# EMPOWERING STUDENTS AS AGENTS OF RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

Promoting moderate Islam in the education sector to prevent radicalism and violent extremism, particularly in Indonesia's Islamic universities has been considered important. This study demonstrated how values of moderate Islam empower student to prevent radicalism and violent extremism in university. This research is qualitative case study. Eight students and two teachers at a public Islamic university in Central Java, Indonesia were recruited to participate. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observation. The result of the study shows that the values of tolerance, inclusivity, flexibility, and objectivity in understanding religious texts were internalized to empower students as agents of religious moderation. The presentation of learning materials were adopted from national journals, reputable international journals, websites, and official social media platforms for moderate Muslim intellectuals. The materials contributed significantly to the prevention of hate speech and hoaxes.

Keywords: Islamic Higher Education, Moderate Islam, Radicalism, Violent Extremism

## *ABSTRAK*

*Mempromosikan Islam moderat di sektor pendidikan untuk mencegah radikalisme dan ekstremisme kekerasan, khususnya di universitas-universitas Islam di Indonesia telah dianggap penting. Studi ini menunjukkan cara nilai-nilai Islam moderat memberdayakan mahasiswa untuk mencegah radikalisme dan ekstremisme kekerasan di universitas. Jenis penelitian ini kualitatif dengan menggunakan metode studi kasus. Partisipan dalam penelitian ini adalah delapan mahasiswa dan dua guru di sebuah universitas Islam negeri di Jawa Tengah, Indonesia. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara semi terstruktur dan observasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai toleransi, inklusivitas, fleksibilitas, dan objektivitas dalam memahami teks-teks agama diinternalisasikan untuk memberdayakan mahasiswa sebagai agen moderasi beragama. Penyajian materi pembelajaran diadopsi dari jurnal nasional, jurnal internasional bereputasi, website, dan platform media sosial resmi untuk intelektual muslim moderat. Materi-materi tersebut memberikan kontribusi yang signifikan terhadap pencegahan ujaran kebencian dan hoaks.*

*Kata Kunci: Ekstremisme Kekerasan, Islam Moderat, Perguruan Tinggi Keislaman, Radikalisme*

## INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of radicalism and violent extremism completely needs to be combatted, including in the educational sector situated in the disruption era. This age engages students to deal with virtual communities, mostly interacting via digital media. Consequently, specific instructional designs need to be deemed beneficial to link them to technology integration (McKnight et al., 2016). In a further vein, Niemi et al., (2018) declare that the digital age discourses have been penetrated by a wide array of hate speech, hoaxes, and ideological propaganda through the presence of social media networks. In response to this, university teachers or faculty members are encouraged to enact best practices and potential strategies for honing educational contexts.

Educational institutions should be managed to provide positive interactions between various groups of students and promote respect for others. An integrated educational management system requires shaping students way of life and moral integrity in the advanced world (Hasan, 2012). Students' critical thinking skills should be enhanced to oppose absolutism and single truths often used in extremist ideology (Halafoff et al., 2019). Moreover, variegation of policies on the national education system, including human resources and learning materials, denotes crucial issues and need to foster (Kirana, 2018). For this reason, students in the digital age should be equipped with the knowledge, values, attitudes, and behavior that enhance responsible global citizenship, critical thinking, empathy, and the ability to tackle radicalism and violent extremism (Thomas, 2016).

Radicalism and violent extremist practices recruit people's resilience toward extremist ways of thinking by providing them with types of "content knowledge and doctrines" (Davies, 2015). In Indonesia, four emerging factors contribute to the potential root of Islamic radicalism, i.e. political repression, poor governance, global awareness, and Arabization (Muzakki, 2014). In addition to the root, one of the religious problems highlighted in Indonesia reveals the religious understanding, which is not comprehensive and may lead to the practice of religious exclusivism (Ni'am, 2015). More surprisingly, in the digital age, a recent increase in the activity of violent extremist networks that leads to terrorism across lots of countries has also brought a rise in the number of youngsters, including students involved. In Surabaya, a bomb has attacked three churches and Police headquarters in 2018 involved a woman and two children (Cahya, 2018). It asserts that radicalism, violent extremism, and terrorism have no place in Islam and other religions.

