



## Integrating the Value of Religious Moderation into the Islamic Religious Education Curriculum to Counter Social Polarization in Junior High Schools

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**Abstract.** The rise of digital media, identity politics, and narrow interpretations of religious texts is escalating the social polarization among adolescents based on religion. Educational institutions, particularly through Islamic Religious Education (PAI), are essential in promoting moderate, tolerant, and inclusive views on religion. This study aims to explore how integrating principles of religious moderation into the PAI curriculum can act as an educational resource to reduce social polarization among junior high school students. This study utilizes a qualitative approach that includes a literature review and examination of curriculum documents. The results suggest that integrating values of religious moderation into the objectives, resources, methods, and evaluation of PAI education can improve tolerance, reduce harmful stereotypes between groups, and foster a culture of dialogue among students. As a result, PAI functions not only as a means of delivering religious lessons but also as an instrument for shaping national identity and promoting social unity.

**Keywords:** Character Education; Curriculum; Islamic Religious Education; Religious Moderation; Social Polarization.

### 1. BACKGROUND

Indonesia is known as a country with a high degree of religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. This reality constitutes a social asset that serves as a solid foundation for national unity. However, on the other hand, diversity also harbors the potential for conflict if not addressed through education, dialogue, and inclusive policies. In recent decades, there has been an increase in social tensions rooted in religious identity, both in public spaces and in the digital realm. This phenomenon is known as social polarization a situation where society is fragmented into groups with deep ideological, emotional, and social differences (Sunstein, 2018).

Religiously-based social polarization is not only emerging among the general public but is also beginning to infiltrate the education sector, including at the Junior High School (SMP) level. Adolescents in their early teenage years are in a stage of psychological development where they are highly influenced by their environment, particularly social media, peer groups, and authority figures. Erikson (1968) explains that adolescence is a stage of identity crisis, during which individuals strive to find their sense of self, including their religious and social identities. If, during this phase, students acquire a narrow, literal, and exclusive understanding of religion, there is a high likelihood that this will develop into intolerant attitudes and a rejection of differences.

In this context, schools play a strategic role in religious education. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) serves not only as a means of disseminating Islamic knowledge but also contributes to the development of students' character, social behavior, and religious views. According to Tilaar (2015), education is essentially a process of acculturation that is, the internalization of values, norms, and meanings that shape an individual's mindset and behavior within society. Thus, PAI should serve as a means to foster a mature, humanistic, and diverse religious identity that aligns with the reality of Indonesia's diversity.

However, various studies indicate that the teaching of Islamic Education in schools still tends to focus on cognitive and normative aspects. The curriculum places greater emphasis on memorizing verses, definitions of fiqh laws, and doctrinal beliefs, while contextual and social dimensions are often neglected (Yusuf, 2021). As a result, students may understand Islamic teachings textually but lack the reflective ability to interpret those teachings within the context of a diverse society. This situation creates an opening for the development of exclusivist attitudes and even radicalism in subtle forms, such as claims of sole truth and the delegitimization of other groups.

In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has introduced religious moderation as a new approach to managing religious life. Religious moderation is defined as "religious views, attitudes, and practices that emphasize balance, justice, and respect for diversity" (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). This concept rejects extremism, whether in the form of hardline radicalism or liberalism that disregards fundamental religious values. Religious moderation positions religion as the foundation of social ethics that supports peace, justice, and solidarity.

From an educational perspective, religious moderation has a profound impact. Education, particularly religious education, is viewed as a vital tool for instilling the values of moderation from an early age. This statement aligns with Banks' (2015) view that schools are the primary setting for developing democratic citizens capable of living amidst diversity. Thus, the Islamic Education curriculum must be designed and implemented in such a way that it not only conveys normative teachings but also facilitates the development of tolerant attitudes, empathy, and dialogue skills among students.

As an ideological and educational document, the curriculum plays a crucial role in determining the direction and orientation of education. Apple (2012) states that the curriculum always embodies specific values, interests, and a vision regarding the kind of society it seeks to build, and is therefore never neutral. In this context, a religious education curriculum that

promotes the value of religious moderation serves as a constructive form of ideological intervention aimed at fostering a harmonious and inclusive society.

