

Epistemology and Resistance to the Meaning of Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract

The concept of religious moderation has been widely promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but it has not fully reached pesantrens, potentially leading to conflicts. This article aims to uncover the various meanings of moderation among the Santri and to examine the epistemological framework derived from the *Kitab Kuning* (classical Islamic texts). The exegesis-phenomenology method was used by asking the Santri for their views on religious moderation and confirming their behaviors to understand the sources and methods of their knowledge. The findings show that the meaning of religious moderation in pesantrens is natural-adaptive, and its epistemology is characterized as Bayani-cognitive. This article contributes theoretically to understanding the various meanings of moderation in pesantren and practically to policy-making for the widespread dissemination of religious moderation in religious institutions.

Keyword: *Religious Moderation, Resistance, Salaf Islamic Boarding School.*

Abstrak

Gagasan moderasi beragama telah disebarkan secara luas oleh Kementerian Agama, namun belum sepenuhnya mencapai pesantren, ini berpotensi menimbulkan konflik. Artikel ini bertujuan mengungkap varian makna moderasi di kalangan santri dan meneliti bangunan epistemologi yang bersumber dari kitab kuning. Metode exegesis-fenomenologi digunakan dengan meminta pandangan santri tentang moderasi beragama dan mengkonfirmasi perilaku mereka untuk mengetahui sumber dan metode pengetahuan mereka. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa makna moderasi beragama di pesantren bersifat natural-adaptif dan epistemologinya bercorak bayani-kognitif. Artikel ini berkontribusi secara teoritis dalam memahami varian makna moderasi di pesantren dan secara praktis bagi kebijakan penyebaran moderasi beragama di lembaga keagamaan.

Kata Kunci: *Moderasi Beragama, Pesantren Salaf, Resistensi.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation as a work program of the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Religion aims to provide an open, tolerant, and humanist religious understanding for religious believers. In the road map, there are several aspects that are targets for strengthening religious moderation starting in 2020-2024. The road map is spread over four areas covering infrastructure development, strengthening the perspective of religious moderation in 2021, strengthening the perspective and capacity of state administrators and religious institutions in 2022, strengthening the perspective of religious moderation in Indonesian religious life in 2023, and strengthening religious harmony in religious life with a perspective. Religious moderation in 2024 (RI, 2020).

In practice, the spread of religious moderation is uneven in the religious life of Indonesian society, especially in Islamic boarding school environments. Basically, Islamic boarding schools are not familiar with the term religious moderation, even though Islamic boarding schools' religious understanding and practices substantially reflect the value of religious moderation (Rusmiati et al., 2022). According to Masturaini and Yunus (2022), Islamic Boarding Schools have a hidden curriculum that can shape the character of students to be moderate. The hidden curriculum is formed by Islamic boarding school traditions and culture, as well as a positive climate in the Islamic boarding school environment. Therefore, Islamic boarding schools substantially have their own meaning and interpretation regarding the term religious moderation, which may or may not be relevant to government programs. This is because Islamic boarding schools have their own style and character when teaching religious doctrine. This character and style become an academic problem when it comes to understanding inclusive religion for the government. The reason is the existence of Islamic boarding schools is supported by formal education and also skill development for the students as a means of life (A. Ghazali et al., 2022). Formal education and skills are not sufficient for future religious challenges, which are increasingly complex and rigid, namely the emergence of new religious sects, the existence of religious organizations, and even the emergence of transnational Islam (Rachman Assegaf, 2017).

Facing the challenges above, Islamic boarding school culture, which is personally plural and has eschatological values in its religious views, actually has the potential for conflict if it is not accompanied by moderate religious understanding or is not equipped with training in national insight (Anis, 2017). Thus, it is necessary to spread and strengthen moderate understanding in Islamic boarding schools, which has interesting facts from the ideological, cultural, and educational aspects, so that the spread of religious moderation is not only limited to formal government agencies but also spreads to religious, educational institutions, especially Islamic boarding schools. In reality, the development of the meaning of moderation in Islamic boarding schools, especially in Jekulo, is not uniform and does not fully reflect an inclusive attitude towards religion, such as being friendly with non-Muslims or issues of state and religion. This is because studies that discuss the value of religious moderation are not just one book but more, such as tauhid, tafsir, fiqh, and Sufism, each of which explains non-Muslim

themes and the relationship between religion and the state at a glance (observation results at Islamic boarding schools).