Additionally, the radical and extremist practices involved the escalation of young people's resilience toward extremist ways of thinking by providing them with various types of content knowledge concerning international rights and agreements (Davies, 2015), different worldviews and religions (Muzakki, 2014), and by stimulating the young generations with inclusive experiences of the schools as a safe social place (Arifin, 2016). Concerning the impacts of violent extremism, both in the direction of rightwing extremism and religious-inspired extremism in the digital age, the role of educational institutions has been promoted to prevent and combat radical and extremist ideologies toward their students.

Some research highlights the emergence of increasing phenomena of radicalism and violent extremism in higher education institutions, demonstrating a systematic response to this issue. The endeavor to tackle radicalism and violent extremism should include mobilizing one of the best resources the state has available to protect and assist youngsters through education (Hogan, Barrelle, & Smith, 2019). Educators should approach prevention through humanistic, democratic, and inclusive pedagogics. Counter-radicalization efforts tend to result in serious prevention strategies that may possess harmful impacts on higher education (Sjøen & Jore, 2019).

The discussion of radicalism and violent extremism should be mediated through education in digital-age society. Four approaches are considered applicable in education cope with the promotion of values of citizenship and diversity, critical education, religious literacy, and media literacy (Ghosh et al., 2016). To deal with this, all constructive potentials of religious education are important to be integrated into higher education institutions to fight against the growth of radicalism and violent extremism (Zainiyati, 2016). One of the integrations is promoting religious moderation to university students to counter radicalism and violent extremism. Religious moderation fits the modernity, democracy, and plurality upheld in Indonesian Islam and represents the original character of religious Muslims in Indonesia (Azra, 2006). It means this country enacts the foreign policy that emphasizes Islam as a "religious identity" and has been articulated since the era of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), the fourth president of Indonesia, as well as the former chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organization in the country (Umar, 2016).

Religious moderation accentuated in Islamic moderation has its endorsement. It is introduced as a beautiful means of practicing Islamic values in daily life, declaring between the right-wing and left-wing groups (Mutawali, 2016). Similarly, Islamic moderation refers to the opposition of radical and extremist Islam and Islamic fundamentalists (Kamal, 2017). This portrays that Islamic moderation possesses the style to internalize the concept of *wasatiyyah* (moderation) that is contra to extreme actions (Ab Rashid et al., 2020; Zaduqisti, 2020) and is used as the basis in a friendly Islam spread to the universe in every single aspect of human life, including higher education institutions (Ni'am, 2015). It denotes the urgency of the internalization of religious moderation values for Muslims to perform peaceful Islam *raḥmatan lil 'alamîn* (blessing for all universe).

The issue of radicalism and violent extremism occurred in educational settings has been discussed by several previous studies (Davies, 2015; Muzakki, 2014; Ni'am, 2015; Nurhayati & Hamid, 2020; Rahmat, Firdaus, & Yahya, 2019; Suhendi, Sawahel, & Abdillah, 2020). They have informed very scant attention to the prevention of radicalism and violent extremism by infusing religious moderation in Islamic higher education institutions. To fill this void, a further empirical investigation is required to explore values of religious moderation inculcated for university students and teachers' endeavors to organize the students as agents of religious moderation to prevent radicalism and violent extremism in the age of disruption. This article sheds light on how to design Islamic education with religious moderation-oriented learning materials in an Islamic higher education environment.

