



Religious Moderation as Social Praxis: Religion as a Need in the Lived Experience of Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Discourse on religious moderation is frequently understood normatively and regulatively through top down policy programs that risk becoming detached from the actual experiences of believers. **Objective:** This study aims to analyze how perceiving religion as a human need contributes to the formation of religious moderation as a social praxis within the pesantren environment. **Methods:** This study employs a reflective qualitative method grounded in an insider position, with data collected through continuous observation, interviews, and literature study. **Results:** The findings reveal that religious moderation is experienced as a social praxis emerging from everyday religious experience (lived religion). Moderation values are manifested through the moral leadership of scholars (kiai), persuasive language, and prudent institutional role boundaries to maintain social harmony. Although effective in dampening open conflicts, this strategy of self restraint leaves boundaries in addressing structural problems. **Conclusion:** This study concludes that religious moderation is a dynamic and contextual social process rather than a completed normative indicator. **Contribution:** This study contributes to enriching religious studies by offering a new framework for religious moderation grounded in lived religion and social praxis in society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse on religious moderation in contemporary religious studies is gaining strength alongside increasing attention toward the relationship between religion and social life in a pluralistic society (Patahilah & Lubis, 2025). In the Indonesian context, religious moderation has not only developed as an academic discourse, but has also become an integral part of public policy and state institutional programs (Susanto, 2024; Syafieh & Anzhaikan, 2023). This topic garners interest and is important to study because religious moderation is often positioned as an ideal stance in responding to differences, preventing extremism, and maintaining social cohesion in communal life.

According to the views of Al Jayyousi et al. (2023) and Saumantri (2023), when religion is positioned as an existential human need that provides meaning in life, inner peace, and moral orientation, it does not exist as a normative burden or a rigid rule. Instead, it serves as a source of social ethics that is continuously lived and reinterpreted in accordance with the dynamics of actual community life (Al Jayyousi et al., 2023). In the multicultural landscape of Indonesia, modern pesantren play a crucial role as educational centers that integrate values of tolerance and peace through a holistic approach (Dewi et al., 2023). These institutions function not merely as spaces for transmitting religious knowledge, but as driving forces and mentors in resolving social religious problems through the habituation of balanced attitudes, tolerance, and justice (Huda et al., 2026; Sumadi et al., 2023).

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A real phenomenon currently occurring is that in many studies and policy documents, religious moderation still tends to be understood rigidly, normatively, and regulatively through top-down program frameworks (Putri & Budiman, 2022). This external approach risks separating moderation from the actual religious experiences of believers (Jati et al., 2024). This issue is further reinforced by observation and interview findings in the pesantren environment, which show a gap where effective religious moderation on the ground is not understood as a formal discourse concept. Instead, it is lived through role limitation, prudence, and self restraint strategies to dampen conflict, which on the other hand leaves structural problems that have not been directly addressed.

Research on religious moderation and pesantren life has been conducted in recent years. Various studies show that religious moderation focuses on the importance of tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and the rejection of violence in the name of religion (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021; Nasir & Rijal, 2021; Patahilah & Lubis, 2025; Suprpto, 2020, 2022). Other studies also emphasize that pesantren generally place greater emphasis on educational aspects, scholarly traditions, or the transmission of Islamic values (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021; Hannan, 2020; Marjani, 2023; Nasir & Rijal, 2021). Results from these studies indicate that current research mapping still rests on normative questions regarding how religious moderation ought to be realized, and has not linked it directly with daily religious experiences (lived religion).

Although various studies have extensively examined religious moderation and pesantren traditions, most prior research still discusses these aspects separately and has not provided a comprehensive picture of how religious moderation grows from perceiving religion as a human need. Furthermore, previous research has predominantly utilized normative indoctrinate approaches, leaving literature and empirical gaps regarding empirical evidence on moderation as a living social praxis (lived experience). Based on these gaps, this study offers a social praxis approach from an insider perspective as a literature gap to integrate the perception of religion as a human need with daily moderation practices in pesantren.

