

## **Kyai Leadership in Promoting Religious Moderation: A Case Study in Indonesian Pesantren**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, play a strategic role in promoting religious moderation. However, there is a lack of empirical research explicitly linking kyai leadership models to the internalization of moderate Islamic values. This study employed a qualitative case study approach at two pesantren in Tulang Bawang, Lampung. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 25 participants (kyai, administrators, and senior students), participant observation, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The findings reveal a hybrid transformational-participatory leadership model practiced by the kyai. Transformational aspects include exemplary conduct, inspirational vision, and intellectual stimulation, while participatory elements empower students through structured involvement in decision-making and program implementation. These leadership dynamics are operationalized through three main strategies: (1) contextual interpretation of classical texts (*kitab kuning*), (2) dialogical preaching and inclusive communication, and (3) experiential learning through interfaith engagement and community immersion. Despite challenges such as radical external influences and the stigma of moderation, kyai leadership has significantly shaped santri mindsets toward tolerance, empathy, and inclusive Islamic identity. This study contributes to the enrichment of transformational leadership theory in religious education and offers practical insights into embedding *Wasathiyah* Islam through culturally rooted pedagogies. Kyai leadership is central to fostering religious moderation in pesantren. Support from policymakers and curriculum developers is vital to sustaining this leadership model in strengthening inclusive Islamic education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pesantren is one of the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, playing a crucial role in shaping students' character and religious understanding. As an institution deeply rooted in Muslim community culture, pesantren holds a significant responsibility in nurturing a generation that not only possesses a strong grasp of religious knowledge but also practices Islam in an inclusive and moderate manner. Amid the challenges of globalization and the rapid flow of information, pesantren faces various obstacles, including the rise of extremist ideologies and religiously-motivated intolerance that may undermine social cohesion and the values of religious moderation (Aimah et al., 2024; Faisal, Pabbajah, et al., 2022). Therefore, the leadership of the kyai, as the central figures in pesantren, becomes a key factor in shaping a balanced and harmonious Islamic understanding among students.

Religious moderation is an approach that emphasizes balance in understanding and practicing religious teachings, preventing individuals from falling into either extreme conservatism or excessive liberalism. The Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has actively promoted the importance of religious moderation to maintain national unity and social harmony, a concern shared by other Muslim-majority nations facing similar challenges of radicalism (Sudirman et al., 2025). As a traditional Islamic educational institution, pesantren has a strategic role in internalizing these values among its students (Akmansyah & Nurnazli, 2024). One of the most effective ways to instill religious moderation is through the kyai's leadership and pedagogical strategies in educating students.

In this context, the leadership model of kyai in pesantren has unique characteristics that differentiate it from other leadership models. A kyai is not only a spiritual leader but also an educator, administrator, and moral guide for students, embodying a form of faith-based leadership that integrates religious authority with educational management (Zaluchu et al., 2025). By employing an educational approach based on moderate Islamic values, kyai create a conducive learning environment that fosters inclusive and tolerant student character (Sarkowi, 2024). Thus, it is essential to further examine how the kyai's leadership model supports religious moderation education in pesantren and the strategies employed to maintain a balance between Islamic traditions and the evolving social realities.

The leadership of the kyai is a central component in the pesantren structure, playing a vital role not only in educational aspects but also in shaping character, organizational culture, and the ideological direction of the institution. Various studies have examined different leadership models employed by kyai, including charismatic leadership (Abdurrahman et al., 2022; Ghafar, 2022; Jatmikowati et al., 2019; Shiddiq et al., 2021), transformational leadership (Arifin et al., 2024; Nursetialloh, 2023; Nasith, 2024), Sufi-based leadership (Muali et al., 2021), as well as situational and transformative leadership (Robaeah et al., 2023; Wajdi et al., 2022; Sanusi et al., 2021; Yaturrochmah et al., 2024). These models have been proven effective in influencing students' behavior and encouraging broader social change.