**METHOD**

The present qualitative case study aims to investigate how values of religious moderation are inculcated in teaching and learning processes and what university teachers' endeavors are employed to foster their students as agents of religious moderation in the digital age (Yin, 2003). The case study was undertaken in a public Islamic university in Central Java, Indonesia. Five students and two teachers volunteered to participate in this research.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The former aimed to explore values of religious moderation incorporated in Islamic higher education institutions to counter radicalism and violent extremism. The interviews were carried out in *Bahasa Indonesia*, to give more exposure for the participants in responding to the given questions. Duration of the interviews lasted for 30 to 60 minutes. The latter was conducted to investigate the university teachers' endeavors to foster their students as agents of religious moderation situated in Islamic higher education institutions. Dealing with the data analysis, the study employed thematic content analysis to transcribe, reduce, code, classify into

themes, tabulate, and interpret the semi-structured interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hatch, 2002).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The relationship between religion and psychological well-being has been the subject of discussion among scholars for decades. In Indonesia, the issue of religious moderation has been nurtured and developed among the students in Islamic boarding schools throughout Indonesia. This issue has attracted scholars in Islamic institutions like Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. They have so far been considered as religious institutions that emphasize traditional aspects and conservatism overriding their ability to develop themselves in modern life. Upholding this religious moderation, the government hopes that the development of the concept of religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools could bring changes in reducing radical thoughts that can endanger security in Indonesia. Religious moderation is an important aspect to secure the diversity in the country. In addition, it is expected to improve people's comprehensive views on Islam.

**Values of Religious Moderation Infused in Islamic Higher Education Institutions to Counter Radicalism and Violent Extremism**

The present study demonstrates four values of religious moderation embedded in the classroom settings managed by the university teachers to tackle radicalism and violent extremism in the digital age. First, it could be noticed that the undergraduate students discussed in groups that performed tolerance in encountering diversity in terms of various ideas and thoughts between the group members.

Student 1

"In the learning process, we are encouraged to have group collaborations. Each group is assigned to discuss current issues on Islamic studies" (Ali, Personal Communication, May 15, 2019).

Informed by the interview data with Ali, the group discussion situated in one of the Islamic universities in Central Java, Indonesia, was organized by the university teacher to develop diverse students' thoughts and ideas. Further, the learning design with this discussion method allowed students to express their ideas without insecure feelings even though their opinions might differ from other classmates.

Student 2

"We perceived differences in opinion emerged from the group discussion, and each of us tried to respect the diversity of people's thoughts and ideas" (Aziz, Personal Communication, May 17, 2019).

Inspired by the interview data with Aziz, this finding showed a diversity of opinions and fostered the students to respect other thoughts and ideas. This result meets that diversity is the natural inclination that all human beings must perceive. In this vein, people with conflicting behavior lack tolerance, accommodation, and cooperation (Wani, Abdullah, & Chang, 2015). It indicates that conflict is a major productive force in the evolution of the relations within and between societies. However, if violence is used, the conflict is disruptive or destructive.

The finding also aligns with tolerance in dealing with the diversity in every aspect of life and copes with a wide array of differences, including opinions relating to the scientific field (Kamali, 2015). Tolerance and open-mindedness are also emphasized in Muslims' daily lives to uphold a peaceful practice of religious moderation (Schmidt, 2021). This viewpoint illustrates that humanistic and democratic dialogues stimulate individuals with different philosophies and ideologies to mitigate their diversity to prevent and equally treat others with moderate character.

Second, the value of inclusiveness in absorbing current issues could be noted once the students were open to others' responses in group presentations and performed demonstration or role-play in front of the classroom. This value of religious moderateness is evidenced in the following interview excerpts.

Student 3

"We are taught by our lecturers to perform an open attitude in absorbing actual issues when listening to different views from other friends" (Burhan, Personal Communication, May 17, 2019).

Student 4

"Our lecturers stimulate us to perform openness on a certain current issue discussed by friends of mine" (Naila, Personal Communication, May 18, 2019).

Portrayed by the interview with Burhan and Naila, the recruited participants, these findings are relevant to Islamic moderation essence, i.e. the attainment of justice, inclusiveness, moral excellence and the avoidance of injustice, exclusiveness, and extremes (Islam & Khatun, 2015). In further direction, democratic breakdown in Indonesia demands justice, religious moderation, pluralism, and inclusive society (Menchik, 2019), including at the national education sector. It reveals that religious moderation incorporated in the digital age's learning design upholds inclusiveness, emphasizes fairness, and avoids injustice.