This research provides a more comprehensive perspective on religious moderation through a reflective qualitative approach grounded in an insider position. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the development of concepts surrounding social praxis and lived religion, broaden scientific understanding, and strengthen studies in the field of religious studies. Practically, the results of this research are expected to serve as a reference for the government, pesantren leaders, and stakeholders in designing and evaluating religious moderation policies so that they are not top down, but rather rooted in the reality and social relations of society more effectively.

This study aims to analyze how perceiving religion as a human need contributes to the formation of religious moderation as a social praxis. The focus of this study is directed toward the social religious experiences of the pesantren community, the role of kiai as moral compasses, and attitudes toward limits and ambiguities in maintaining harmony in daily social relations.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employs qualitative research with an analytical descriptive approach and a reflective orientation within the framework of religious studies. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to understand religious practice as a lived religious experience rather than merely a normative or structural phenomenon. This approach is appropriate for interpreting the meaning of social religious practices contextually and analyzing how perceiving religion as a human need contributes to shaping religious moderation within the pesantren community. The researcher holds an insider position that possesses structural and cultural proximity to the study locus, thereby providing direct access to internal logic, symbols, and community dynamics that are difficult for external researchers to reach.

2.2 Object of Research

The object of this research consists of daily religious practices, social religious relations, and the dynamics of shaping religious moderation as a social praxis. The research subjects are the pesantren community, which includes kiai as moral authorities and calming figures, students (santri), as well as the surrounding community that interacts in fulfilling religious needs, traditions, and managing social conflicts.

2.3 Instruments and Data Collection

The researcher acts as the primary human instrument who collects data through several techniques: 1) reflective observation: continuous observation of the social religious experiences of the pesantren, routine ritual practices,

daily interactions between the kiai and the community, and patterns of resolving social religious issues on the ground; 2) reflective interviews / social experience: deep exploration of data regarding requests for advice, prayers, and ethical guidance from the community to the kiai, as well as patterns of managing social emotions; 3) literature study (documentation): review of relevant scientific literature regarding religious moderation, pesantren studies, lived religion, and social religious ethics.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis techniques were conducted inductively and interpretively through the following stages: 1) identification of data patterns: categorizing recurring patterns of religious practices and social interactions in pesantren life; 2) social religious interpretation: interpreting the social and ethical functions of religion in dampening conflict and maintaining awareness of institutional role boundaries; 3) conceptual synthesis and theoretical triangulation: connecting empirical findings in the field with theoretical frameworks of lived religion, social ethics, and social praxis; 4) methodological reflexivity: maintaining data trustworthiness by consciously managing the proximity of the insider position and academic analytical distance to avoid subjective bias or romanticization of the pesantren institution.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

3.1.1 Perception of Religion as a Human Need in the Pesantren Community

The research results show that religion within the pesantren environment is experienced and practiced as a tangible lived religion rather than merely a normative burden of obligation or formal doctrine. The community visits the pesantren and kiai not only for religious ritual matters (such as aqiqah, thanksgiving celebrations, or funeral arrangements), but also to obtain inner peace, ethical advice, and moral legitimacy in responding to daily life problems, ranging from economic business issues to family and social conflicts. In times of crisis or uncertainty, the presence of the kiai becomes a symbol of restored order and a calmer for social emotions.

3.1.2 Pesantren and Community Relations Based on Social Ethics

The relationship between the pesantren and the community forms a social religious ethic characterized by a proportional stance, prudence, and awareness of institutional role boundaries. The pesantren is intensely involved in its primary area of competence (rituals, traditions, and Islamic education), while on broader social issues, its involvement is selective and responsive. This relational pattern is proven to strengthen the moral legitimacy of the pesantren because religion is presented humanely, non dominantly, and without imposing rigid social control.

3.1.3 Moral Leadership of Kiai in Maintaining Balance

Kiai hold a key role as social balancers through a persuasive approach, prudence, and exemplary behavior rather than through confrontational enforcement of rules. In managing tensions or conflicts within the community, kiai prioritize soothing language, a willingness to listen, and the use of deliberation. The ability of kiai to read situations and refrain from unnecessary involvement serves as an effective strategy to dampen open conflicts and maintain communal harmony.