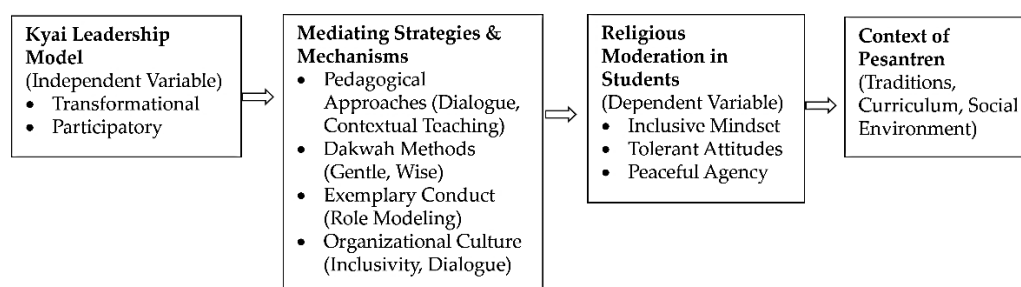
On the other hand, the issue of religious moderation has gained increasing importance amid the rising challenges of radicalism and intolerance. As traditional Islamic educational institutions, pesantren hold a strategic position in instilling the values of *Wasathiyah* (moderate Islam). Studies such as Faisal et al. (2022), Hafidz (2021), Parmoko et al. (2024), Rozaq et al. (2022), and Wibowo et al. (2025) demonstrate that kyai possess strong moral and social authority to convey the values of moderation through sermons, personal example, and moral-based curricula. Research by Mujahid (2021), Purwowidodo & Zaini (2024), Mukarromah et al. (2024), and Wahab et al. (2024) emphasizes the importance of integrating moderation into the teaching and nurturing processes of *santri* (students), as well as strengthening the pesantren curriculum to present a peaceful and tolerant narrative of Islam.

However, a critical evaluation of this literature reveals a significant gap. While existing research provides valuable insights, it often operates in silos. Studies on kyai leadership frequently focus on its general styles and organizational impact, without systematically tracing its connection to specific educational outcomes like religious moderation. Conversely, research on religious moderation in pesantren tends to discuss curriculum and institutional roles, paying insufficient attention to how the kyai's leadership itself—as the central managerial and cultural force—directly shapes the internalization of these values. Although some studies (e.g., Hamidah & Chasannudin (2021); Al-Ghifari et al. (2024);

Humaidi et al. (2024); Khoiriyah et al. (2024) and Misdah et al. (2025)) have begun to bridge this divide, their focus remains limited, often failing to provide a holistic, empirically-grounded model that explicates the mechanisms and strategies of leadership in fostering moderation.

Therefore, this study is motivated by the need to bridge this academic gap. Its novelty lies in explicitly and holistically connecting specific kyai leadership models to the process of religious moderation education, moving beyond a general association to analyze the practical implementation and direct impact on students' perspectives and behaviors.

To guide this inquiry, this research is framed by a conceptual model that posits the kyai's leadership model (the independent variable) influences the outcome of religious moderation among students (the dependent variable) through specific mediating strategies, including pedagogical approaches, da'wah methods, and organizational culture, all within the unique contextual framework of the pesantren. This model visually illustrates the assumed relationships investigated in this study (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework: The Relationship between Kyai Leadership and Religious Moderation in Pesantren

Guided by this conceptual framework, this study pursues four interconnected objectives. First, it seeks to identify and analyze the specific leadership models employed by the kyai at Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah and Pondok Pesantren Al Iman in fostering religious moderation. Second, it aims to investigate the concrete pedagogical, communicative, and managerial strategies these kyai use to instill values of moderation into students' daily lives. Third, the research will examine the internal and external factors that either support or inhibit the effectiveness of kyai leadership in cultivating a pesantren environment oriented toward religious moderation. Finally, it aims to assess the perceived impact of this leadership on the mindsets and religious attitudes of the santri, specifically concerning their tolerance and inclusivity.

This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the kyai's leadership model in religious moderation education at pesantren. Furthermore, this research is expected to formulate evidence-based recommendations for pesantren and policymakers in developing more adaptive and effective leadership to address contemporary religious challenges. Thus, this study contributes to enriching the literature on Islamic leadership and offers practical insights for Islamic education policies in Indonesia that promote inclusivity and religious moderation.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore in depth the kyai's leadership model in religious moderation education at pesantren. A qualitative study was chosen as it allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon holistically within its complex social and cultural context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This research specifically examines the leadership of kyai in two pesantren: Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah and Pondok Pesantren Al Iman in Tulang Bawang Regency, Lampung Province. The sites were selected through a purposive sampling technique based on specific criteria: (1) their recognized reputation in the local community for actively promoting religious moderation, and (2) the presence of distinctive kyai leadership models, which provided a rich context for a comparative case study.

Data collection was conducted through three primary methods: observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.