Third, the value of logic and flexibility in digesting emerging texts was radicalism and violent extremism when the students were facilitated to search for online journal articles concerning current issues about radicalism and violent extremism and asked to present the result of their reading comprehension.

Student 5

"There are many positive values from the learning designs managed by our lecturers. They, for example, invited us to think logically in interpreting any text either from print or online media as well as scientific articles presented online in several reputable journals" (Huda, Personal Communication, May 20, 2019).

Meanwhile, Mr Jauhar, one of the university teachers, pointed out that:

Teacher 1

"Frequently, I share teaching materials retrieved from online scientific journals with my students. These journals are nationally and internationally reputed. This resource delivery of teaching materials is to familiarize students with logics in dealing with actual issues. In addition, the value of flexibility will be well-embedded if the students are willing to open their minds by reading scientific articles to enrich various perspectives to prepare them as agents of religious moderation" (Jauhar, Personal Communication, May 24, 2019).

Muslim students in the digital age should be nurtured not to interpret religious texts rigidly and deem other people possessing different perspectives as threats that may lead to manifest in radical and extremist actions (Haris, 2006). This indicates that in educational settings, teachers should encourage their students to navigate their learning resources appropriately with logical and critical thinking skills and the flexibility and open-mindedness in digesting information in the digital age to encounter hatred and radicalism.

Lastly, the value of objectivity could be seen while the students gave feedback to other groups' works. Providing feedback is very pivotal to facilitate students' engagement in the teaching and learning process. The excerpt of the interview with the university teacher illustrates the finding.

Teacher 2

"The positive values noticed in the group discussion include objectivity when we have to provide assessments, suggestions, and input as part of the feedback process on the students' ideas and opinions" (Rahman, Personal Communication, May 25, 2019).

This point may speak to the concept of Islamic moderation that carries the objectivity of Islam, in which the principle of *at-tawazun* (fairness) is promoted to be one of the bases in religious moderation for shaping the way of life, knowledge paradigm, the art of worship, and interaction that transforms the culture and the personal character in moderate Muslim civilization (Yakuub & Othman, 2016). Likewise, "the specific features of the dialogue also need to be opened up at the grassroots level to reach youth", including students (Aiello, Puigvert, & Schubert, 2018) and make a difference in their understanding of radicalism and violent extremism to prevent them from engaging in any extremist groups. This proposes that objectivity in education promotes a system of warning on emerging ideologies of radicalism and violent extremism in the digital age to prevent students from perpetrating radical actions.

Concerning the four values of religious moderation, it requires teachers' roles to facilitate teaching and learning design that provides educational programs, curriculum, and learning designs highlighting religious moderation, which fosters multiculturalism and pluralistic society and prevents radicalism and violent extremism in Table 1.

Table 1. Religious Moderation Values Emerging from Learning Process

| No. | Value of Religious Moderation | Learning Design |
|-----|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. | Tolerance in encountering diversity | Group discussion |
| 2. | Inclusiveness in absorbing current issues | Demonstration |
| 3. | Logic and flexibility in digesting emerging texts | Online navigation |
| 4. | Objectivity | Peer feedback |

Table 1 illustrates that various learning designs should be organized to promote values of religious moderation for countering radical and extremist actions and ideologies for students in the digital age. It fulfils teachers' roles in fostering "learning processes, knowledge activation, selective intention, and inhibition" to educate their students about fighting against radicalism and violent extremism (Kruglanski, Fernandez, Factor, & Szumowska, 2019), particularly in the digital age. The teachers' roles demonstrate educational institutions provide their students with de-radicalization programs by crafting inclusive-moderate character education (Muhammad, Hiariej, & Boateng, 2021). This implies that education strengthens humanity to respect others by stimulating tolerance, creativity, cognitive skills, ethical values, including religious moderation (Yamamoto & Ananou, 2015).