3.1.4 Religious Moderation as Social Praxis

Religious moderation in the pesantren environment is proven to exist not as an abstract concept, policy discourse, or top-down program slogan, but rather manifests as a social praxis that naturally grows out of daily religious experiences. Moderation values are realized through concrete choices of action, such as self restraint, prioritizing a dialogic persuasive approach, and maintaining the sustainability of social relations amidst differences.

3.1.5 Boundaries and Ambiguities of Religious Moderation Practices

Although effective in dampening open conflict and maintaining public tranquility, the practice of religious moderation in pesantren leaves boundaries and ambiguities. The use of self restraint and prudence strategies effectively maintains symbolic harmony, but sometimes does not touch upon or resolve underlying structural problems. In addition, high reliance on the personal figure of the kiai triggers institutional capacity limitations and variations in moderation practices across different pesantren.

Table 1: Summary of Findings Dimensions on Religious Moderation Practices in Pesantren

No	Dimension of Findings	Form of Empirical Implementation	Impact / Social Function
1	Perception of Religion	Religion is experienced as an inner calmative, moral legitimacy, and daily life reference.	Responds to existential human needs and provides social certainty.
2	Institutional Relations	Pesantren limit roles to competence areas and act selectively and responsively.	Strengthens moral legitimacy and prevents rigid institutional dominance.
3	Leadership of Kiai	Exemplary behavior, dialogic persuasive approach, and awareness of role limits.	Dampens social emotions and maintains balance in community relations.
4	Moderation Praxis	Self restraint, avoiding open confrontation, and prioritizing deliberation.	Preserves social cohesion naturally without top-down indoctrination.
5	Boundaries & Ambiguities	Symbolic conflict management and reliance on the personal figure of the kiai.	Effective in dampening open conflict, but has not resolved structural issues.

Based on the mapping in Table 1 above, it can be interpreted that religious moderation within the pesantren environment is an organically interconnected social ecosystem. In this environment, perceiving religion as an existential need serves as the primary foundation for the emergence of the moral leadership of kiai and proportional institutional relational ethics. This table illustrates that the reliability of religious moderation in pesantren lies not in the formalization of doctrine, but in the flexibility of social praxis, such as self restraint and persuasive approaches, which are proven successful in maintaining community cohesion. Nevertheless, the fact that dimensions of boundaries and ambiguities still emerge indicates that pesantren based religious moderation functions more as an instrument for maintaining local level relational harmony than as a tool for structural transformation. Consequently, its sustainability depends heavily on the personal capabilities of kiai in managing social emotions and tensions.

3.2. Discussion

The research results show that religious moderation in the pesantren environment is not understood as a top-down policy discourse or merely a normative doctrine. Rather, it is experienced as a social praxis that naturally grows out of perceiving religion as a daily living need. This finding indicates that the religious life of the pesantren community operates at the level of lived religion, where the presence of the kiai and pesantren institutions functions as an inner calmative, ethical reference, and manager of social dynamics during various crises. Substantively, these results address the study objective by demonstrating that when religion is positioned as an existential and social need, moderate attitudes emerge inherently through self restraint practices, awareness of role boundaries, and the maintenance of community relation harmony. The meaning of this finding demonstrates that the success of religious moderation depends heavily on the socio-cultural roots of the local community rather than external indoctrinative interventions.

The emergence of these findings is presumed to be influenced by several factors originating from subject characteristics, the environment, and the mechanisms for executing social interaction within the pesantren (Burga & Damopolii, 2022; Effendi, 2020; Ma'arif et al., 2023; Masroer, 2018). The results of this study can be explained through the interaction of several main factors, namely the high degree of habituation and historical emotional trust of the community toward the moral authority of the kiai, the continuity of Islamic scholarly traditions, and the ethical awareness of the pesantren not to impose institutional dominance beyond its competence. This phenomenon likely occurs because religion is presented non confrontationally, but rather through exemplary behavior, the use of persuasive language, and the management of social emotions in daily dynamics. Furthermore, awareness of institutional role boundaries also contributes to these results, wherein the pesantren chooses to be present selectively and responsively. This condition demonstrates that the relationship among these factors forms a social mechanism that maintains stability and religious maturity without coercive pressure.

