Islamic subjects and moderation of religion, which can be seen from the content elements of lecture material and Islamic learning methods and moderation of religion, prioritizing critical thinking patterns. The explanation has been described in the following section.

1. Cultural Tolerance Education in Islamic Lecture Material Content and Religious Moderation

Informant D1 explained that the religious moderation course contains material that encourages students to moderate understanding, psychomotor, and affective. To achieve this goal, several steps were taken by dividing the material on religious moderation into three stages, including 1) understanding various concepts of religious moderation in various countries, 2) connecting the learned concepts with practice, and 3) the last stage is implementing moderate behavior into social life through project-based learning. Informant D1 explained,

"We are collaborating with the moderation house to produce the Semester RPP for the course Islam and religious moderation. Several steps were taken, starting with understanding various concepts of religious moderation applied in various countries to link the concepts studied with practical situations in everyday life." (Informant D1, personal communication, June 2023).

Informant D2 provided details that in Stage 1, the course was emphasized to give the students an understanding of religious moderation, including the parameters and indicators. This material is provided at meetings 1 to 3, aiming to introduce and strengthen students' knowledge of the theories of moderation of religion globally. D2 explains,

"In the first phase, our teaching focuses on providing students with an understanding of the concept of moderation in religion in various countries, including aspects that are parameters and indicators of moderate attitudes in religion. We will present the contents of this material in the first session of three meetings. The aim is to introduce and strengthen students' understanding of various theories related to religious moderation on a global scale." (Informant D2, personal communication, June 2023)

In Stage 2, Informant D3 explained that lectures on religious moderation are emphasized to enhance students' abilities to relate the theories taught in Meetings 1-3 with the phenomena of cultural and religious diversity around them. Students are guided to devise strategies for implementing the concept of religious moderation in light of their diverse experiences. These strategies include fostering a tolerant interreligious dialogue based on peace education, rejecting extremism, integrating the concept of religious moderation in making social and humanitarian contributions, and encouraging students to develop a contextual understanding of religious teachings based on the theory of religious moderation. This treatment was given at the 4-10th meeting, informant D3 explained:

"In the second stage of the religious moderation lecture, students are empowered to meet the concepts from the first to the third meeting with the reality of cultural and religious diversity. They try to design an approach to tolerant dialogue between religions, reject extremism, and help social interests. Through the fourth meeting to bond, Students also study the history of religion and its relationship with cultural and social diversity" (Informant D3, personal communication, July 2023)

After students felt they could connect the concept of religious moderation with societal phenomena, Informant D1 moved on to Stage 3: directly implementing moderate behavior into social life. This effort is facilitated through project-based lectures in Meetings 11-15. In Meetings 11-13, lecture participants are divided into several groups, each tasked with designing a project that exemplifies the application of religious moderation in day-to-day life. These

projects can take various forms, such as videos, presentations, plays, or other suitable expressions.

Each group is expected to elucidate how their projects reflect moderation values and why these aspects hold significant importance. In the 14th Meeting, each group presents their projects to the class, and all students have the opportunity to provide constructive feedback on how these projects embody the concept of religious moderation. Group and class discussions will be conducted to delve deeper into the lessons gleaned from these projects. Meeting 15 tasks students with writing an article that encapsulates the skills acquired from the three-stage lectures: understanding theory, linking theory and practice, and practical application in society on religious moderation.

Table 1: Form of Learning Religious Moderation

No	Number of Meetings	Assignment	Project Form
1	11 to 13	Dividing lecture participants into several groups to plan projects for implementing religious moderation in everyday life.	Videos, presentations, plays, or other forms of expression.
2	14	Each group will present the results of their project to the whole class. Other students can provide constructive input regarding the application of religious moderation concepts in this project.	Discussion
3	15	Write an article that connects the learning stages: understanding theory, the relationship between theory and practice, and its application in society, especially regarding religious moderation.	Article

Information provided by Informant D3 explained that at the 16th meeting, students were required to take the semester final examination, which had three different options. The first option is the written examination, the second choice is the oral examination, and the third option involves developing a project previously submitted in Stage 3 into a scientific article. One of the things that stands out from this explanation is the third option, in which students who can write scientific papers will be given directions to submit their writings to journals with a minimum accreditation level of Sinta 3. This has significant implications, especially in the context of completing a final project. The Faculty of Education and Teacher Training at Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang seems

to provide an opportunity for students to graduate without having to write a traditional thesis, if students manage to have quality scientific publications and can be published in journals with adequate accreditation at least reaching Sinta level 3. This policy provides wider opportunities for students to demonstrate their academic abilities and scientific contributions through recognized publications. This also reflects the university's orientation towards research and scientific contributions, which can benefit students and the institution (Darmalaksana,&Wahyudin,2021). This choice can be essential in motivating and helping students direct their academic efforts toward higher achievement and providing a significant alternative to meeting graduation requirements (Darmalaksana, & R. Hambali, 2021).