In addition to moderation, the concept of inclusiveness, tolerance, straightforwardness, equality, and prosperity belongs to characteristics articulated in Islamic moderation (Kamali, 2015). Moreover, the teachers' moderate ways in the classroom settings also showcase the values of religious moderation promoted in Indonesian Islam that demonstrates 1) non-violent ideology in propagating Islam, 2) adopted modern ways of life with their all elements, involving science and technology, democracy, and human rights, 3) the use of rational way of thinking, 4) contextual approach in understanding Islam, and 5) the use of *ijtihad* (intellectual exercises to make a legal opinion in case of the absence of explicit justification form the Qur'an and Hadith) (Hilmy, 2013). In other words, the prevention of radical and extremist actions involves the role of school and faculty members, family, community, and other media.

**University Teachers' Endeavors to Foster Students as Agents of Religious Moderation**

Portraying the analyzed interview and observation data, the study also focuses on the university teachers' endeavors to empower their tertiary students as agents of religious moderation situated in Islamic higher education institutions. The attempts were realized by

providing various learning materials highlighting religious moderation to the university students regarded as millennials in the digital age.

Teacher 1

"To foster an academic atmosphere in my classes, several articles on the realm of Islamic education retrieved from nationally and internationally reputed journals are reviewed to incorporate values of religious moderation to students of mine. The learning materials are beneficial to prepare them as agents of religious moderation in the era of disruption" (Jauhar, Personal Communication, May 24, 2019).

Teacher 2

"I provide more teaching materials related to religious moderation, the so-called Islam *wasathiyah*, by presenting materials sourced from the internet, including websites or social media accounts of religious moderation thinkers. This is essential to tackle radical understanding among students" (Rahman, Personal Communication, May 25, 2019).

The findings assert university teachers' efforts to teach religious moderation values. The religious moderation-based materials were mainly adopted and adapted from nationally and internationally reputed journals, posts on the personal websites of two Muslim intellectuals, i.e. Nadirsyah Hosen, a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Law, Monash University, and Sumanto Al Qurtuby, a cultural anthropologist and a professor at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, Saudi Arabia as depicted in Figure 1, Figure 2, and their official Facebook pages. Based on the interviews with the two university teachers, it was due to the consideration that the two prominent Indonesian academicians regularly contributed meaningful posts or article contents with religious moderation promoted in Indonesia.



Figure 1. Nadirsyah Hosen's Official Website (https://nadirhosen.net/)



Figure 2. Sumanto Al Qurtuby's Official Website (https://sumantoalqurtuby.com/).

Figure 1 and Figure 2 expose that digital communication through the proliferation of websites and social media enables its users, including students, to take advantage of the universe. An article content, for example, posted on Nadirsyah Hosen's official website administered on April 10, 2017, reported that regarding some Islamic mass organizations as well as Muslim figures and scholars tended to commit radical actions, he recommended that all the parties were expected to be able to re-uphold religious moderation symbolizing 'Islam Nusantara' (Indonesian Islam) to equip the principle of Islam *rahmatan lil 'alamin* in every condition (Hosen, 2017). Sumanto Al Qurtuby, likewise, posted another content on his official website dated August 12, 2019, depicts that radical actions represent the anxiety and incapability of Muslims' culture and politics in facing the domination, superiority, hegemony, and penetration of global culture propagated by the Western world (Al Qurtuby, 2019).

The findings expose the ease of their virtual communication featured in the online platforms may lead to the consumption of hate speech, hoaxes, or misleading information. This reaffirms that the internet users should be educated to digest the information they grasp from the social media, websites, or messaging application platforms by selecting them from moderate sources, not radical and extremist ones, and avoiding the so-called 'computational propaganda' (Zuhri, 2016). It warns social media users to be aware of the hazardous impacts of the digital age to counter radicalism and violent extremism.