Articles that examine religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools are very diverse in terms of studies, methods, and approaches used. First, an article examines the strengthening of moderation from aspects of nationality and religious values at the Nurul Islam Islamic boarding school in Jember through education, training, and organizational skills. In line with this, religious knowledge is an important pillar for becoming a moderate Muslim, but the 4 pillars of nationality are also urgent in maintaining state stability (Faqih, 2023; Ibad, 2021). Second, an article that examines the value of moderation in Islamic boarding schools. The moderation values that develop in Islamic boarding schools include *tawashut*, *tawazun*, *i'tidal*, *tasamuh*, *musawah*, and *shura*. Third, cultivation can be done in several ways, such as through formal classes, *halaqah* and hidden curriculum, leadership, and example (Budiman, 2020; Husain, 2020; Masturaini & Yunus, 2022).

Studies on religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools are still normative in nature, trying to find the value of religious moderation that lives in Islamic boarding schools. Apart from that, we have not studied the epistemology of moderation that has developed in Islamic boarding schools, which relates to the attitudes and actions that have been carried out by students so far, which can reflect moderating values. Therefore, a different perspective is needed in presenting religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools, namely uncovering the meaning of religious moderation that is spread in Islamic boarding schools and students understanding the epistemology of moderation as originating from books or only limited to the hidden curriculum.

This article emphasizes the dialectic of studying religious moderation and resistance to the meaning of *santri* at the Jekulo Kudus Islamic Boarding School. The reason is that the dissemination of religious moderation is limited to government agencies and universities and does not touch Islamic boarding schools. This study is a field study that took the research setting at Islamic boarding schools in Jekulo Kudus, such as An-Nur al-Islamy, Al-Qaumaniyah, and several other Islamic boarding schools. This article uses the theory of language philosophy in analyzing data that has been collected via Google Forms from 6 students spread across Pondok Jekulo.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Islamic Boarding School Turats as Epistemology

Islamic boarding schools, as the center of Islamic civilization in Indonesia, have a strategic role in preparing prospective ulama (C. Abdullah, 2014; Rois et al., 2023). In the process of creating people who are experts in the field of religion, students must understand and master Islamic law, such as *tafsir*, *hadith*, linguistics, *fiqh*, monotheism, Sufism, and several other fields of knowledge.

This process is carried out continuously and in stages from the *ibtida'* (beginner) level to the *aliyah* (high) level and some even reach the *ma'had ali* level (college boarding school). However, what is noteworthy is that the studies that

develop in Islamic boarding schools are more Bayani-normative in nature, not many include studies that are Burhani-philosophical in nature and even avoid philosophy as a product outside of Islam (Isbah, 2020).

The sources of study that develop in Islamic boarding schools are more directed towards books by Middle Eastern scholars, such as Ilmu Nahwu studying Mukhtashar Jiddan, Fiqh Fathul Qarib Mujib, Tafsir Jalalain, Tawhid studying Tuhfatul al Murid al Jauharul Tauhid and other books which are directly taught by kiai or ustadz who has met the qualifications. These sources have their context when they were created by the author and religious problems that are different from the Indonesian context, so it is necessary to study the works of Indonesian ulama as part of introducing religious, cultural, and national values (A. Abdullah, 2015).

The study of these books is spread throughout almost all Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Dogmatically, these studies contribute to strengthening the students' basic religious understanding, but substantively, these books do not reflect local religious, cultural, and Indonesian aspects that teach about moderate religious life (Shofaussamawati & Muhtador, 2023). This reality is worrying about the continuity of santri as ulama cadres when they cannot interact between religious knowledge and culture and nationality.

Kiai or ustadz have full authority in providing explanations of the text, both from grammatical aspects and content, and developing interpretations. This meaning is obtained from the kiai who teach so that the building of authority that is built is persuasive and can influence the students with their abilities (Fadl, 2001). This learning model is preserved in Islamic boarding schools as something unique and not shared by other educational institutions.