Dividing the religious moderation material into three stages has several important reasons to ensure deep understanding and practical application. At the stage of strengthening the knowledge of religious moderation in various countries, students can explore multiple perspectives on the meaning and indicators of religious moderation from different cultural and historical contexts (Muna, 2023). This helps to transcend narrow views and broaden understanding of the diversity of religious interpretations (Saputera, 2021). The second stage involves efforts to connect the concepts learned with actual practice. This is important so students can see the theory's relevance and implications in everyday life (Samsul, 2020). Through case studies and practical examples, students can identify how religious moderation can be applied to resolve conflicts, promote interfaith dialogue, and build cross-cultural cooperation (Ltek, 2021). In the final stage, students are invited not only to understand and talk about religious moderation but to integrate the values of tolerance and respect for differences into concrete actions. By facing real situations in a multicultural society, students will be trained to bridge gaps and promote peace (Firmansyah, 2021). Through this approach, students not only have a deeper understanding of religious moderation but can become individuals who can adapt positively to different cultural situations (Syamsuriah, 2022). They will have the necessary skills and knowledge to build a harmonious and inclusive society where various beliefs and values coexist peacefully (Yatno, 2022).

2. Religious Moderation in Critical Thinking Learning

Strengthening religious moderation through learning methods based on Critical Thinking is a very relevant approach in encouraging students to develop an attitude of tolerance towards diverse cultures (Vogt, 1997). Informant D1 explained that this method

was chosen to cultivate students' abilities to critically and openly analyze, evaluate, and form an understanding of religion and culture. Through this approach, students are encouraged to develop critical thinking skills concerning religious and cultural norms, thereby understanding that cultural variations and differing beliefs are natural aspects of society (Moosavi, 2022). Informant D1 shared his experience as follows,

"The critical thinking method that we apply at Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang aims to train students to analyze, evaluate, and formulate their understanding of religion and culture critically and openly. By using this method, students are encouraged to develop critical thinking skills regarding religious and cultural norms. The goal is for them to understand that societal variations in culture and beliefs are normal. Apart from that, this method also tries to teach students how to wisely deal with sensitive issues around cultural, religious, and racial differences to maintain unity among the people." (Informant D1, personal communication, July 2023)

In line with the above, Informant D2 mentioned that applying critical thinking-based learning methods also allows students to identify the root causes of intercultural conflicts, often related to narrow perceptions or prejudice against religious differences. By encouraging students to explore different points of view, they can see that religious and cultural values are not always opposite or mutually exclusive. This can help reduce skepticism or distrust of other cultures, thus strengthening intercultural tolerance and cooperation. Informant D2 explained,

"Learning methods that focus on critical thinking in Islamic courses and religious moderation allow our students to recognize the root causes of intercultural conflicts, often related to narrow views or prejudice against religious differences. We hope that by encouraging students to investigate diverse viewpoints, they will realize that religious and cultural values are not necessarily contradictory or mutually exclusive. Thus, this can help students at Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang reduce skepticism or distrust of other cultures, strengthening intercultural tolerance and cooperation."

When conveying his experience, the D3 informant said that the critical thinking-based learning method can produce students who can make wiser decisions in situations involving differences in religion and culture. By being accustomed to considering many different points of view and information, students can avoid actions or words that harm other parties and choose alternatives that promote intercultural harmony. (Aslan, 2020). Thus, strengthening religious moderation through learning methods based on critical thinking can significantly contribute to forming generations of students who are more open, tolerant, and able to adapt to an increasingly complex and diverse society (Saulius, 2013). Informant D3 explained,

"In my experience teaching at Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang, I often encounter intelligent students. If there is material that is not their thoughts, ask the lecturer directly. This provokes us to carry out critical thinking-based learning to produce students who can make smarter decisions regarding religious and cultural differences. By being accustomed to considering various points of view and different information, students are more likely to avoid actions or words that can harm other parties and prefer alternatives that support intercultural harmony. Therefore, strengthening a moderate attitude toward religion through a teaching approach that focuses on critical thinking can significantly contribute to shaping a generation of students who are more open, tolerant, and able to adapt to society."

