Transforming Religious Education Through Inclusivity: How Indonesian Pesantren Cultivate Moderate Islamic Values and Da'wah Practices

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Abstract

The challenge of religious extremism in multicultural societies demands educational institutions that can cultivate moderate Islamic values and inclusive attitudes. This research investigates how Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) transform into inclusive spaces that strengthen religious moderation (*wasathiyyah*) and moderate da'wah (Islamic propagation) practices. Employing an interpretive paradigm with qualitative methods, this study examines two pesantren models: Pesantren Persatuan Islam Manbaul Huda in Bandung City and Pesantren Welas Asih in Garut Regency through observation, in-depth interviews with pesantren leaders, and document analysis. The findings reveal that pesantren inclusivity is driven by structural factors, particularly government policies promoting wasathiyyah Islam, and cultural factors embedded in institutional management. The cultivation of religious moderation occurs through five interconnected roles of ustaz (Islamic teachers): as conservators, preserving authentic Islamic teachings; as innovators, creating integrated spiritual-nationalism programs; as transmitters, disseminating moderate values; as transformators, modeling exemplary behavior through interfaith learning initiatives; and as organizers, implementing systematic character-strengthening activities. These pesantren successfully produce Muslim cadres with open-minded, wise, moderate perspectives who embody Islam as rahmatan lil alamin (mercy to all worlds), demonstrating that religious education institutions can serve as effective epicenters for cultivating tolerance, justice, and balanced attitudes in addressing Indonesia's spiritual and cultural plurality.

Keywords: Pesantren; inclusivity; religious education; religious moderation; moderate da'wah.

Abstrak

Tantangan ekstremisme religius dalam masyarakat multikultural menuntut lembaga pendidikan yang mampu mengkultivasikan nilai-nilai Islam moderat dan sikap inklusif. Penelitian ini menginvestigasi bagaimana pesantren Indonesia bertransformasi menjadi ruang inklusif yang memperkuat moderasi beragama (wasathiyyah) dan praktik da'wah moderat. Menggunakan paradigma interpretatif dengan metode kualitatif, studi ini mengkaji dua pesantren model Pesantren Persatuan Islam Manbaul Huda di Kota Bandung dan Pesantren Welas Asih di Kabupaten Garut melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam dengan pimpinan pesantren, dan analisis dokumentasi. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa inklusivitas pesantren didorong oleh faktor struktural, khususnya kebijakan pemerintah yang mengkampanyekan Islam wasathiyyah, dan faktor kultural yang tertanam dalam manajemen institusional. Kultivasi moderasi beragama terjadi melalui lima peran ustaz yang saling terkait: sebagai

konservator yang menjaga keaslian ajaran Islam, inovator yang menciptakan program spiritual-nasionalisme terintegrasi, transmitor yang menyebarluaskan nilai-nilai moderat, transformator yang memodelkan perilaku teladan melalui inisiatif pembelajaran lintas agama, dan organisator yang mengimplementasikan kegiatan penguatan karakter sistematis. Pesantren-pesantren ini berhasil menghasilkan kader muslim berperspektif terbuka, bijaksana, dan moderat yang mewujudkan Islam sebagai rahmatan lil alamin, mendemonstrasikan bahwa lembaga pendidikan keagamaan dapat menjadi episentrum efektif dalam mengkultivasikan toleransi, keadilan, dan sikap seimbang dalam menyikapi pluralitas agama dan budaya Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: *Pesantren; inklusivitas; pendidikan keagamaan; moderasi beragama; da'wah moderat.*

INTRODUCTION

The rise of religious extremism and intolerance in multicultural societies has emerged as a critical global challenge requiring institutional responses that can effectively bridge theological principles with educational practice (Ismail et al., 2025; Shonhaji, 2026). Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, presents a particularly complex case characterized by extraordinary diversity of ethnic groups, customs, cultures, religions, and political preferences (M. Abdullah et al., 2025; Hasan et al., 2024; Susanto & Dwijayanto, 2022). This diversity creates potential for division and social disintegration when differences in religious perspectives are not managed wisely (Margiansyah et al., 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2025). Understanding how educational institutions navigate this complexity has become increasingly urgent for both scholars and policymakers.

Historically, the Medina Charter demonstrated Prophet Muhammad's model of religious moderation embodying respect for humanity, religious diversity, and peaceful coexistence acceptable to multicultural societies (Fahri & Zainuri, n.d.; Rustandi & Hanifah, 2019). The sociological context of Indonesian society shares striking similarities with Medinan society, making the spirit of *wasathiyyah* (religious moderation) particularly relevant for contemporary Islamic practice (Fakhri et al., 2025; Fauzi, 2021). This historical precedent provides both theological legitimacy and practical guidance for developing moderate, wise, and peaceful da'wah (Islamic propagation) in plural settings (A. Abdullah et al., 2023; Paisun et al., 2025; Rohmah et al., 2025).

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), as traditional Islamic educational institutions with deep historical roots in Indonesia's independence struggle, occupy a strategic position in addressing contemporary extremism through their comprehensive educational, social, and da'wah functions (Ma`arif et al., 2025; Paisun et al., 2025). These institutions serve dual roles as residential learning centers for students (*santri*) and community da'wah institutions providing religious understanding to broader society (Dahlan et al., 2025; Hariadi et al., 2024; Utama & Salim, 2024). However, the institutional mechanisms through which pesantren transform themselves into inclusive spaces that actively cultivate religious moderation remain insufficiently understood, necessitating systematic empirical investigation.

Existing scholarship on religious moderation has concentrated on theological conceptualization of wasathiyyah as the middle path between extreme liberalizing and rigid takfiri perspectives. Recent work has examined governmental policy frameworks promoting justice, balance, and tolerance, alongside four main indicators: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and accommodation toward local culture (Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2019)

While these studies provide theoretical foundations regarding balance between revelation and reason, divine (*ilahiyyah*) and humanitarian (*insaniyyah*) elements, they lack examination of how educational institutions operationalize these abstract principles in daily practice (Olsen, 2025; Učakar, 2025).