The integration of the value of religious moderation into the Islamic Education curriculum encompasses various elements, ranging from the establishment of learning objectives, content selection, and teaching methods to the assessment system. For example, material on *ukhuwah Islamiyah* can be expanded to include an understanding of *ukhuwah insaniyah* (brotherhood among all humanity), and stories from Islamic history can be interpreted as lessons on tolerance and living in harmony. With this approach, PAI no longer functions as a limited space for indoctrination, but as a space for dialogue and critical reflection.

In the context of social polarization, a curriculum approach based on religious moderation holds great potential for mitigating conflict and building bridges between groups. Students equipped with a moderate understanding of religion tend to be more open-minded, capable of respecting differences, and less likely to be provoked by hateful narratives. Research by Hidayat and Mahmud (2022) shows that religious education emphasizing tolerance and dialogue significantly reduces intolerant attitudes and social prejudice among high school students.

From this explanation, it can be concluded that integrating the value of religious moderation into the Islamic Religious Education curriculum is an urgent necessity to address the challenges of social polarization in educational settings. Therefore, this study emphasizes how to systematically integrate the concept of religious moderation into the Islamic Religious Education curriculum as a teaching strategy to foster an inclusive and peaceful approach to religion that focuses on national unity.

## **2. THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **The Concept of Religious Moderation**

Religious moderation is a concept that emerged in response to extremism and division in religious practice. Etymologically, moderation derives from the term *moderatio*, which means a balanced attitude—neither excessive nor deficient. Within a religious framework, religious moderation refers to perspectives, attitudes, and religious practices that emphasize a balance between faith in religious teachings and respect for the reality of social diversity.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2019) defines religious moderation as a religious attitude that avoids extremism, whether it be radicalism or excessive liberalism. Religious moderation views religion as a source of values that supports the creation of a peaceful, just, and harmonious life. In Islam, the concept of religious moderation aligns

with the principle of wasathiyah found in the Qur'an (QS. Al-Baqarah: 143), which describes the Muslim community as *ummatan wasata* (a balanced community).

The core values of religious moderation include:

- a. *Tawassuth* (moderate/middle-of-the-road): not radical in understanding and practicing religious teachings.
- b. *Tawazun* (balanced): able to strike a balance between worldly and spiritual concerns, as well as between individual and social rights.
- c. *I'tidal* (fair): treating something in a balanced and non-discriminatory manner.
- d. *Tasamuh* (tolerance): respecting differences in others' religious beliefs and practices.

These values serve as a crucial foundation for fostering an inclusive religious life and provide the theoretical basis for designing a religious education curriculum that is sensitive to diversity.

### **Islamic Religious Education from a Curriculum Perspective**

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is a required subject in Indonesia's national education system, aimed at shaping students into individuals who are faithful, devout, and possess good moral character. However, from a modern curriculum perspective, PAI is not merely a process of conveying religious information, but also a process of instilling values and fostering character development.

Tilaar (2015) states that the curriculum is a strategic tool for shaping individuals in accordance with national educational goals. The curriculum encompasses not only academic content but also reflects the values, perspectives, and aspirations of society that it seeks to achieve. Thus, the Islamic Education curriculum plays a vital role in shaping students' mindsets and attitudes toward religion and social interaction.

In the Merdeka Curriculum, the learning objectives for Islamic Education (PAI) are to enhance students' overall abilities, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. This provides a significant opportunity to integrate the value of religious moderation into PAI instruction, so that students not only understand Islamic teachings in a textual sense but can also apply them in a diverse social context.

### **Theories of Multicultural Education and Tolerance**

The integration of religious moderation into the Islamic Education curriculum is inseparable from the theory of multicultural education. Banks (2015) states that multicultural education aims to raise students' awareness of diversity and prepare them to live harmoniously in a diverse society. This form of education emphasizes the importance of respecting differences, social justice, and equality.

Within the framework of Islamic Education (PAI), multicultural education serves as a means of conveying Islamic values that are open-minded and respectful of diversity. This is crucial for preventing the emergence of exclusive and intolerant attitudes that can lead to social conflict. Education in tolerance, as an element of multicultural education, emphasizes the values of empathy, discussion, and respect for others' rights to practice their beliefs.

### **Social Polarization from an Educational Perspective**

Social polarization is a phenomenon characterized by the division of society into groups with sharply divergent views, values, and identities. Sunstein (2018) explains that polarization is often reinforced by interactions within homogeneous groups, thereby reinforcing biases and reducing openness to other perspectives.