Learning models that develop in Islamic boarding schools include bandongan, sorogan, and watonan (Dhofier, 1994; M. B. Ghazali, 2003). Each of these methods has a unique character for Islamic boarding schools, such as the bandongan model, which emphasizes the kiai as a source of knowledge, and sorongan emphasizes the mastery of the students in front of the kiyais. Watonan is almost the same as bandongan but does not use meaning. Each of these study models does not provide discussion space for students because the model is one-way for both Kiai and students. This study model is boring and ineffective for students because it is verbalistic (Hasibuan et al., 2018).

In the contemporary context with a developing religious landscape, Islamic boarding schools face serious challenges in religious issues. Therefore, Islamic boarding schools need to develop adaptive and innovative learning models. According to M. Falikul Isbah (Isbah, 2020), Islamic boarding schools can negotiate with developing study models and not close themselves off from global issues. The use of technology continues to grow and plays an important role in spreading Islamic teachings by Islamic boarding schools and also maintaining Islamic traditions. However, technology has not had an impact on the issue of

religious moderation, so students and Islamic boarding school students can also be affected by radicalism and extremism (Kamaludin et al., 2021).

2.2. Conceptions and Resistance to Religious Moderation

Religious moderation can be considered as a perspective, a way of attitude and acting that prioritizes a middle position, always acts fairly and is not extreme in religion (Agama, 2019). Etymologically, the word moderation comes from the Latin *moderatio*, which means moderate, and in English, moderation which means average, core, standard, or non-aligned, but in the Big Indonesian Dictionary, moderation means reducing violence and avoiding extremes (Nasional, 2008). The Qur'an calls moderate with the word *wasath*, which has the meaning of not being separated from both sides, and the word *wasatha* is mentioned five times in the Qur'an; QS al-Baqarah 143 and 238, QS al-Maidah 89, QS al-Qalam 28 and QS al-'Adiyat 4-5 (Shihab, 2020).

Apart from the linguistic context and religious teachings, religious moderation is basically an important paradigm in building harmony for humans to live together. One of these paradigms is by floating the treasures of classical traditions, in this case, Islamic boarding school *turast*, which contains not only a number of knowledge but also values, attitudes, and instruments for acting in facing the dynamics of the times (Prakosa, 2022). The actualization of tradition is an alternative to demonstrate a moderate religious life amidst the complex problems of modern society, such as hate speech, discrimination, intolerance, radicalism, extremism, identity politics, and the strengthening of new religious identities that emerge from studies packaged in a contemporary way (Fenton, 2016).

The rise of negative attitudes appearing on the surface of society must be a concern for all components of the nation because it will become a source of division. For example, this is clearly demonstrated in the hate speech that is rife in the media. This hate speech can be classified into at least four issues, namely political issues, social issues, economic issues, and religious issues. Each of these phenomena can be found when approaching major state celebrations or major religious holidays, such as presidential elections, regional elections, Christmas, Chinese New Year, and historical events (Ningrum et al., 2018).

2.3. Religious Language and the Problem of Meaning

Language is a communication tool used by users to convey aims and objectives. In Islam, Arabic is used as a medium of revelation to convey messages to the Prophet Muhammad. This is emphasized in the Koran, Surah Ibrahim verse 4, Surah Yusuf verse 2, Surah Taha verse 113 and Surah asy-Syu'ara verse 195. Each verse shows explicitly the use of Arabic as a medium of revelation to facilitate the message conveyed.

One of the great messages conveyed by the Koran to the people of the Prophet Muhammad is related to the status of Muslims as *wasatha* (moderate)

people which is found in Surah al-Baqarah verse 143. This verse has a background in the story of the people of the Prophet Isa who believed he was God and The people of Prophet Musa were very rational in their religion (Shihab, 2006). Therefore, the Koran describes the people of the Prophet Muhammad as a people who could balance rationality and textuality.

In the same region, Surah al-Baqarah verse 143 has become dogmatic legitimacy in spreading the insight of religious moderation in Indonesia because this letter has a prophetic spirit that must be carried out by Muslims in Indonesia. However, this does not mean that there are no obstacles in meaning because each group and religious group will interpret moderation with their own subjective actions (Ricœur, 1974; Weber, 1949).