Pesantren research has primarily focused on historical development (Bruinessen, 1995; Dhofier, 2011) and typological categorizations distinguishing Salafiyah (traditional) from Khalafiyah (modern) forms (Directorate General of Islamic Institutional Education, 2003; Dhofier, 2009). While scholars acknowledge pesantren's tripartite functions as educational (*tarbiyah*), *da'wah*, and social institutions, these studies remain largely descriptive (Mumtaz et al., 2024). Critical gaps exist regarding the specific pedagogical strategies, teacher roles, and institutional practices that enable pesantren to implement da'wah for multicultural audiences with diverse education levels, socio-cultural backgrounds, economic standards, and political preferences.

METHOD

This study employs an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach to understand how reformist pesantren develop religious moderation and inclusive da'wah practices (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Theoretically, the research integrates structural dimensions (Ministry of Religious Affairs policies through RPJMN 2020-2024) and cultural dimensions (educational leadership interpretation) by adopting teacher role theory and da'wah studies. The conceptual framework identifies five interconnected ustaz roles: conservator, innovator, transmitter, transformator, and organizer in operationalizing moderation principles. Recent scholarship emphasizes the critical role of religious educators in cultivating moderate Islamic values within educational institutions (Mala & Hunaida, 2023)(Azra, 2021; Rijal & Supriadi, 2022), while studies on pesantren transformation highlight the importance of pedagogical innovation in responding to contemporary pluralism challenges (Nilan, 2023; Wahid et al., 2024).

The research utilizes a focused case study method with purposive sampling of two institutions: Pesantren Persatuan Islam Manbaul Huda in Bandung City and Pesantren Welas Asih in Garut Regency, West Java. Selection criteria include: (1) formal affiliation with reformist Islamic civil society organizations (Persis and Muhammadiyah); (2) leadership by young, visionary Kiai actively engaged in interfaith peace communities; and (3) documented participation in interfaith peace programs and tolerance education initiatives (Annabil & Hanif, 2025; Ma`arif et al., 2025). This purposive sampling strategy enables examination of potentially deviant cases that may diverge from the theological tendencies of reformist organizations.

Data collection was conducted through observation, interviews, and documentation following qualitative research protocols. Observations were performed by examining various learning activities and interactional processes occurring within the pesantren environment. Interviews were conducted with two key informants, and documentation was carried out by documenting relevant activities and archives related to the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Pesantren Management in Strengthening Religious Moderation

The strategy for strengthening religious moderation according to the Ministry of Religious Affairs RI consists of three approaches: a) socialization and dissemination of religious moderation ideas; b) institutionalization of religious moderation into binding programs and policies; and c) integration of religious moderation perspectives into the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020-2024.

Strengthening religious moderation values is carried out by considering four main indicators: 1) national commitment; 2) tolerance; 3) anti-violence; and 4) accommodative toward local culture (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019: 42-45). Pesantren as a da'wah institution has universal and comprehensive da'wah functions. In this regard, pesantren functions not only as an educational institution but also plays a role as a social institution that carries out various activities in community empowerment.

This empowerment process is carried out through various development stages that begin with building individual or community awareness in carrying out religious activities. Subsequently, strengthening community awareness in its social role, both in the context of the community environment within their residential scope and in the national context. Social empowerment activities are also carried out in various spheres of life, including economic, cultural, and even political or national aspects.

Strengthening religious moderation values in pesantren can be implemented through various patterns using both individual and institutional approaches. Strengthening religious moderation through an individual approach is conducted through socialization and character development based on religious moderation among *asatiz* (teachers) or instructors and caretakers of pesantren. This approach is important because Kiai, teachers, or ustaz in pesantren become important figures capable of transmitting religious moderation values and attitudes to students or the community. Meanwhile, the institutional approach is carried out through efforts to maintain, straighten, and provide knowledge about religious moderation to pesantren residents. Pesantren institutions serve as organizers and custodians of religious moderation values.

> "Our pesantren implements open management, including in the process of strengthening religious moderation. Some time ago, we provided an opportunity for a student from Germany to get to know our pesantren. He was a non-Muslim, but we gave him the opportunity to learn about Islam and Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren. It turns out that this approach strengthens the humanitarian dimension while representing the value of rahmatan lil alamin (mercy to all worlds)." RF (Head of Manbaul Huda Islamic Boarding School)

This statement from RF illustrates a practical application of religious moderation in Islamic educational institutions through inclusive engagement with people of different faiths. By welcoming a non-Muslim student from Germany to experience pesantren life, the institution demonstrates that religious moderation is not merely a theoretical concept but a lived practice that embraces openness and dialogue. This approach aligns with the Islamic principle of rahmatan lil alamin (mercy to all worlds), showing that da'wah can be effectively conducted through direct experience and cultural exchange rather than through proselytization. The open

management policy reflects the broader da'wah methodology of bil hikmah (wisdom), where understanding and mutual respect create opportunities for meaningful interfaith dialogue. Such initiatives strengthen the humanitarian dimension of Islamic education by breaking down barriers and misconceptions, while simultaneously representing the universal and inclusive nature of Islamic teachings. This practice demonstrates how pesantren institutions can serve as bridges between cultures and religions, embodying the moderate, wise, and responsible approach to da'wah that addresses the reality of multicultural societies in contemporary times.

Source: Instagram account of Rosihan Fahmi @fahmirosihan

Figure 1. Pesantren Leader with Foreign Student (non-Muslim) from Germany.

RF states that, in addition, the program for strengthening pluralistic values in pesantren is carried out through the development of knowledge and arts, one of which is the Santri Innovation Week. In this program, every student is required to create a work in various forms that is positioned as a contribution to civilization. These works may take the form of scientific projects, book writings, artistic products, and other creative outputs. Each student must present and defend their work before a panel of reviewers. This process serves as a means of reinforcing the values of openness and progress within Islamic civilization. It is also what shapes the pesantren as a transformative institution embodying the values of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a mercy to all creation).