Informant D2 explained that one of the methods lecturers use to implement critical thinking-based learning in forming an attitude of respect for cultural differences is guided discussions. He said guided discussions could encourage students to participate in structured discussions on sensitive topics related to religion and religious moderation. Lecturers can act as facilitators to ensure that meetings are balanced and meaningful, encouraging students to speak with measurable arguments and consider diverse points of view (MacKnight, 2000). As explained by informant D2,

"There are three reasons why we chose guided discussions to be a way of instilling moderate understanding. First, guided discussions allow students to develop a deeper understanding of basic Islamic principles and the teachings of religious moderation. In this context, students can systematically understand the values that underlie Islamic teachings, such as tolerance, peace, and respect for diversity. This discussion also provides an opportunity to identify how religious teachings can be applied in different cultural contexts. Second, Guided Discussions also help students appreciate and respect cultural differences. Students can acknowledge cultural diversity, religious views, and practices through open and purposeful dialogue. This contributes to the development of an attitude that is inclusive and respectful of differences, which in turn forms a conscious attitude towards cultural plurality in society. Third, Guided Discussions enable students to overcome negative stereotypes and prejudices related to cultural and religious differences. Students can embrace diverse viewpoints and understand the social, historical, and cultural contexts behind these differences through a purposeful exchange of opinions."

Slightly different, Informant D1 prefers to use the analysis model of religious and cultural texts. According to him, this method is done by assigning students to analyze religious or cultural texts from various perspectives. This involves an in-depth understanding of the historical and cultural context behind the text and the ability to identify messages that support tolerance, diversity, and understanding between religions (Rogers, 2004). Analysis of religious and cultural texts plays a central role in Islam and spiritual moderation courses. Through this approach, students are invited to understand and analyze religious texts that form the basis of the teachings and beliefs of Muslims

(Luke, 1995). An in-depth understanding of sacred texts such as the Al-Qur'an and Hadith is essential in holistically understanding Islam's teachings.

"I think that the analysis of religious texts can support a broader understanding of the cultural values contained in Islamic teachings. Through an in-depth examination of the historical and cultural contexts in which these texts appear, students can identify how cultural factors have influenced the interpretation and practice of religious teachings. This helps promote a critical attitude towards aspects that require adaptation to remain relevant in diverse cultural contexts. Analyzing religious and cultural texts also plays a vital role in shaping a conscious attitude toward cultural differences. In this way, we invite people to understand that culture significantly shapes how people understand and practice religion."

Unlike the Informant D1 and D2, Informant D3 preferred to give assignments to students to conduct contemporary case studies related to religious and cultural moderation themes. He believes that the use of contemporary case studies helps students relate the theory of religious moderation to more contemporary real-world situations. They can analyze conflicts or incidents involving religious differences and find solutions promoting harmony and tolerance (Sewang, Anwar, 2019). Contemporary case studies in Islamic courses are an approach that allows students to apply the principles of religious moderation in real situations (Sewang, 2020). For example, case studies can involve interfaith dialogue, the need for tolerance, and handling extremism (Taja, 2021). Through actual case analysis, students can understand how Islamic religious teachings can be interpreted wisely and moderately to promote social harmony (Osborne, Roger, 1985). Informant D3 explained,

"One of the essential aspects of religious moderation is the ability to deal with cultural differences openly and inclusively. Case studies on religious moderation in forming an awareness of cultural differences could involve situations where Muslim communities live with people from different cultural backgrounds. Students can analyze how the Islamic principles of hospitality, equality, and mutual respect can be applied in everyday interactions to reduce tensions and encourage cross-cultural cooperation."

The results of a contemporary case study-based learning model for Islamic and religious moderation courses will be seen as a deeper understanding of the complexities of spiritual teachings and the ability to relate them to real-world situations (Zhou, Yuefang, 2008). Students engaged in case studies of this nature are expected to enhance their critical thinking, analytical, and problem-solving skills, particularly when dealing with challenges related to religious and cultural differences (Jacobson, 1996). The application of religious moderation will also positively impact forming an awareness of cultural differences, reducing prejudice, and building peace in a multicultural society (Paige, 2003).