- a. Participant observation was carried out to understand the dynamics of interaction between kyai, students (*santri*), and other *pesantren* elements within the context of religious moderation education. This enabled the researcher to directly observe the kyai's leadership practices, including teaching methods, communication patterns, and strategies used to instill moderation values (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009).
- b. In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 25 participants, selected via purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives. The participants comprised 4 kyai (the primary leaders), 6 *pesantren* administrators (including teachers and staff), 12 senior *santri* (who had spent a minimum of 3 years at the *pesantren*), and 3 community leaders closely associated with the *pesantren*. Sample interview questions explored thematic areas such as: "Can you describe your leadership philosophy in educating *santri*?"; "What specific strategies do you use to teach the value of tolerance?"; and "What challenges have you faced in promoting religious moderation here?"
- c. Document analysis was performed by reviewing relevant documents, including *pesantren* curricula, religious study materials (*kitab kuning*), internal policies, and activity reports related to religious moderation. These documents served to triangulate and reinforce the research findings.

Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld throughout the study. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were clearly informed about the research aims, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all identifiable information has been removed, and pseudonyms are used in the reporting of findings.

The data analysis technique employed was thematic analysis, following the interactive model proposed by Miles & Huberman's (1984). The process involved three concurrent steps: (1) Data reduction, where raw data from transcripts and field notes were systematically coded and condensed; (2) Data display, where the condensed data was organized into matrices and thematic charts to identify patterns and relationships; and (3) Conclusion drawing and verification, where initial conclusions were drawn and continually checked against the full dataset. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources (kyai, *santri*, documents) and methods (observation, interviews, document analysis), enhancing the credibility and reliability of the study.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Findings

##### 3.1.1 The Hybrid Transformational-Participatory Leadership Model

Data gathered from *Pondok Pesantren* Darul Islah and Al Iman reveal a complex and dynamic leadership model that organically integrates transformational and participatory principles. This hybrid model does not operate as two separate styles but functions synergistically to create an educational ecosystem conducive to the internalization of religious moderation values. In-depth analysis demonstrates that each dimension of this model manifests through highly concrete practices in the daily life of the *pesantren*.

The transformational leadership of the Kyai in these two *pesantrens* extends far beyond their traditional role as mere spiritual leaders. They emerge as change agents who actively shape the Islamic worldview of their students. This transformation is achieved not only through sermons or formal teaching but through a leadership architecture built upon three main pillars: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation.

First, idealized influence is manifested primarily through absolute exemplary conduct. The Kyai do not merely preach about honesty (*shiddiq*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), and effective communication

(*tabligh*); they are the living embodiment of these values. A senior student at Pondok Pesantren Al Iman described, "Our Kiai never commands what he does not practice himself. If he forbids us from gossiping, we witness firsthand how he always guards his tongue and speaks well of everyone, even those with differing views." Observations at Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah confirmed similar behavior, where the Kyai consistently demonstrated fairness and respect in every interaction, whether with students, staff, or external guests. This exemplary behavior creates a powerful moral attraction, compelling students not merely to obey but to genuinely desire to emulate the Kyai's character and conduct.

Second, inspirational motivation is cultivated through the narratives and vision shared by the Kyai about a friendly and peace-bearing Islam. The Kyai in both pesantren consistently emphasize that their educational goal is to produce "*professional ulama*" or "spiritual intellectuals"—individuals who not only possess deep religious knowledge but are also capable of contributing positively and acting as peacemakers in a diverse society. A Kyai at Darul Islah stated in a religious lecture, "*Your duty is not to declare others as infidels, but to become a mercy to all creation (rahmatan lil 'alamin). Leave this pesantren bringing solutions, not adding to problems.*" This vision serves as a guiding compass, motivating students to internalize the values of moderation.

Third, intellectual stimulation is applied through educational methods that encourage dialogue and critical thinking. Beyond the traditional sorogan and bandongan learning sessions, the Kyai organize *bahtsul masail* forums (discussions on contemporary issues) where students are encouraged to voice opinions, question, and analyze various problems from different perspectives. A caretaker of Pondok Pesantren Al Iman explained, "*We intentionally spark debates on issues such as democracy and human rights in Islam. The goal is for students not to fear differences but to be trained in systematic thinking and appreciate opposing arguments.*" This approach trains students not to accept doctrines blindly but to build a critical and personal understanding of religious teachings.

While the transformational dimension builds the foundation of values and vision, the participatory dimension realizes it in the structure and daily practices of leadership. The Kyai intentionally design a system that empowers students and provides them with tangible space to participate in pesantren management. This aims to train independence, responsibility, and leadership skills from an early stage.