The findings of this study strongly reinforce the assumptions of Lived Religion Theory (McGuire, 2008), which places concrete daily religious experience as the primary locus of religious analysis. The findings align with the theory of religious normativity and historicity from Almedy (2025), Hidayah et al. (2025), and Wood & Laksana (2020), which states that the integration between normative teachings and historical reality allows religion to retain both ethical authority and social relevance. These results reinforce Fazlur Rahman's (1982) view of religion as social ethics, emphasizing that the core of religious teachings is the formation of a moral consciousness responsive to social reality. Examined from the perspective of Berger & Luckmann's (1966) social construction theory, these findings show that the symbolic legitimacy of pesantren is built naturally through the institutionalization of humane and

contextual roles. The study findings support and extend the conceptual framework of religious legitimacy and authority theories within pluralistic social spaces.

The findings of this research correspond with prior research by [Dhofier \(1982\)](#), who reported that pesantren serve as centers of moral authority that reproduce Islamic scholarly traditions while shaping a worldview rooted in community social experiences. The results confirm various previous studies ([Buton et al., 2021](#); [Maulana & Ferdian, 2024](#); [Rosydi & Putra, 2024](#); [Timotius et al., 2022](#)) showing that dialogue and managing differences operate as social processes within real life spaces rather than mere formal theological discourse. On the other hand, this study reveals differences with previous research, particularly regarding the perception of religious moderation. While prior studies such as [Irama & Zamzami \(2021\)](#) viewed moderation from a regulative formality perspective of state policy, this study finds that moderation in pesantren operates implicitly as an experienced daily social praxis.

In contrast to previous studies, these research results offer a reading of religious moderation from an insider perspective that links the perception of religion as an existential need with social praxis on the ground. The strength of this study lies in its ability to integrate aspects of subjective religious experience, social ethics, and institutional boundaries, thereby yielding a more complete understanding of lived religious dynamics. The scientific value of these findings is further enhanced by providing an empirical foundation for shaping public policy so as not to reduce religious moderation to a mere top-down normative indicator.

The urgency of this research extends existing understanding by revealing that religious moderation not only yields social harmony, but also leaves boundaries and ambiguities when structural problems are not directly addressed. The obtained findings successfully bridge research gaps (literature gap), particularly regarding the link between perceiving religion as a human need and the formation of moderate attitudes within the pesantren community. These results provide a new perspective on the relationship between the moral authority of the kiai and self restraint strategies that were previously understudied from a lived religion praxis perspective.

This research enriches the literature through an insider reflective qualitative approach within the context of traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. It is clear that the study findings indicate that the relationship between variables is not simple, but rather influenced by highly contextual moral leadership mechanisms and social emotion management. Deeper analysis shows that successfully dampening conflict through persuasive and prudent approaches risks producing latent tension if structural inequality issues continue to be ignored, thus requiring a more comprehensive perspective in understanding this phenomenon. Based on the research results, a perspective can be developed that religious moderation should be understood as a dynamic social process that is continually negotiated, rather than a completed ideal state. These findings open up the possibility of new conceptual models explaining the relationship between perceiving religion as a need, social ethics praxis, and religious institutional capacity boundaries. This aligns with the perception that community based religious moderation sustainability requires a balance between moral figure exemplary behavior and capacity strengthening in handling structural problems ([Kadaryanto et al., 2025](#); [Kurnia et al., 2023](#); [Susanto, 2024](#)).

Although the research results show that moderate attitudes grow from perceiving religion as a need and from the exemplary behavior of kiai, other factors could potentially influence these findings. The interpretation of these results should also consider factors outside the analyzed variables, such as local political climates, economic welfare levels of surrounding communities, and access to digital media. Beyond the primary factors investigated, these conditions are likely influenced by the cultural kinship structure of rural communities, which naturally tend to avoid open conflict to preserve community integration. These findings can be explained through alternative perspectives, such as power relation theories or local political economy dynamics, warranting further research to test these possibilities more broadly.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implications

The findings of this study provide theoretical implications for the study of religious moderation and lived religion by synthesizing that religious moderation does not exist as a normative concept or a top-down policy program. Rather, it is experienced as a social praxis growing out of perceiving religion as a daily living need. The findings fill a literature gap regarding how the perception of religion as an existential need within the pesantren community transforms into social ethics and moderate relational patterns, as well as how the boundaries and ambiguities of this praxis operate in managing local social tensions.