The problem lies in the transfer of meaning from Arabic as God's revelation to human languages, such as Indonesian. This is because Arabic as a text has its own historicity, which includes psychological conditions, socio-cultural background, language traditions used, and writing characters (Hidayat, 1996). However, the objectivist group in hermeneutic studies states that the transfer of meaning can be done by paying attention to the author's psychology, mastering the grammar of the language, and awareness of the object being considered (Syamsuddin, 2010).

It's just that the idealism of the objectivist group does not always reflect reality. The reason is that the term *wasatiah*, or religious moderation, is interpreted as a way of religion for Islamic boarding schools in Jekulo. This indicates the fragility of meaning that develops in Islamic boarding schools. According to MAF (santri Q Jekulo), religious moderation is an attitude of tolerance/centeredness when practicing religion. This is also expressed by IM (santri Q Jekulo): this term refers to attitudes and efforts to make religion the basis and principle to always avoid extreme behavior or expressions (radicalism) and always look for a middle way that unites and equalizes all elements in social life. , state, and Indonesian. Likewise, with MKA santri A: a way of practicing religion that is not extreme or SR santri A: who understands religious moderation by practicing and understanding religion properly, meaning leaving out excessive words. And santri S, santri A.: who give meaning by understanding and practicing religious teachings without going to extremes.

Basically, the three answers given by the students show the general meaning of religious moderation according to the abilities and knowledge learned. The meanings are not necessarily wrong or wrong, because these three meanings have the message that Islam teaches religious people to practice their religion in a middle position and not too excessively.

The difference in answers is a reality that is developing among the Islamic boarding school community regarding the practice of religious moderation. This phenomenon stems from the students' struggle with religious knowledge and the surrounding environment, which can be potentially problematic because of the resistance to the meaning given by the students. According to James Scott in

Wiwin Zunula (2022), although this meaning is not a contradiction to the meaning of the state, it could be a rejection that has developed in society or knowledge that has developed in Islamic boarding schools, which has gone through variants of meaning.

Khaled M. Abou Fadl (Fadl, 2001) states that the authorship process has many stages so that each period will have its own author. In this case, the students are a small part of the authorship of the religious texts that have been produced and are part of the birth of further texts that interpret the word wash from the results of interactions and religious representations that develop within the Islamic boarding school community. In this case, the students are a small part of the authorship of the advanced text, so they cannot avoid various meanings because the authorship of meaning is closely related to context and time.

2.4. Epistemology of the Meaning of Moderation and Contemporary Religious Issues for Santri

Epistemology is a part of philosophy that studies the structure of knowledge, methods and validation of one's knowledge of something, but epistemology is also related to philosophical and critical studies on the basis of the theory of knowledge (J, 2022). Epistemological discourse is discussed by scholars with different approaches and paradigms.

Western scholars discuss science according to the character and paradigm used, so that epistemology develops into three, namely rationalism, empiricism and criticism (Tafsir, 1999). This is different from Muslim scholars who include intuition and revelation as part of the source of knowledge, so that the styles of knowledge that develop in the Islamic world become Bayani (textualist), Irfani (philosophical) and Burhani (Sufi) (Muthahhari, 2010).

Meanwhile, the epistemology of religious moderation among students is very varied. This varied epistemology can be said to originate from studies being carried out by highly religious Islamic boarding school students. Meanwhile, students' knowledge construction related to moderation is mostly obtained through life in Islamic boarding schools, especially various studies of classical texts. One of the students revealed that the books studied at the Islamic boarding school and discussing religious moderation were the books of monotheism, tafsir, fiqh, and Sufism (santri Q Jekulo). Meanwhile, the parts or chapters of the book that explain religious moderation are ta'sis jam'iyyah nahdlotul ulama', tolerance, Al-Baqarah 143, Ikhtilaf fuqoha' and avoiding immoral acts.

This reality illustrates that studies in Islamic boarding schools are universally very broad and varied, but specifically, there are or no books that study diversity and discuss religious moderation. Even so, Islamic boarding schools have taught religious moderation in daily life related to muamalah and worship, such as studying the yellow book, character-building students, and deepening the understanding of aswaja (Faqih, 2023). The absence of a strong and standardized understanding of religious moderation from the government has the

effect of blurring the meaning that develops in Islamic boarding schools. In this context, an approach that is considered effective in preventing radicalism and extremism is to carry out gentle negotiations with Islamic boarding schools (Wildan & Muttaqin, 2022).