This participation is structural, not merely symbolic. In Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah, for instance, there is a "student council" chaired by senior students tasked with coordinating extracurricular activities, managing the library, and acting as a liaison between students and the leadership. "*We are given full trust to manage units such as scouting, arts, and even the student cooperative. The Kyai provides broad direction, but the execution is delegated to us. If problems arise, we must first devise solutions before consulting,*" stated the council chairperson. A similar system is implemented at Pondok Pesantren Al Iman, where senior students are assigned as "mentors" for new students, responsible for guiding their adaptation and basic understanding.

This participatory practice yields a dual impact. On one hand, it creates a more inclusive and democratic educational environment where students feel valued and develop a strong sense of belonging towards their pesantren. On the other hand, it serves as the most effective leadership laboratory. By being directly involved in solving real problems, students learn about negotiation, conflict management, and collective decision-making—skills essential for aspiring moderate leaders.

Thus, the hybrid leadership model implemented by the Kyai at Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah and Al Iman constitutes a mutually reinforcing symbiosis. The transformational dimension provides the soul, vision, and moral compass, while the participatory dimension provides the framework, practical space, and tools for empowerment. The Kyai transforms from a singular authoritarian figure into a "primary guide" within a dynamic learning community. Through this combination, the values of religious moderation are not taught as dogma but are brought to life and experienced directly by students through exemplary conduct, dialogue, and tangible responsibility, thereby fostering deeper and more sustainable internalization.

### 3.1.2 Strategies for Operationalizing Religious Moderation: From Theory to Educational Practice

Research findings reveal that the transformational-participatory leadership of the Kyai is actualized through a series of planned, systematic, and integrated operational strategies within pesantren life. These strategies function as transmission mechanisms that transform the values of religious moderation from mere discourse into daily living practices. The analysis indicates that these strategies do not operate in isolation but form a mutually reinforcing educational ecosystem, encompassing pedagogical, communicative, and socio-cultural dimensions.

#### 3.1.2.1 Pedagogical Strategy: Contextualizing the Authority of Classical Texts

The first and most fundamental strategy lies in the pedagogical approach applied in teaching the *kitab kuning* (classical texts). The Kyai in both pesantren consciously contextualize these authoritative texts, rather than teaching them literally and doctrinally. The teaching-learning process of the *kitab kuning* is designed not as a one-way transfer, but as a dialogic space between classical texts and contemporary realities.

For instance, in a study session of Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulumuddin* at Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah, the Kyai does not merely explain the theological concept of *riya'* (showing off in worship). He encourages students to discuss manifestations of *riya'* in the social media era, such as the motivations behind creating viral religious content. "*We discuss the chapter on riya' not only so you avoid showing off in the mosque, but so you can use social media wisely. Is our intention in live-streaming a Quranic study session to show off or to genuinely preach?*" remarked a Kyai, sparking discussion. A similar approach is applied at Pondok Pesantren Al Iman when studying jurisprudence texts like Fathul Qarib. When discussing laws concerning relationships with non-Muslims, the Kyai does not only convey the legal text but invites students to analyze the socio-historical context in which the text was written, then discuss its implementation in today's diverse Indonesian society.

This pedagogical strategy is reinforced by the institutionalization of structured *bahtsul masail* (contemporary issue discussion) forums. This forum is not merely an extracurricular activity, but a hidden curriculum that trains critical thinking skills and intellectual empathy. An administrator of Pondok Pesantren Al Iman explained, "*We intentionally choose controversial themes such as the death penalty for apostasy (murtad) or female leadership. Students are divided into groups that must defend different opinions, even those that may contradict their personal views.*" Through this method, students not only learn that differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf*) exist but also understand the logic behind those differences. They are trained to appreciate the process of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), thereby avoiding the tendency to easily blame or excommunicate other groups.

#### 3.1.2.2 Communicative Strategy: Preaching as the Art of Bridge-Building

The second strategy lies in the communicative or preaching approach employed by the Kyai. They consistently apply the principle of *bil hikmah wal mau'idhatil hasanah* (with wisdom and good instruction). This principle is translated at two levels: internal communication within the pesantren and external communication with the wider community.

At the internal level, the language used by the Kyai and ustadz (teachers) in correcting student errors tends to avoid confrontation and is more guiding in nature. An ustadz at Darul Islah exemplified this: "*If a student acts harshly towards a friend from a different school of thought (mazhab), we don't immediately scold him. We invite him for coffee, ask his reasons, then we show him texts from his own religious books that teach tolerance. We guide him to conclude his own mistake.*" This approach is effective because it preserves the student's dignity while opening their mind.