4.2 Research Contributions

The findings of this study contribute new scientific information to the fields of religious studies and the sociology of religion by synthesizing a new framework for religious moderation as a social praxis based on lived religion. This framework can be used to explain the institutionalization of moderation values through the moral leadership of kiai, the management of social emotions, and prudent institutional role limitation through the accumulation of findings from prior studies.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

4.1 Research Limitation

Although this study successfully reveals religious moderation as a social praxis based on lived religion, several limitations exist: 1) contextual scope: this study focuses exclusively on pesantren communities with specific local cultural characteristics. consequently, the findings regarding the moral leadership patterns of kiai and their social praxis may not necessarily be directly generalized to non pesantren muslim communities or urban religious organizations; 2) depth of structural aspects: the use of an insider reflective qualitative approach places greater emphasis on social meaning and relational harmony. as a result, it explores class conflict dimensions, political economic relations, and the structural impacts of formal legal policies in society with less depth; 3) reliance on central figures: the analysis in this study relies heavily on the role and personal authority of the kiai. thus, it does not fully map the dynamics of moderation praxis driven independently by other social actors, such as pesantren women groups, young students (santri), or laypersons.

4.2 Recommendation for Future Research

Based on the findings and research limitations outlined above, several recommendations are formulated for academics, practitioners, and policy makers: 1) expanding study contexts: future researchers are recommended to conduct comparative studies examining religious moderation praxis outside the pesantren environment, such as in urban religious organizations, indigenous communities, or modern islamic educational institutions; 2) interdisciplinary approaches: utilizing critical sociological or political economic analysis is recommended to dissect how religious moderation responds to structural inequality and agrarian or economic conflicts untouched by symbolic religious approaches; 3) studies on non central actors: investigating the roles of other grass roots leadership actors, such as nyai (female pesantren figures), students (santri), and youth leaders, in transmitting religious moderation values.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of this study conclude that religious moderation in the pesantren environment does not operate as a top-down policy discourse or a rigid normative doctrine. Rather, it is experienced as a social praxis that naturally grows out of perceiving religion as a living need (lived religion). When religion is positioned as an existential human need that provides inner peace, moral legitimacy, and ethical reference in facing daily crises, moderate attitudes emerge inherently through religious practices that are humane, contextual, and responsive to community social reality.

The success of institutionalizing religious moderation in pesantren is largely determined by proportional ethical relations and the moral leadership of the kiai. Kiai play an important role as social balancers through exemplary behavior, soothing persuasive language, and an awareness of institutional role boundaries by not imposing dominance beyond their competence. Moderation values are transmitted and practiced through concrete choices of action, such as self restraint, prioritizing deliberation, and maintaining the sustainability of social relations to preserve peace and community cohesion.

Nevertheless, this study also highlights that religious moderation as a social praxis is not exempt from boundaries and ambiguities. The strategies of prudence and symbolic harmony executed proved effective in dampening open conflict, but on the other hand potentially leave structural issues untouched directly. Therefore, religious moderation must be understood as a dynamic and continuously negotiated social process, where its sustainability requires a balance between the moral leadership of religious figures and capacity building in responding to the complexities of social change.

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Author Contribution Statement

All authors discussed the results, contributed to the final manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. Anas Mushthofa: Conceptualization and Design; Writing - Original Draft. Muhammad Zainuddin: Methodology, Writing - Review & Editing; Performed data collection and Analysis. Ahmad Izzuddin: Conceptualization

Declaration of Generative AI (GenAI) Usage in Scientific Writing

The author declares that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) technology was utilized solely as an assistive tool for language editing, grammar improvement, readability enhancement, and refining the structural composition of the manuscript. The entire research conceptualization process, data collection and analysis, result interpretation, academic argument formulation, and drawing of conclusions were performed entirely by the author. The author has verified all content in the manuscript and assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the article. All instances of Generative AI usage in this article were conducted by the authors in accordance with the [JISMB GenAI Tool Usage Policy](#), with the authors assuming full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work."

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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