Challenges of Implementing the Religious Moderation Program at Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang

After conducting comprehensive discussions with three students who had attended Islamic lectures and religious moderation at Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang, we identified three challenges to successful learning. These included 1) low learning motivation, 2) course plans and strategies that fail to align with students' interests, and 3) a lack of appropriate social support. Addressing the first challenge, informant M1 explained that low learning motivation was the most significant factor contributing to the failure to achieve the objectives of Islamic lectures and religious moderation. According to M1, low learning motivation among students can be influenced by various complex factors. These include high mental and emotional pressure in the lecture environment that leads to feelings of stress and anxiety. The demands for high academic performance and intense competition can also cause students to worry about their inability to meet expectations (Russell, 1994). As a result, they tend to lose interest and enthusiasm for learning because of the psychological burden that hinders the learning process (Smith, 2013). Informant M1 explained,

"I like lecturers who are smart and look very enthusiastic in teaching. But lecturers like that usually have many demanding assignments that make us feel high mental and emotional pressure. Besides that, I also haven't been able to find the relevance of this material to my abilities, so I get bored and lack enthusiasm for learning".

The lack of relevance of course material to students' career interests or aspirations can reduce learning motivation (Salili, Farideh, Chi-yue Chiu, and Ying-yi Hong, 2012). If students feel that the material being taught is not following their interests or life goals, they may feel lazy to invest time and effort in understanding the lesson (Munro, 2014). This can cause boredom and a lack of enthusiasm for learning, so their motivation decreases drastically (Egan, Toby Marshall, Baiyin Yang, 2004). The impact of low learning motivation on achieving the objectives of Islamic lectures and Religious Moderation is very significant. Courses related to religion require deep understanding and solemn reflection. When learning motivation is low, students tend to only fulfill obligations without absorbing and understanding the material correctly (Ho, 1998). This impedes the formation of a deep understanding of Islamic principles and religious moderation (Asvio, 2022). Low motivation also impacts the quality of class discussions and active participation in religious-related academic activities, reducing the effective learning process (Sewang, Anwar, 2020). As a result, students may only meet the

minimum requirements without developing in-depth insights into religion, hindering the primary goal of Islamic education, which includes a more holistic and critical understanding of religious teachings and the application of moderation in everyday life (Mawardi, Dalmeri, 2018).

The second factor that challenges the implementation of Islamic lectures and moderation in religion is lecture plans and strategies that are not in the students' interests. Informant M2 admitted that several phenomena made this lecture uninteresting; he stated as follows,

"The rigid curriculum and traditional teaching methods reflect the irrelevance of content to social realities and changing times. Limited interaction with moderate religious practitioners and stakeholders also complicates the situation. The solution is to develop inclusive Islamic and Moderation religious curricula that reflect current social perspectives, adopt innovative teaching methods, and involve diverse groups in the educational process. This is essential to address today's educational challenges effectively."

The first phenomenon identified in the plans and strategies for moderating religious teaching not by students' interests is the lack of content relevance to social reality and the times (Weinstein, Claire E., 1983). A significant number of lectures still embody a rigid and traditional understanding of religion, often failing to connect adequately with contemporary issues that students face. This could result in a lack of interest among students, as they may perceive the teachings as having no practical application in their daily lives. For instance, if a course overlooks the implications of technology, globalization, or current social issues that could be tied to religious teachings, students might feel less motivated to engage with the course.

The second phenomenon is inflexibility in teaching and assessment methods. Lesson plans that are too colored by face-to-face lectures or reading classic texts without providing space for interactive discussion or creative exploration can cause a loss of interest (Vaidya, 1999). A monotonous teaching approach may constrain students of various backgrounds and learning styles. In addition, judgments that focus solely on traditional written examinations may also overlook the potential of students who excel in oral expression, creative projects, or the practical application of religious moderation (Dansereau, 1978). As a result, students with different interests and abilities may feel that this course plan does not meet their needs and expectations (Nijhuis, 2008).

The third phenomenon is the lack of interaction with moderate religious speakers and related stakeholders. Lectures on religious moderation that only focus on academic

theories without inviting reasonable spiritual practitioners to talk about their experiences facing challenges of extremism or intolerance can make students feel they have lost a real connection with the natural world (Hiqmatunnisa, Hani, 2020). If students do not see how the concepts learned can be applied in practical contexts and listen to the experiences of people who have faced different views in society, their interest in the course may wane (Salamah et al., 2020).

