.

Religious Moderation and Its Relevance to Islamic Education in Higher Education Institutions

Gunawan[1], Romel Sinaga[2], Budiman Akbar[3]

[1]   Politeknik Negeri Media Kreatif 1; gunawan@polimedia.ac.id
[2]   Politeknik Negeri Media Kreatif 2; rosinaga24@gmail.com
[3]   Universitas Negeri Jakarta 3; axbaroxx@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the application of religious moderation principles within Islamic education at a state polytechnic campus. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis to examine how Islamic education courses incorporate the values of tolerance, inclusivity, and anti-radicalism. The findings reveal that religious moderation is embedded in the curriculum through the promotion of critical thinking, respect for diversity, and community engagement activities. However, challenges such as the varying levels of students' prior knowledge and attitudes toward moderation necessitate continuous efforts in fostering an inclusive and balanced understanding of Islam. This research highlights the significant role of higher education institutions, especially polytechnics, in preparing students to navigate a pluralistic society while maintaining religious integrity and promoting social harmony. The implications of these findings underscore the need for tailored educational strategies that align with the unique characteristics of polytechnic students and their future professional roles.

Keywords: Religious Moderation, Islamic Education, Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation has become a critical discourse in Indonesia, particularly in response to rising concerns over radicalism and intolerance in various social spheres, including educational institutions. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has emphasized the importance of promoting religious moderation as a national priority to maintain harmony in Indonesia's pluralistic society. However, despite significant policy initiatives, challenges persist in translating these ideals into practical frameworks, particularly within Islamic education in higher education institutions.

The urgency for implementing religious moderation is underscored by recent data. For instance, the Wahid Foundation (2022) reported a 15% increase in intolerance-related incidents in educational settings compared to the previous year. Furthermore, a survey by the Setara Institute (2021) revealed that approximately 30%

of university students in Indonesia exhibited attitudes aligned with exclusive or intolerant ideologies. These findings suggest that higher education institutions, including polytechnics, must intensify their efforts to embed religious moderation into their curricula and campus cultures.

Previous studies have examined various aspects of religious moderation. For instance (Minabari, et al., 2024) analyzed the integration of religious moderation in secondary schools, focusing on curriculum content and teacher competencies. Similarly, (Sudur, 2024) investigated how Islamic education lecturers in universities approach the topic, highlighting gaps in practical implementation due to limited resources and inconsistent methodologies. However, limited research has explored the context of state polytechnics, which have distinct characteristics compared to universities. Polytechnics emphasize practical and technical skills, often attracting students from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. This unique environment offers both challenges and opportunities for fostering religious moderation.

This study addresses the research gap by investigating how principles of religious moderation are implemented in Islamic education at a state polytechnic. Specifically, it examines curriculum design, teaching strategies, and student perceptions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of polytechnics in promoting tolerance and inclusivity. The findings aim to contribute to the broader discourse on religious moderation in higher education and offer actionable insights for policymakers and educators.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore the implementation of religious moderation principles within Islamic education at a State Polytechnic campus (Sari, 2021). A case study was selected because it provides a deep understanding of the specific context and the application of religious moderation in polytechnic environments, which differ from universities in terms of academic focus and student demographics.

a. Research Location

The study was conducted at a State Polytechnic in Indonesia that enrolls students from diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. This institution was chosen as it represents a typical polytechnic environment in Indonesia, providing insight into the dynamics of religious moderation in this particular setting.

b. Data Collection

Data were collected through three main techniques:

1) Observation:

The researcher conducted direct observations during Islamic Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) classes. This included observing teaching methods, interactions between lecturers and students, and other activities that reflect the integration of religious moderation principles in the learning process.