Combatting radicalism and violent extremism cannot be the sole responsibility of the government. It indicates that all parts of society should contribute to preventing radicalism and violent extremism, including Muslim intellectuals and academicians, in the digital age. This shows that Muslim academicians may counter radicalism and violent extremism practices through education in the digital age. It agrees that integrating internet resource-based, including the use of social media, with a dialogic intention opens up new kinds of opportunities for teachers and students publicly to share, explain, justify, critique and reformulate ideas (Mercer, Hennessy, & Warwick, 2019). It is intended not to ignore the existence of security threats in life regarding radicalism and violent extremism.

The academicians, for this reason, play a crucial role in preserving mainstream, religious moderation that promotes the principle of Islam *rahmatan lil 'alamîn* in tackling radicalism and violent extremism in the educational sector. It also consolidates that the tremendous space of the internet, nowadays, is utilized by several religious authorities, including academicians, because the massive users of social media can access them everywhere and anytime (Muzakka, 2018). This points out that Muslim academicians attempt to spread religious moderation by integrating technology promoting Islamic values and virtual learning in the digital age.

Religious moderation is at the center of a diverse country like Indonesia. Moderation requires citizen within a particular culture to go hand in hand, and it also puts emphasis that one party does not negate others. It sought to explore a feasible solution to build harmonious life. spiritual moderation has been considered by many as a promising effort to mix spiritual teachings with national culture. It may lessen and to some extent reduce and eliminate the elements of destruction to the diversity.

Religious moderation is a concept that is compatible with the principle of the nation foundation of the Indonesian namely Pancasila. One of its principles teaches the social justice for all Indonesian human beings (the 5th principle). In other words, Islam and Pancasila are compatible. Religious moderation is deemed to be suitable to be implemented in situations like in Indonesia. It requires Muslims to take a middle route (moderation). This kind of view enables Muslims to exercise their faith within the society. Islam is indeed a faith that makes an ease for humans to carry out the instructions of Allah and His Messenger.

Justice is one of religious moderation in Islam promoted for all parties. Many verses of the Al-Qur'an state this noble teaching. Justice is a religious coaching and it plays significant

role in the lives of many people. Without the existence of justice, prosperity of the people might be difficult to achieve in the society. Honest value is a simple recipe for every individual in the society to implement in the social life. Fair regulation guarantees the rights of human from all walks of life. The principle of balance *(tawâzun)* can be applied as a mean to manage human in terms of their hearing, sight, heart and so forth. The principle tries to reduce and to some extent eliminate the harm. The principle takes many forms in Islam. It may be categorized into numerous varieties of non-secular lifestyles institutions as follows: Theological stability, the stability of spiritual rituals, the balance of morality and character and balance of *Tasyrî'i* tactics (criminal formation). The principle of tolerance *(tasâmuh)* is seen as a faith in religion and sharia. Applying the principle in Islam, allows the people to eliminate the behavior of intolerance. This is to say that the area of tolerance is respect. It is no longer seen as a justification and the act of following certain faith. Tolerance is one of the principles of religious moderation. This will be exemplified in destructing the place of worship of other religions.

## CONCLUSION

The current study highlights empowering university students as agents of religious moderation in Islamic higher education institutions situated in Indonesia. This empowerment is organized by promoting religious moderation, the original character of Indonesian Islam, to prevent radicalism and violent extremism through education sectors in the digital age. The research results demonstrate values of religious moderation internalized in the education sector to prevent radicalism and violent extremism in the digital era. The teachers attempted to provide religious moderation-oriented learning materials with their students derived from nationally and internationally reputed journals with the scope of radicalism and violent extremism issues and Muslim intellectuals' official websites or Facebook pages discussing the realm of religious moderation. Muslim communities reject extremist interpretations of Islam. This may lead to striking Muslims, including Islamic education teachers, who are not selective in providing learning activities and materials promoting religious moderation to erode radical and extremist actions in the digital age. It urges teachers and educational policymakers to formulate for moderate and democratic Islamic education. The study findings are forwarded to further researchers investigating other radicalism and extremism issues, specifically in educational settings.

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