The final challenge that can hinder the success of Islamic learning and religious moderation is the lack of appropriate social support. Informant M3 explained that the polarization of religious views in society could create an environment not conducive to open discussion and a deeper understanding of moderate aspects of religion. He also stated that a failure of an approach including teaching religion in educational institutions could result in an inability to respect different religious views and practices, thus hindering their ability to accept and practice moderate values. Moreover, the limited role of middle religious leaders in guiding and assisting students can reduce opportunities to discuss sensitive issues openly and obtain a balanced view (Tanjung, 2022). M3 said,

"Yes, sir, there are indeed many benefits if, in the first semester, we go to college, the class has been determined. But in my opinion, this limits our association. I couldn't have more friends as frequently as I thought. The impact is huge because the polarization of religious views in an environment not conducive to open discussion and a deeper understanding of moderate aspects of religion may occur. Moreover, we have a policy that we must follow ma'had. Makes our association very limited. Even more so if the lecturer is less competent."

The impact of lack of social support in learning religious moderation has a very significant effect. First, it can reinforce extreme attitudes and intolerance among students. Without the opportunity to hear diverse viewpoints and talk about moderate frames of mind, students may be more vulnerable to the influence of radical groups that offer simple solutions to complex questions about religion (Wickham, 2004). Second, the lack of social support, in this case, can also hinder the development of students' problem-solving and critical skills because they may be more likely to receive information without in-depth study (Husn, 2020). Third, a lack of understanding of the moderation aspect of religion can reduce students' ability to contribute positively in a multicultural and multireligious society because tolerance and respect for differences are neglected. Therefore, creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment is essential where students can feel safe to ask questions, question beliefs, and discuss religious issues with diverse views (Yarmayani, 2018). Support from moderate religious leaders and other influential parties is critical in

encouraging a broader understanding of religious moderation and its contribution to a harmonious society (Khafid, 2007). In addition, integrating social and vital skills in the religious curriculum can help produce a more skilled generation in dealing with the complexities of the modern world with a wise and balanced perspective (Sholihah, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that integrating cultural diversity education into the "Islam and Religious Moderation" courses at Walisongo State Islamic University, Semarang, has been systematically implemented. The process involves introducing conceptual frameworks of religious moderation, contextualizing these through comparative global perspectives, and finally translating them into behavioral competencies via project-based learning. The pedagogical methods—ranging from textual analysis to dialogic reflection on current socio religious issues—cultivate students' critical consciousness. Such approaches foster knowledge acquisition and the embodiment of tolerance and moderation as lived values. These findings demonstrate that when designed with cultural inclusivity and critical pedagogies, religious education can transcend doctrinal instruction and promote coexistence across diversity. This underscores that educational institutions, particularly Islamic higher education, play a strategic role in shaping future generations' ethical orientation toward pluralism and peacebuilding

The significance of this study lies in its theoretical and pedagogical contribution to Islamic education in the post-truth and identity-fragmented era. It showcases how religious education can serve as a transformative tool for nurturing social harmony and inclusive citizenship. By embedding religious moderation into the academic curriculum, the study advances a model of education that aligns Islamic values with universal human rights. Furthermore, it contributes to scholarly discourse by bridging Islamic theological principles with contemporary multiculturalism theories, reinforcing Islam's potential for dialogical engagement in plural societies. This integration challenges binary perceptions of religion and modernity, offering new insights into the compatibility between tradition and tolerance. Thus, the study enriches both the educational practices within Islamic institutions and the broader theoretical debates on religion, education, and societal pluralism.

This research, however, has several limitations that suggest directions for future inquiry. The limited scope of participants and institutional focus may restrict

generalizability beyond the case context. Additionally, while insightful, reliance on narrative inquiry renders the findings open to subjective interpretation, necessitating triangulation with other qualitative or mixed methods. The scope of sources referenced in discussing religious moderation also remained narrow, potentially curtailing engagement with broader epistemological debates and international case comparisons. Moreover, the absence of longitudinal observation restricts insights into sustained behavioral transformation among students. Future research should expand the participant base, apply interdisciplinary frameworks, and explore longitudinal impacts of religious moderation education in diverse institutional contexts. These efforts would deepen empirical understanding and reinforce the role of Islamic higher education in constructing peaceful multicultural societies.

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