2) In-depth Interviews:

   a) Interviews were conducted with several key participants, including:

      i. Lecturers teaching Islamic Education courses to explore their teaching strategies, challenges faced, and efforts to incorporate religious moderation into their lessons.

      ii. Students from various departments to understand their perceptions of religious moderation and its impact on campus life.

      iii. Institutional Administrators to investigate the campus policies that support or promote religious moderation.

   b) Documentary Analysis:

      i. The researcher analyzed documents such as syllabi, teaching materials, academic guidelines, and institutional policies related to religious moderation.

c. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify key patterns and themes emerging from the data. The analysis process included the following steps:

1) Reading and familiarizing with the interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents.

2) Coding the data based on relevant themes, such as teaching methods, challenges in implementation, and student perceptions.

3) Organizing the main themes and interpreting the findings in relation to the research objectives.

d. Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the study employed data triangulation by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and document analysis to ensure consistency. Additionally, the data were analyzed collaboratively with peer researchers to minimize potential bias in interpretation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

a. Implementation of Religious Moderation in Islamic Education

The study found that religious moderation was integrated into the Islamic Education curriculum at the State Polytechnic in various ways. The lecturers

emphasized critical thinking, inclusivity, and respect for diversity as core values within their teaching practices. In the classroom, these values were communicated through discussions that highlighted the importance of tolerance, anti-radicalism, and the acceptance of different interpretations within Islam. The lecturers also utilized case studies that presented real-life scenarios of religious diversity and conflict resolution, aiming to cultivate a balanced perspective among students.

This finding aligns with the work of Azra who asserts that religious moderation in education involves presenting a balanced view of religious teachings, promoting tolerance, and ensuring that students understand the importance of living harmoniously in a pluralistic society (Rahman, et. All., 2024). The findings also support Wibowo, who noted that schools incorporating religious moderation into their curricula focus not only on the doctrinal aspects of religion but also on fostering a culture of mutual respect among students from different backgrounds (Wibowo, N. E., & Bakri, S. 2022).

However, the study revealed that while the content of Islamic Education courses reflected religious moderation, the implementation of these values was inconsistent. Some lecturers, especially those with less experience or training in moderating religious discourse, struggled to create an open, inclusive environment for discussion. These challenges echo findings from Sari, who highlighted the difficulties faced by educators in universities in effectively integrating religious moderation due to varying personal beliefs and teaching methodologies (Sari, M., 2023). The inconsistency in implementation at the polytechnic could be attributed to a lack of formal training in religious moderation for lecturers, which is a significant gap identified in the current educational landscape.

b. Student Perceptions of Religious Moderation

The students expressed a general awareness of the importance of religious moderation but reported mixed levels of understanding and acceptance. Many students acknowledged that their education in Islamic moderation helped them develop a more tolerant perspective toward others, especially in a multicultural environment. Some students noted that discussions in class allowed them to critically examine their beliefs and understand that Islam encourages peace and coexistence.

However, a significant number of students revealed challenges in applying these principles outside the classroom. Many students came from rural or more conservative backgrounds, where exposure to religious diversity was limited. This gap in experience created difficulties in fully embracing the principles of religious moderation. This finding is consistent with research by Purwanto, who noted that students' prior exposure to diverse religious views plays a crucial role in how they internalize and apply the concepts of religious moderation (Purwanto, Y., Qowaid, Q., & Fauzi, R., 2019). As such, a more comprehensive approach that includes

extracurricular activities and community engagement might be needed to reinforce the values learned in the classroom.

c. Challenges in Promoting Religious Moderation in Higher Education

Several challenges were identified in the promotion of religious moderation at the polytechnic. The first challenge was the lack of specific institutional policies and frameworks that explicitly support religious moderation. While the polytechnic's curriculum included elements of religious moderation, there was no structured approach or formal policy to ensure its integration across all programs and disciplines. This is a critical gap, as noted by M. S. Azyumardi Azra , who emphasized the need for systemic policies that support religious moderation in educational institutions (Albana, 2023). Without these policies, the promotion of religious moderation can become inconsistent and dependent on individual lecturers.