Source: Instagram Account MAS Manbaul Huda @masanda.ok

Figure 2. Presentation of Santri Innovation Works

Practically, the management of strengthening religious moderation in pesantren is carried out through several stages (Sutrisno, 2019; Anshari et al., 2021), including: first, the role

as conservator. This role is performed through being a motivator, facilitator, counselor, and even becoming an example or figure that subsequently generates an imitation process from *ustaz* to students (*santri*). This role is also carried out by providing original and fundamental understanding of the concept of religious moderation so that society does not misunderstand it.

Second, the role as innovator. Being able to provide innovation in building religious moderation. The innovation of an *ustaz* in pesantren is inseparable from their role as central to character development, especially character in building religious moderation. Religious moderation values in character development can be carried out through integrated spiritual and nationalism strengthening. Third, the role as transmitter. Continuing the understanding of religious moderation is done by *ustaz* through one method, motivating or becoming a motivator for students in pesantren.

Fourth, the role as transformator. The transformation carried out by *ustaz* in building religious moderation is that the *ustaz* becomes a figure (example/role model). Motivating and providing guidance as an effort to continue the value system and giving responsibility to an *ustaz* to be able to behave well, so that students do not make mistakes in receiving their attitudes. Fifth, the role as organizer. Implementing organization in strengthening student characteristics through religious moderation values. This role is carried out by planning the process of strengthening religious moderation through a series of planned, directed, and measurable activities.

Pesantren Welas Asih strengthens religious moderation through various programs that reinforce the *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for all creation) dimension among students. This is implemented through learning programs designed to provide students with direct experiences of diversity. Examples include the Connecting School for Peace program, interfaith learning activities conducted with clear and firm boundaries, cultural outing classes to various cultural institutions, and environmental programs that connect students with their living ecosystem. Regular leadership training programs are also held to cultivate responsible leadership among santri. Other initiatives, such as cultural outing classes, peace student exchange programs, Islamic student seminars or workshops, and similar activities, serve as integral components of the learning process. These programs are not limited to the pesantren's formal curriculum but are enriched with local and cultural elements that nurture students' tolerance, wisdom, and fairness in responding to differences and pluralism.

Source: Instagram Account @peacesantren_welasasih

Figure 3. Poster of Peacesantren Welas Asih Activities in Strengthening Religious Moderation

The posters illustrate Peacesantren Welas Asih's concrete initiatives in promoting religious moderation through experiential learning. The Connecting School for Peace program provides students with opportunities to interact and learn alongside peers from different religious backgrounds, fostering understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. Meanwhile, the Outing Class to Kampung Naga encourages students to appreciate and preserve local cultural heritage, reinforcing harmony between religious values and cultural diversity. Together, these programs embody the pesantren's commitment to cultivating inclusive, tolerant, and peace-oriented attitudes among its students as part of the broader vision of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*.

Religious moderation has become a strategic issue that is beginning to be internalized in several pesantren educational institutions. This relates to efforts to display the face of Islam as a mercy to all worlds (*Rahmatan lil Alamin*) implemented in the teaching and service processes of pesantren institutions. For example, several pesantren play the role of transmitter in internalizing religious moderation values and attitudes. This is done through formulating educational programs oriented toward strengthening understanding of religious moderation both within and outside the pesantren environment.

Several learning activities perceived to embody the spirit of religious moderation in pesantren include strengthening national commitment through introducing national heroes both formally through history subjects and Islamic history in Indonesia (*sirah*), introducing national songs, student creativity weeks, outing classes, basic student leadership training, student organizational involvement, and so forth. Internalization of tolerance and anti-violence values, for example, through teaching verbal and behavioral etiquette (*adab*), introducing the dangers of bullying, student and parent counseling, to visitation programs from non-Muslim students in the form of connecting school for peace programs (introduction to peace culture). Additionally, strengthening religious moderation is also carried out through cultural strategies, where students in several pesantren conduct cultural visits and even bring in cultural figures or cultural practitioners as guest teachers to facilitate students.

The central role of pesantren in the institutional management process strengthens the transmission and internalization of religious moderation values and attitudes for its students. The more open the mindset of pesantren leadership, the greater the opportunities in the process of understanding moderate, tolerant, and wise attitudes. In several pesantren managed by leaders who tend to be open-minded, widely networked, and visionary, it tends to be easier to understand religious moderation values as part of efforts to actualize Islam as a mercy to all worlds. This is evidenced by learning program packages that not only rely on fulfilling pesantren curriculum content but are also enriched with pesantren locality content oriented toward strengthening awareness of plurality.

Strengthening this mindset is carried out as one alternative effort to implement Islamic da'wah. One informant stated that having learning programs in the form of peace connections such as integrating students with students of different religions serves, on one hand, as an effort to instill humanitarian tolerance values and, on the other hand, as an effort to introduce Islam (*da'wah*). Thus, the reality of Islam as a religion of mercy to all worlds is depicted through humanitarian social life activities among students when they interact with other human beings.

The role of pesantren in the process of internalization, transmission, diffusion, and transformation of religious moderation values and attitudes. In this regard, pesantren becomes an epicenter capable of strengthening an inclusive Islamic ecosystem as an effort to strengthen Islamic da'wah. Therefore, pesantren as both a da'wah institution and an Islamic educational institution has spiritual and social functions that are viewed as capable of realizing efforts toward Islam as a mercy to all worlds (*rahmatan lil alamin*).

One of the strengthening programs is directed not only toward students but also toward asatiz or teachers, who serve as peace educators. Pesantren Welas Asih seeks to build an educational ecosystem that promotes the values and culture of peace within the pesantren environment while also influencing the broader community. Proactively, the pesantren organizes training sessions for teachers who are committed to nurturing values of peace and multiculturalism. These efforts aim to establish a collaborative peace network that reinforces and sustains these values across educational and social contexts.