In the context of education, social polarization can manifest itself in the form of intolerant attitudes, stereotypes toward other groups, and religious exclusivism among students. This phenomenon poses a serious challenge to the education sector, as it can disrupt the learning process and undermine social harmony within the school environment.

Therefore, education plays a vital role as an agent in preventing polarization by instilling the values of inclusivity, tolerance, and dialogue. Religious education, particularly Islamic Religious Education (IRE), serves as a strategic tool because it is directly linked to the formation of students' religious perspectives.

### **Constructivist and Dialogic Learning Theories**

The integration of religious moderation into Islamic Education (PAI) instruction is based on constructivist theory, which posits that knowledge is constructed by students through experience and social interaction. According to this theory, learning is not a one-sided process but rather involves active engagement in which students develop their own understanding.

Freire (2005) developed the concept of dialogic education, which places dialogue at the heart of learning. In this approach, both teachers and students are active learners, and the learning process takes place through a critical and reflective exchange of ideas. This approach is highly relevant for instilling the value of religious moderation, as it enables students to understand diverse perspectives and develop an open-minded attitude.

### **Research Framework**

Based on the theoretical review above, the following conceptual framework can be established:

- a. Social polarization among students is influenced by a narrow and exclusive understanding of religion.
- b. Religious moderation offers the values of balance, tolerance, and justice as a solution.

- c. The Islamic Education curriculum is a vital tool for internalizing these values.
- d. The application of religious moderation in the objectives, content, methods, and assessment of learning can foster an inclusive attitude toward religion.
- e. Such an inclusive attitude contributes to reducing social polarization within the school environment.

Therefore, this theoretical study demonstrates that the integration of religious moderation values into the Islamic Education curriculum has a solid and relevant conceptual foundation for addressing today's social challenges.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative method and adopts a literature review approach. This strategy was chosen because the study aims to thoroughly investigate the concept of religious moderation and how its values can be integrated into the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum as an effort to prevent social polarization in junior high schools (SMP). The qualitative approach allows the researcher to explore the meanings, concepts, and ideas found in the literature and educational policies in a more in-depth and contextual manner.

The data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data sources were drawn from official documents such as the book *\*Religious Moderation\** published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, as well as the Islamic Education (PAI) curriculum documents in the Merdeka Curriculum for junior high school. Secondary data was obtained from a number of scientific journal articles, academic books, and previous studies discussing religious education, religious moderation, tolerance, and social polarization in the school context. Each source was selected for a specific purpose, namely based on its relevance and reliability in an academic context.

Data collection was conducted through documentation and literature review by reading, taking notes, and categorizing important information related to the research topic. The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis, which involves examining the content of documents to identify themes, concepts, and semantic relationships related to the integration of religious moderation into the Islamic Education curriculum. The analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study employs source triangulation by comparing information from various references to gain a deeper and more objective understanding. With this approach, the study is expected to provide an accurate picture of the role of the Islamic

Education curriculum which focuses on religious moderation in addressing social polarization among junior high school students.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

##### **Conceptual Findings on Religious Moderation in Education**

Based on a review of various literature and policy documents, religious moderation is understood as an approach to religion that prioritizes the values of balance, justice, and respect for diversity as its core principles. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2019) defines religious moderation as “a balanced and non-extremist perspective, attitude, and religious practice in carrying out religious teachings.” This concept emphasizes that religious practice should not be exclusive or opposed to others, but rather should promote the formation of a harmonious and peaceful social life.

In the field of education, religious moderation plays a crucial role because schools serve as places where the mindset and character of the younger generation are shaped. Banks (2015) emphasizes that education must serve as a means to foster multicultural understanding and enhance students’ skills in interacting within diverse communities. Thus, religious moderation is not merely a theological discussion but also an essential educational framework within the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum.

Research findings indicate that the core principles of religious moderation include *tawassuth* (balance), *tawazun* (harmony), *i’tidal* (justice), and *tasamuh* (tolerance). These values are directly linked to the national education vision, which is to produce students who are faithful, have good character, and are able to adapt to a democratic and civilized society.

##### **Integrating Religious Moderation into the PAI Curriculum Framework**

An analysis of the Merdeka Curriculum and other PAI documents reveals significant opportunities to incorporate the values of religious moderation into the curriculum’s objectives, content, methods, and assessment.