Islamic boarding school studies, which are the basis for santri epistemology in constructing their knowledge, are not only obtained from book studies. However, it is also supported by the Islamic boarding school environment as the center of Islamic civilization, which accepts students from different cultural, linguistic, and regional backgrounds. This is a point to support Islamic boarding schools to become centers of Islamic civilization. The diversity of students living in Islamic boarding schools illustrates Islamic life in the early days, which was not only dominated by one tribe but was diverse. It is in this area that Islam pays attention to human civilization, not only limited to mere doctrine, but also civilization, including in terms of religious moderation (Majid, 1997).

The diversity of students' backgrounds, cultures, and places of residence has logical consequences for the practice of religious moderation when it comes to contemporary issues, such as the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims or whether non-Muslims have halal blood. Related to this theme, there are various meanings among students from various perspectives, such as religious doctrine, humanity, and state regulations.

The students have interesting views regarding this issue. According to one of the Islamic boarding school students in Jekulo, non-Muslims must be protected as long as they do not cause harm (MAF Santi Q). This opinion is reinforced by the humanitarian perspective conveyed by SR student A Jekulo with his opinion that non-Muslims must also be protected as fellow humans. Furthermore, K santri A also expressed the opinion that non-Muslims are protected because they are still brothers in humanity. However, it was different from what S. Santri A said, who used a state perspective that we live in a country based on laws with reference to the 1945 Constitution. The important thing is not to violate the 1945 Constitution and to be able to respect each other. This argument is strengthened by HML Santi Q that non-Muslims are not halal to fight. If a non-Muslim commits a minor/serious mistake, he or she must receive punishment in accordance with the applicable provisions, namely those agreed upon by the community within the community (state/region).

The consequences of various studies and the daily behavior of kiai or ustadz support students in having an open view regarding contemporary issues. Islamic boarding schools in Jekulo have an important contribution and role in spreading moderate and inclusive Islam (Ibad, 2021). Awareness of religious history and identity as a santri is also an important value for spreading *Islam Rahmah* because santri has become a reference for society in seeking contemporary solutions (Rois et al., 2023).

The meaning of the concept of non-Muslims through the terms kafir harbi or kafir dhimmi in classical books does not necessarily give the meaning of killing.

However, the students are also taught about the history of the early Islamic period and the context in which Islam was spread today. In simple language, students already have historical provisions as a religious guide for the future. By borrowing the double movement theory, the students have realized the moral ideal rather than the formal legal one that is developed in the book (Fazlur Rahman, 1982).

Students' awareness of religious doctrine and human civilization is a demand amidst the intense issue of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. In the same area, the existence of Islamic boarding schools should not be forgotten by policyholders in order to spread moderate views, attitudes, and behavior in religion. The problem is that when Islamic boarding schools are left to interpret religious moderation themselves according to their perspective, this can give rise to resistance and conflicts of meaning. In this position, policyholders can invite Islamic boarding schools to formulate the meaning of religious moderation.

3. CONCLUSION

This article shows that the resistance to the meaning of religious moderation among Islamic boarding school students is changing terms, and the word moderation has linguistic problems that must be strengthened technically because the language will experience a development of meaning that is adapted to the place and time. Apart from that, the students have an epistemology of knowledge that comes from everyday life and classical studies taught by Kiai and ustadz. This has the consequence of a shift in meaning that is adapted to the study and theme when conducting the study. Students' awareness of contemporary religious issues cannot be underestimated. The students already have historical and social awareness when talking about relations between Muslims and non-Muslims from many perspectives.

This paper finds that the meaning and interpretation of religious moderation that is developing in the world of Islamic boarding schools is not merely doctrinal-structural in the sense of originating from the Islamic boarding school's cultural heritage but is more natural-adaptive as an implication of the openness of Islamic boarding schools in accepting students from various ethnicities and culture background. Meanwhile, the developing epistemological building has a Bayani-cognitive pattern, which becomes the basis for students' behavior. This article contributes theoretically to uncovering variants of the meaning of moderation that are developing among Islamic boarding schools. In practical terms, the government, especially the Ministry of Religion, can benefit from designing religious moderation policies that are accommodating to the history and dynamics of religious institutions, including universities, madrasas, and Islamic boarding schools, as a form of strengthening inclusive religious understanding.

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