Source: Instagram Account @peacesantren_welasasih

Figure 4. Poster of Pesantren Welas Asih Activities in Strengthening the Religious Moderation Ecosystem

The reality of multicultural and plural *da'wah* objects results in dynamics in the implementation of da'wah activities. In this case, differences in views, understanding, attitudes, and actions in expressing patterns and models of religiosity are unavoidable realities. Therefore, strengthening the values and attitudes of moderation in religion becomes an alternative for displaying moderate, wise, critical, and responsible da'wah activities. Thus, the implementation of *da'wah* activities amid the multiculturality and plurality of da'wah objects is oriented toward manifesting a harmonious, peaceful, and serene face of Islam.

The poster illustrates the Training for Peace Educator program organized by Pesantren Welas Asih, which serves as an important initiative in strengthening the ecosystem of religious moderation within the pesantren. Through this program, teachers and tutors are trained to integrate peace education into their teaching practices, fostering tolerance, empathy, and intercultural understanding among students. By equipping educators with the knowledge and skills to promote peaceful values, the pesantren not only builds a culture of harmony within its own environment but also extends its influence to the broader educational community, reinforcing the principles of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* and inclusive Islamic education.

The moderate da'wah perspective positions the reality of da'wah objects in Indonesia as a miniature of human civilization built upon differences. In this regard, every da'wah practitioner has an obligation to introduce Islamic principles as a foundation for building civilization. Fundamentally, Islam is a universal teaching intended for all humanity in the universe. Islam systematically and comprehensively regulates various human interests. Not a single human affair escapes Islamic perspective. Therefore, introducing the face of Islam as a mercy to all worlds (*rahmatan lil alamin*) becomes the main principle in carrying out moderate, wise, and peaceful da'wah.

The da'wah perspective views that understanding and practicing Islamic teaching concepts as human life values must be applied in various dimensions and spheres of life. Islam as a teaching of truth needs to be conveyed to all humanity holistically and comprehensively. Islamic da'wah oriented toward truth and goodness positions humanity as conscious subjects and objects of da'wah. Therefore, practically, Islamic da'wah activities must be carried out to build participatory and emancipatory human consciousness in efforts to draw closer to Allah.

The cultivation of moderate Islamic values within Indonesian pesantren is fundamentally shaped by the multifaceted roles that *ustaz* (Islamic teachers) perform in their daily interactions with *santri* (students). These roles operate across multiple dimensions, creating a comprehensive framework for transmitting and nurturing religious moderation within Islamic educational institutions.

Structural Factors Enabling Religious Moderation in Pesantren
Government Policy Integration and Institutional Response

Both pesantren demonstrate institutional adaptation to national religious moderation policies integrated into Indonesia's National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN 2020-2024). However, implementation approaches differ based on organizational affiliation and leadership orientation. At Manbaul Huda, institutional leaders explicitly connect government initiatives with pesantren's reformist (Persis) theological tradition. RF, the pesantren head, explained:

> "Our pesantren implements open management, including in the process of strengthening religious moderation. Some time ago, we provided an opportunity for a student from Germany to get to know our pesantren. He was a non-Muslim, but we gave him the opportunity to learn about Islam and Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren. It turns out that this approach strengthens the humanitarian dimension while representing the value of rahmatan lil alamin (mercy to all worlds)."

This statement reveals how leadership interprets religious moderation as compatible with reformist identity when framed through universal Islamic principles. The German student visit represents institutional willingness to engage non-Muslims directly—a practice potentially controversial within more conservative reformist circles.

At Welas Asih, affiliated with Muhammadiyah, structural integration manifests through systematized peace education programs. Documentary evidence shows recurring initiatives: "Connecting School for Peace" programs facilitating interfaith student exchanges, "Training for Peace Educator" sessions for ustaz professional development, and cultural immersion activities like visits to Kampung Naga traditional village. Instagram documentation (@peacesantren_welasasih) displays consistent branding of these activities under "peacesantren" identity, suggesting institutional commitment beyond ad hoc responses to government policy.

Observations revealed both pesantren incorporate religious moderation indicators national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, accommodative attitudes toward local culture into program design, though with distinct emphases. Manbaul Huda prioritizes intellectual innovation and cultural production, while Welas Asih emphasizes experiential interfaith engagement and peace pedagogy.

Leadership Characteristics and Institutional Openness

Leadership profiles emerged as critical structural factors enabling moderation cultivation. Both pesantren are led by relatively young *Kiai* (compared to traditional pesantren leadership demographics) with extensive educational networks beyond their organizational affiliations.

RF's background includes participation in interfaith dialogue forums and academic engagement with pluralism scholarship. During observations, RF referenced contemporary Islamic thinkers advocating contextual ijtihad and demonstrated familiarity with comparative religious education literature. This intellectual orientation appeared to legitimize innovative programs within the institution.

At Welas Asih, leadership involvement in regional peace-building networks created institutional partnerships enabling student exchange programs. Observational data showed regular collaboration with Christian schools in Bandung through joint environmental projects and cultural festivals. The Kiai's personal relationships with non-Muslim educational leaders facilitated these initiatives, suggesting that leadership social capital significantly impacts institutional capacity for interfaith engagement.

Both leaders articulated visions positioning pesantren as "epicenters of inclusive Islam" and "spaces for humanization, liberation, and transcendence" language reflecting exposure to progressive Islamic educational philosophy beyond traditional pesantren discourse.

Pedagogical Strategies and Ustaz Roles in Practice
Conservator Role, Foundational Knowledge Transmission

Classroom observations at both pesantren revealed systematic engagement with classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) framing religious moderation as authentically Islamic rather than externally imposed. At Manbaul Huda, *ustaz* teaching *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) regularly invoked the principle of *wasathiyyah* (middle path) during discussions of contemporary issues.

One observed session addressed social media ethics. The ustaz cited Quranic verses and hadith emphasizing balanced behavior, then facilitated discussion where santri analyzed examples of online extremism (both liberal and conservative). The ustaz's role centered on establishing textual foundations preventing misinterpretation of moderation as religious relativism.