Another challenge identified was the diversity of student backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, many students came from conservative or less-diverse backgrounds, making it harder for them to fully grasp the concepts of religious moderation. Furthermore, the polytechnic's focus on technical and vocational education meant that the Islamic Education courses were often viewed as supplementary or less critical, leading to a lack of engagement with the subject. This situation mirrors findings by Pardede, who found that vocational education students tend to prioritize technical skills over ethical or religious education, which can result in a shallow understanding of the values being taught (Pardede, 2021).

d. The Role of Islamic Education Lecturers

The role of Islamic Education lecturers in fostering religious moderation was pivotal, as they not only conveyed the content but also shaped the learning environment. Lecturers who employed interactive and participatory teaching methods, such as group discussions and debates, were more successful in encouraging students to engage with the material and reflect on their own beliefs. These findings support research by Khamim et. all, who argues that interactive teaching methods can significantly enhance students' understanding of religious moderation by encouraging critical thinking and dialogue (Khamim, et. All., 2023).

However, it was also observed that some lecturers struggled with balancing religious teachings with the need to foster an open, tolerant environment. This challenge was often attributed to the lecturers' personal beliefs and teaching experience. As such, there is a pressing need for targeted professional development programs for lecturers to equip them with the skills to teach religious moderation effectively. These programs could include training on pedagogical techniques, conflict resolution, and how to manage diverse classroom discussions—areas that have been identified as critical for promoting religious moderation in educational settings (Jayendra, 2024).

e. Recommendations for Improving Religious Moderation in Polytechnics

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made for improving the promotion of religious moderation in polytechnics. First, there is a need for clear institutional policies and guidelines that emphasize the importance of religious moderation across all academic programs, not just within Islamic Education courses. Second, lecturers should be provided with training on how to effectively teach religious moderation and manage diverse viewpoints in the classroom. Third, the polytechnic should incorporate extracurricular activities, such as interfaith dialogues and community service projects, to help students experience religious diversity firsthand. Lastly, there is a need for more research and collaboration between higher education institutions and religious organizations to develop context-specific models of religious moderation that are relevant to polytechnic students.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the implementation of religious moderation in Islamic education at a State Polytechnic, revealing both advancements and challenges. The integration of religious moderation values into the curriculum was evident, with lecturers emphasizing tolerance, critical thinking, and respect for religious diversity. However, the study found that the application of these principles was inconsistent across different courses and lecturers. The challenges in maintaining consistency were largely attributed to the lack of formal training for lecturers on religious moderation and the diversity of student backgrounds, which affected their ability to fully embrace the values taught.

The findings highlight that while students were generally aware of the importance of religious moderation, their understanding and application of these principles varied. This was especially true for students from more conservative or less-diverse backgrounds, who struggled to reconcile their prior beliefs with the concepts of religious moderation. This gap suggests a need for more comprehensive teaching methods and support mechanisms to foster the practical application of religious moderation in everyday life.

Furthermore, the study identified significant gaps in institutional support for religious moderation, such as the absence of clear policies and frameworks that specifically promote these values across all academic programs. The lack of a structured approach to religious moderation within the institution pointed to a systemic gap that could undermine the effectiveness of its integration into the curriculum.

The study also highlighted the critical role of lecturers in facilitating the promotion of religious moderation. Lecturers who employed interactive teaching methods, such as group discussions and debates, were more successful in engaging

students and fostering a deeper understanding of moderation. However, the personal beliefs and teaching experience of lecturers played a significant role in determining the effectiveness of these methods.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are made to enhance the promotion of religious moderation in polytechnic settings. These include the development of clear institutional policies that prioritize religious moderation across all academic programs, providing lecturers with specialized training in moderating religious discourse, incorporating extracurricular activities to engage students in interfaith dialogue, and fostering collaboration between higher education institutions and religious organizations to create a more comprehensive approach to religious moderation.

In conclusion, while progress has been made in integrating religious moderation into Islamic education at the polytechnic, more effort is needed to overcome the identified challenges. By addressing these gaps, polytechnics can play a crucial role in promoting religious moderation, contributing to the development of a more inclusive, tolerant, and harmonious society.

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