##### ***Integration into Learning Objectives***

The learning objectives of Islamic Education (PAI) are not only focused on mastering Islamic teachings but also on fostering social and moral attitudes. In the context of moderation, the objectives of PAI can be directed toward fostering students who possess an understanding of Islam that brings blessings to all of creation. This statement aligns with the view of Nurcholish Madjid (2000), who stated that “religion should be a source of public ethics that supports peace, not conflict.”

### ***Integration into Instructional Materials***

Islamic Education (PAI) curriculum at the junior high school level—such as ethics, Islamic history, and the Qur'an and Hadith—can be linked to the values of moderation. For example, the study of the Constitution of Medina can serve as an example to demonstrate that Islam, from its very inception, has valued diversity and established a society that prioritizes equality and justice. This reinforces the view that tolerance is not a foreign concept in Islam, but rather an integral part of its core teachings.

### ***Integration into Teaching Methods***

The study's findings indicate that dialogic learning methods, group discussions, and case studies are highly effective in instilling the value of moderation. These methods enable students to consider various perspectives and develop empathy. Freire (2005) describes the dialogic approach as a means of liberation, because through dialogue, students learn to think critically and respect others.

### ***Integration in Evaluation***

The evaluation of Islamic Education (PAI) covers not only cognitive aspects but also behavior and attitudes. Assessing attitudes toward tolerance, openness, and the ability to cooperate serves as a measure of the success of integrating moderation in religious practice.

### **Religious Moderation as a Strategy to Counter Social Polarization**

Social polarization among students often manifests itself in the form of mutual suspicion, stereotypes toward other religious groups, and a tendency to assume there is only one truth. Sunstein (2018) notes that polarization arises when people communicate only with like-minded groups, which in turn reinforces extreme views and closes off the possibility of accepting differences.

In this context, religious education focused on religious moderation serves as a means to mitigate the political and extremist implications of religious interpretation. Students are encouraged to understand that diversity is part of God's divine order. This aligns with Quranic verse 13 of Surah Al-Hujurat, which states that humanity was created into various nations and tribes so that they might come to know one another, not to destroy one another.

A study by Hidayat and Mahmud (2022) indicates that students engaged in religious education focused on tolerance and dialogue exhibit lower levels of social prejudice compared to students who learn through a dogmatic approach. This finding confirms that integrating religious moderation into Islamic Education directly contributes to reducing the potential for conflict and polarization in the school environment.

## **Pedagogical Implications for Islamic Education in Junior High Schools**

The results of this study indicate that the application of religious moderation makes Islamic Education (PAI) more relevant to current social challenges. PAI serves not only as a medium for conveying religious teachings but also as a means of fostering critical, tolerant, and responsible citizens. This assertion aligns with Tilaar's (2015) view that education must be sensitive to social realities and shape students into agents of transformation.

A PAI curriculum grounded in religious moderation can be understood as a cultural and educational strategy to strengthen social cohesion in a diverse society. This integration is crucial not only for the education sector but also for the future unity of the Indonesian nation.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that the application of the value of religious moderation in the Islamic Religious Education curriculum is a very important and relevant step toward preventing social polarization in junior high school settings. Religious moderation, which emphasizes the principles of balance, justice, tolerance, and respect for differences, is proven to be fully aligned with national educational goals as well as the fundamental values of Islamic teachings as a mercy to all creation. During the adolescent growth stage, when students are developing their social and religious identities, an Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum that emphasizes religious moderation serves as the primary means of shaping an inclusive religious perspective that prioritizes social harmony.

Based on the analysis and discussions, it can be concluded that incorporating the value of religious moderation into the Islamic Religious Education curriculum is a crucial and appropriate strategy for preventing social polarization in junior high school settings. Religious moderation, which emphasizes the principles of balance, justice, tolerance, and respect for differences, is proven to be highly aligned with national educational goals and the fundamental values of Islamic teachings as a mercy to all creation. During the adolescent development stage, when students are forming their social and religious identities, an Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum that emphasizes religious moderation serves as a primary tool in fostering an inclusive religious perspective and promoting social harmony.

In addition, religious education that emphasizes religious moderation plays a crucial role in reducing social prejudice, exclusivist attitudes, and tendencies toward polarization among students. By gaining a deeper understanding of religion and emphasizing its humanitarian aspects, students are less likely to be drawn into narratives of hatred, claims of sole truth, or attitudes of rejection toward other groups. Thus, strengthening religious

moderation within the PAI curriculum serves not only to enhance the quality of religious education but also to preserve social unity and the integrity of the Indonesian nation amidst the challenges of diversity and current social changes.

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