At Welas Asih, conservator functions included inviting external scholars for specialized lectures. Documentary evidence showed visits by university professors and NGO representatives discussing pluralism in Indonesian Islam. These sessions provided santri exposure to academic discourse on religious moderation while maintaining theological grounding through Kiai presence and post-lecture discussions.

However, observations also revealed tensions. At Manbaul Huda, some older *santri* questioned whether welcoming non-Muslims into pesantren spaces compromised Islamic distinctiveness. *Ustaz* responses emphasized prophetic precedent (*sirah*) regarding Medina Charter principles, demonstrating conservator role in negotiating between tradition and contemporary practice.

Innovator Role, Creative Program Development

The "*Santri* Innovation Week" at Manbaul Huda exemplifies innovator dimensions. Observations during the week-long event showed santri presenting diverse projects: scientific research on renewable energy, literary anthologies addressing social justice, artistic installations critiquing political polarization, and documentary films on interfaith harmony in Indonesian villages.

RF described the program's rationale:

"In addition, the program for strengthening pluralistic values in pesantren is carried out through the development of knowledge and arts, one of which is the Santri Innovation Week. In this program, every student is required to create a work in various forms that is positioned as a contribution to civilization."

Observational notes recorded that project evaluations assessed both technical quality and reflection of moderate Islamic values. Judges (comprising *ustaz*, community figures, and external educators) asked *santri* to articulate how their work embodied principles like justice (*'adalah*), balance (*tawazun*), and tolerance (*tasamuh*). This integrated assessment reinforced innovation as inseparable from moderation cultivation.

Instagram documentation (@masanda.ok) shows santri presentations occurring in public forums rather than internal pesantren settings, suggesting institutional intent to model youth Islamic intellectualism to broader audiences. Posts garnered comments from alumni, parents, and community members praising pesantren's "progressive yet grounded" approach.

At Welas Asih, innovation manifested through curricular integration rather than standalone events. The "Outing Class" program systematically incorporated cultural visits into

semester schedules. Observations of one outing to Kampung Naga traditional Sundanese village showed structured learning activities: pre-visit briefings on cultural anthropology, guided interactions with village elders, reflective journaling assignments connecting observed traditions with Islamic values, and post-visit presentations analyzing compatibility between adat (customary law) and shari'ah.

> An ustaz facilitating the outing explained:
>
> "We design these experiences so *santri* understand that Islam accommodates cultural diversity. They see living examples of Muslims preserving ancestral traditions without compromising Islamic principles. This direct experience is more powerful than classroom lectures about *'urf* (custom) in Islamic jurisprudence."

Transmitter Role, Systematic Values Dissemination

Transmission of moderate values occurred through both formal curriculum and pesantren regulatory frameworks. At Manbaul Huda, observations revealed daily routines incorporating moderation principles: morning assemblies included recitation of Pancasila (Indonesian national philosophy) alongside Quranic verses, classroom discussions regularly addressed current events through moderation lenses, and disciplinary policies explicitly prohibited extremist rhetoric or symbols.

Documentary analysis of student handbooks at both pesantren showed codified behavioral expectations emphasizing *adab* (etiquette) in interfaith contexts. Rules prohibited derogatory language toward other religions, mandated respectful engagement during interfaith programs, and outlined consequences for intolerant behavior. These regulations operationalized abstract moderation concepts into enforceable standards.

Anti-bullying initiatives represented another transmission mechanism. At Welas Asih, observations of counseling sessions showed *ustaz* addressing conflicts using restorative justice principles rather than punitive measures. One observed case involved *santri* from different socioeconomic backgrounds experiencing tension. The counselor-*ustaz* facilitated dialogue emphasizing Islamic teachings on equality and dignity, helping students recognize how economic privilege could manifest as microaggressions.

Weekly *tausiyah* (religious exhortations) provided regular transmission opportunities. Observational notes from multiple sessions showed *ustaz* consistently framing moderation not as compromise but as authentic Islamic practice. Themes included prophetic examples of mercy toward enemies, Islamic civilization's historical pluralism, and contemporary Muslim scholars advocating contextual interpretation.

However, transmission effectiveness appeared uneven. Informal conversations with *santri* revealed some perceived anti-bullying and tolerance education as repetitive or preachy. One *santri* commented: "*We understand the importance, but sometimes it feels like the same message every week. Maybe more discussion instead of just listening would help*." This suggests transmission strategies may benefit from increased dialogical approaches.

Transformator Role, Modeling Through Experiential Engagement

The "Connecting School for Peace" program at Welas Asih provided the clearest evidence of transformator roles. Observations of joint activities between Welas Asih santri and students from Christian schools showed *ustaz* actively participating rather than merely supervising.

During one observed environmental cleanup collaboration, *ustaz* engaged in informal conversations with Christian students about religious environmental ethics, sharing Islamic perspectives on stewardship (*khilafah*) while inquiring about Christian creation care theology. This modeling demonstrated how interfaith dialogue occurs naturally through shared action rather than formal debate.

Instagram documentation (@peacesantren_welasasih) displays multiple images of *ustaz* alongside non-Muslim educators and students during interfaith events, visually reinforcing that religious leadership actively embodies pluralistic engagement. Captions consistently frame activities using *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy to all worlds) language, connecting transformative practice with theological principles.

At Manbaul Huda, transformator roles manifested through the German student visit described earlier. Observations during the visit showed *ustaz* modifying teaching methods to accommodate the visitor's limited Indonesian and Islamic knowledge, demonstrating pedagogical flexibility. The visitor attended classes, participated in communal prayers (observing respectfully without participating in Islamic rituals), shared meals with *santri*, and engaged in cultural exchange sessions.

Informal interviews with *santri* who interacted with the German visitor revealed transformative impacts: "At first I was confused about how to act around a non-Muslim. But seeing our *ustaz* treat him warmly and answer his questions patiently showed me that da'wah doesn't mean forcing beliefs. It means showing Islam's beauty through our behavior." This student reflection suggests modeling effectively transmits moderate approaches to interfaith relations.

However, transformator roles also revealed tensions. Some *ustaz* appeared less comfortable with interfaith engagement than others, suggesting uneven internalization of moderation principles among educators themselves. Observations noted that younger *ustaz* participated more actively in interfaith programs, while some senior teachers maintained physical distance during joint activities, though remaining respectful.

Organizer Role, Systematic Program Implementation

Both pesantren demonstrated sophisticated organizational structures supporting moderation cultivation. Documentary analysis revealed detailed annual planning documents outlining moderation-related objectives, specific programs addressing each objective, responsible parties, timelines, and assessment methods.

At Manbaul Huda, organizational systematization included curriculum committees specifically tasked with integrating moderation across subjects. Meeting minutes showed committees discussing how history teachers incorporate national heroes into Islamic history (*sirah*) courses, how language teachers select literary texts reflecting pluralistic themes, and how science teachers address Islamic epistemology's compatibility with modern inquiry methods.

Leadership training programs exemplified systematic organization. Welas Asih's "Training for Peace Educator" initiative followed structured professional development models: needs assessment surveys identifying *ustaz* knowledge gaps, workshop series addressing identified needs, follow-up mentoring as *ustaz* implemented new strategies, and evaluation of impact on student attitudes.

Instagram documentation (@peacesantren_welasasih) of the training program shows formal certificates, structured curriculum materials, and participation by external peace education specialists—indicating institutional investment beyond informal professional development.

Organizational roles also encompassed extracurricular systematization. Both pesantren required *santri* participation in student organizations (OSIS equivalents) incorporating leadership development and civic engagement. Observations of organizational meetings showed student leaders planning community service projects, managing peer mediation programs, and coordinating interfaith exchange visits—all framed explicitly as applications of religious moderation principles.

However, organizational capacity constraints emerged during observations. Some planned programs experienced scheduling conflicts with academic requirements, suggesting tensions between curricular demands and co-curricular moderation initiatives. Additionally, resource limitations affected program scale—both pesantren expressed desire to expand interfaith programming but cited budget and personnel constraints.

Santri Perspectives on Religious Moderation Education

While the study primarily interviewed institutional leaders due to access limitations, informal conversations with santri during observations provided preliminary insights into student experiences. At Manbaul Huda, *santri* participating in Innovation Week expressed appreciation for creative freedom: "*This pesantren doesn't just teach us to memorize. We're encouraged to think critically and create something beneficial for society. That's what makes me proud to be a santri here.*"

Another student noted: "*Through innovation projects, I learned that being a good Muslim means contributing to civilization, not isolating from the world.*"

However, some *santri* perceived moderation education as externally driven rather than organically integrated. One student commented:

> "Sometimes it feels like we're doing these programs because the government requires it, not because it's truly part of our pesantren's identity. But maybe that's just my impression."

At Welas Asih, *santri* involved in Connecting School for Peace programs described transformative experiences:

> "Before this program, I had assumptions about Christians based on what I heard. Meeting them directly and working together on projects changed my perspective completely. I realized we share many values."

Another *santri* reflected: "Our *ustaz* always say Islam is *rahmatan lil alamin*, but I didn't fully understand until I experienced it through these interfaith activities." Some *santri* expressed initial anxiety about interfaith engagement:

> "At first I worried it might weaken my *aqidah* (creed). But our *Kiai* explained clearly that understanding other religions doesn't mean accepting their beliefs. It's about respecting their humanity."

This comment suggests institutional success in navigating tensions between theological distinctiveness and pluralistic engagement.

DISCUSSION

Pesantren: Inclusive Space for Da'wah Based on Religious Moderation

In general, pesantren educational institutions have advantages compared to other educational institutions, particularly regarding the instilling, fostering, accompanying, and developing of Islamic values and attitudes in the process of carrying out daily activities (Budiyono et al., 2024; Mustikamah et al., 2025). Additionally, the existence of pesantren strengthens its social function in strengthening the Islamic spirit for the general public. Pesantren becomes an educational institution that not only teaches religious knowledge but also plays a social function that intersects with community realities (Azizah et al., 2023).

Socially, regarding the role and position of pesantren institutions within society, pesantren focuses on instilling and fostering normative, educative, and progressive values. Pesantren has a strategic role and position in developing Islamic society (Mujib et al., 2021). Therefore, pesantren functions can be categorized into three main activities: as an educational institution (*tarbiyah*), a da'wah institution, and a social institution (Arif et al., 2025).

Pesantren as a da'wah institution carries out comprehensive Islamic propagation activities. Pesantren institutions are perceived as institutions that provide enlightenment in understanding Islamic religious teachings for society (Helmy et al., 2021). Therefore, the presence of pesantren is not only viewed as an Islamic educational institution for students residing at the pesantren but also as a da'wah institution that provides religious understanding to society in general (Rustan et al., 2020).

The da'wah activities of pesantren institutions relate to their da'wah function in upholding the word of monotheism (*tawhid*). Pesantren, through the figure of the *Kiai* and its da'wah ecosystem, is viewed as a fostering space capable of providing solutions to various communal dynamics (Hadiyanto et al., 2022). Therefore, the presence of pesantren within society strengthens the foundation of monotheism oriented toward realizing a societal life order in accordance with Islamic shari'ah values (Rahmansyah, 2023).

Pesantren as a da'wah institution has universal and comprehensive da'wah functions. In this regard, pesantren functions not only as an educational institution but also plays a role as a social institution that carries out various activities in community empowerment (Arizona et al., 2025; Sriharini et al., 2018; Umar et al., 2025; Zainudin et al., 2025). This empowerment process is carried out through various development stages that begin with building individual or community awareness in carrying out religious activities (Aisah et al., 2025; Helmy et al., 2021). Subsequently, strengthening community awareness in its social role, both in the context of the community environment within their residential scope and in the national context. Social empowerment activities are also carried out in various spheres of life, including economic, cultural, and even political or national aspects (Hasbi, 2022).

Strengthening religious moderation values in pesantren can be implemented through various patterns using both individual and institutional approaches. Strengthening religious moderation through an individual approach is conducted through socialization and character development based on religious moderation among *asatiz* or teachers and caretakers of pesantren (Ayubi & Masruri, 2025). This approach is important because *Kiai*, teachers, or *ustaz* in pesantren become important figures capable of transmitting religious moderation values and attitudes to students or the community (Mustaqim et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the institutional

approach is carried out through efforts to maintain, straighten, and provide knowledge about religious moderation to pesantren residents. Pesantren institutions serve as organizers and custodians of religious moderation values.

The Process of Forming an Inclusive Space for Religious Moderation in Pesantren

As conservators of religious tradition, *ustaz* serve as motivators, facilitators, and counselors who provide foundational understanding of religious moderation concepts. This role extends beyond mere instruction; *ustaz* become living exemplars whose behavior triggers imitative processes among *santri*. Through the study of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), facilitated discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and by inviting external scholars, *ustaz* ensure that students develop accurate comprehension of religious moderation while building awareness of Indonesia's pluralistic social landscape. This conservative function safeguards the authentic transmission of moderate Islamic thought while preventing misinterpretation of its core principles (Hafidz, 2021).

In their capacity as innovators, *ustaz* demonstrate creative approaches to building religious moderation within pesantren environments. This innovative dimension recognizes that *ustaz* occupy a central position in character development, particularly in fostering moderate religious attitudes. Through integrated spiritual strengthening and nationalism education, *ustaz* design co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that shape *santri's* mindset and mentality as members of Indonesian society (Huda et al., 2024; Ikhwan et al., 2025). Leadership training programs, for instance, exemplify how innovative learning approaches can simultaneously reinforce national consciousness and humanitarian values, demonstrating that religious education need not be confined to traditional pedagogical methods (Albert et al., 2025; Nurhayati et al., 2022; Yuliana et al., 2025).

The transmitter role positions *ustaz* as active channels for disseminating religious moderation principles throughout the pesantren community. Through motivational engagement, *ustaz* provide learning materials focused on Muslim social ethics and interpersonal conduct (Cholily et al., 2025). Importantly, these ethical guidelines (*adab*) are not merely taught theoretically but are embedded within the pesantren's regulatory framework, creating behavioral expectations that apply universally to *santri* and all pesantren residents (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021). This comprehensive implementation ensures that moderate values permeate the entire institutional culture rather than remaining abstract concepts.

As transformators, *ustaz* function as role models whose exemplary behavior provides tangible demonstrations of moderate Islamic practice. This transformative role carries significant responsibility, as *ustaz* must embody the values they seek to instill, ensuring that *santri* receive consistent and appropriate behavioral guidance. Transformation occurs through experiential learning programs that expose *santri* directly to pluralistic contexts (Rahman & Mulyana, 2024). Initiatives such as "connecting school for peace," interfaith learning programs with clearly defined boundaries, cultural outings to heritage institutions, and environmental programs that connect *santri* with their ecological surroundings, all serve to translate theoretical understanding of diversity into lived experience (Jusubaidi et al., 2024).

Finally, the organizer role encompasses the systematic planning and implementation of character-strengthening activities through religious moderation values (Khoir et al., 2024). *Ustaz* coordinate planned, directed, and measurable programs including regular student leadership

training, cultural field trips, peace student exchange programs, and Islamic student seminars and workshops. These organized activities constitute an integral component of the learning process that extends beyond the standard pesantren curriculum (Hussain, 2025; Triana et al., 2025). By incorporating local content and cultural elements, these programs strengthen *santri's* tolerant, wise, and fair attitudes when responding to various forms of difference and plurality in Indonesian society.

Collectively, these five interconnected roles conservator, innovator, transmitter, transformator, and organizer create a dynamic educational ecosystem within pesantren institutions. This multidimensional approach ensures that religious moderation is not treated as a supplementary topic but rather as a foundational element woven throughout the entire educational experience, from formal instruction to informal daily interactions and experiential learning opportunities. **Figure 1** below displays the process of forming pesantren as an inclusive space for religious moderation, thus producing moderate attitudes in the implementation of da'wah activities.
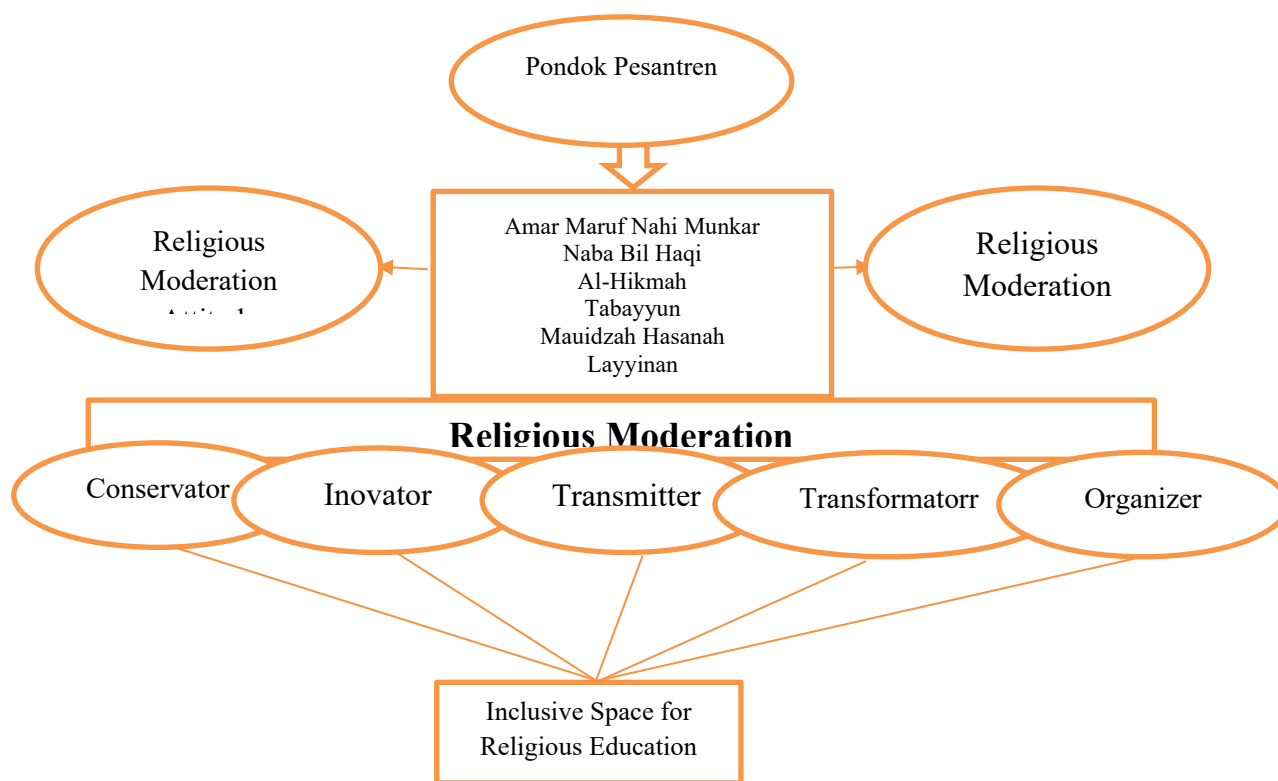
Source: Author's observation, 2024
Figure 5. The Process of Forming an Inclusive Space for Religious Moderation in Pesantren

The diagram illustrates the conceptual framework of religious moderation in pesantren, where the institution (pondok pesantren) serves as a central agent that cultivates both attitudes and values of moderation. These values rooted in Islamic principles such as *Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar, Tabayyun, Al-Hikmah,* and *Mauidzah Hasana*h shape the santri's character and guide the pesantren's educational vision. The model identifies four functional roles of religious moderation within the pesantren ecosystem: Conservator, Innovator, Transmitter,

Transformator, and Organizer. Each role contributes to creating an inclusive space for religious education where pluralism, tolerance, and social harmony can flourish.

In the context of Pesantren Manbaul Huda, these functions are reflected through programs such as the Pekan Inovasi Santri, which encourages santri to produce intellectual and artistic works as contributions to civilization highlighting their innovator and transmitter roles in spreading inclusive Islamic values. Meanwhile, Pesantren Welas Asih embodies the framework through initiatives like Connecting School for Peace, Outing Class to Kampung Naga, and Training for Peace Educator, which demonstrate the pesantren's transformative and organizational functions (Qasserras, 2024; Rozaki & Izudin, 2025). These programs build a culture of peace and collaboration, both within and beyond the pesantren environment, thus realizing the essence of rahmatan lil 'alamin and reinforcing the ecosystem of religious moderation in contemporary Islamic education.

Da'wah based on religious moderation will create an inclusive educational environment. Namely, an educational space that places humans as equals, having the same roles and positions, and oriented towards developing humanistic awareness (Subiyantoro et al., 2026). Practically, the dissemination of da'wah messages digitally is carried out as an alternative effort in conveying transformative Islamic messages. The pesantren environment as a space for humanization, liberation, and transcendence holds a strategic position as the epicenter of inclusive Islam towards an educational ecosystem that strengthens the understanding of pesantren residents in building harmonious and friendly social relations based on religious moderation. In other words, all acts of injustice and anticipation of various forms of violence, oppression, injustice, and other destructive actions can be minimized through a moderate, wise da'wah management process that displays the face of Islam as *rahmatan lil alamin* (a mercy to all worlds).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that reformist-affiliated pesantren successfully cultivate religious moderation through intersecting structural factors (government policy integration, visionary leadership) and cultural factors operationalized via five interconnected *ustaz* roles—conservator, innovator, transmitter, transformator, and organizer—functioning as a comprehensive pedagogical system rather than isolated interventions. Contrary to widespread assumptions, Pesantren Persis Manbaul Huda and Pesantren Welas Asih effectively create inclusive educational spaces where Islamic authenticity and pluralistic engagement coexist, producing Muslim cadres capable of practicing moderate da'wah that strengthens rather than compromises aqidah values. These findings reveal that institutional affiliation (reformist vs. traditionalist) does not deterministically predict moderation capacity; rather, leadership orientation and systematic pedagogical implementation prove more influential in transforming pesantren into epicenters of religious moderation.

The study makes two significant contributions: first, challenging empirically the perception that reformist Islamic organizations are less responsive to religious moderation than traditionalist institutions, and second, introducing the Five Interconnected *Ustaz* Roles Model as a conceptual framework bridging macro-level policy and micro-level pedagogical practice. However, findings must be interpreted cautiously given the small sample of two exceptional

cases in West Java, focus on pesantren with unusually progressive leadership, and lack of longitudinal data tracking sustainability or graduate outcomes.

Future research should examine larger, more diverse samples across Indonesian regions, incorporate mixed-methods designs measuring moderation internalization quantitatively, conduct longitudinal studies tracking institutional evolution and *santri* post-graduation trajectories, and analyze how contextual variables (pesantren type, resources, community environment) mediate transformation processes. Policymakers should provide differentiated support recognizing institutional diversity, invest in *Kiai* professional development emphasizing moderation competencies, and ensure adequate resources for experiential programs beyond compliance mandates.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that traditional Islamic educational institutions can adapt to contemporary pluralism challenges not by abandoning distinctive identities but by discovering within their own traditions resources for encountering difference with wisdom, justice, and mercy a finding with significant implications for addressing religious extremism and building harmonious Islamic civilization in Indonesia's multicultural society.

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