At the external level, the Kyai actively become bridges between the pesantren and the wider community, including followers of other religions. Observations noted that Kyai from Pondok Pesantren Al Iman are frequently invited to interfaith dialogues organized by the local government. A community leader recounted, "*The way the Kyai delivers his message is very different. He does not use confrontational verses but emphasizes universal values like justice, compassion, and preserving life, which are acceptable to all parties.*"

Even in his Friday sermons, the Kyai intentionally avoids divisive diction like "kafir" (infidel) or "denizens of hell," preferring phrases like "our friends of different faiths." This inclusive language selection serves as a model for students on how to convey Islamic teachings without generating hostility.

### 3.1.2.3 Socio-Cultural Strategy: Building a Living Laboratory of Tolerance

The third strategy involves creating a tolerance laboratory through students' tangible involvement in diverse social realities. The Kyai understand that the value of moderation cannot only be learned in the classroom but must be experienced (experience-based learning).

Both pesantren regularly hold live-in or community service programs in villages with diverse population compositions, including areas with non-Muslim majorities. The students do not come to preach aggressively but to live together, help with daily chores, and participate in communal work (gotong royong). A student participant in the program shared, "At first, I was somewhat afraid to be assigned to a Christian village. But it turned out we were received very warmly. We did communal work cleaning drains together, and in the evening had a relaxed discussion about each other's beliefs. I just realized, I had the wrong prejudice all this time."

Furthermore, the pesantren also encourage students to engage in humanitarian projects of a universal nature, such as helping natural disaster victims regardless of the victims' religious background. An alumnus now active in a national humanitarian agency admitted, "The spirit of volunteerism and the attitude of helping others indiscriminately is the foundation instilled in us by the Kyai. For us, helping humans in distress is an act of worship, regardless of their religion."

These three strategies—pedagogical, communicative, and socio-cultural—work symbiotically to form a holistic educational ecosystem. The pedagogical strategy builds the intellectual framework and critical reasoning. The communicative strategy shapes character and skills in conveying perspectives. Meanwhile, the socio-cultural strategy provides empirical experiences that confirm and deepen intellectual understanding while honing empathy.

Through this integration, the values of religious moderation cease to be a separate subject and become the DNA of the pesantren's culture itself. Students do not only know about tolerance, but they feel its benefits in social interactions and are ultimately motivated to practice it in their lives, both during their time in the pesantren and after returning to society.

### 3.1.3 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Kyai Leadership in Religious Moderation Education

The success of Kyai leadership in instilling religious moderation values at Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah and Al Iman does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is significantly influenced by a complex configuration of supporting and inhibiting factors. The research findings reveal a dynamic ecosystem where internal and external factors interact, creating a landscape that simultaneously promotes and tests the resilience of moderation education.

#### 3.1.3.1 Internal Supporting Factors: Strengthening Cultural Infrastructure

Internal factors function as the primary backbone of cultural and structural infrastructure. The first and most fundamental is the contextual *kitab kuning*-based curriculum. In both pesantren, the classical texts are not taught as dead texts to be dogmatically memorized, but as living treasures that engage in dialogue with contemporary realities. A Kyai at Darul Islah provided a concrete example: "When studying the chapter on *riya'* (ostentation) in *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, we don't stop at the classical definition. We invite students to discuss manifestations of *riya'* in the social media era, such as motivations behind creating viral religious content. This makes religious values relevant and trains critical awareness." This approach teaches students that Islam is a religion responsive to context—an important foundation of moderate thinking.

The second equally important internal factor is the deeply rooted tradition of deliberation (*musyawarah*). Deliberation is not merely a decision-making procedure but serves as a living laboratory of democracy and tolerance. A senior student shared: "In solving dormitory problems, we often have disagreements. But the Kyai teaches us that differing opinions are a blessing. We learn not to win personal arguments

*but to seek the best solution together.*" Through this process, students directly experience that differences can be managed peacefully and productively—a valuable lesson applicable to broader contexts of religious and belief differences.

The third factor is the role of senior students as extensions of the Kyai. They function as more effective socialization agents for moderation values due to their age proximity and relatable experience. A pesantren administrator explained the mechanism: *"When a new student shows intolerant attitudes, it's their senior who first approaches them. They guide using more fluid and relatable language, often while chatting at a coffee stall."* This peer education system creates a multiplier effect, where moderation values are not only transmitted vertically from the Kyai but also spread horizontally among fellow students, accelerating the internalization process.

### 3.1.3.2 External Supporting Factors: Bridges to Diverse Realities

On the external side, government support through various training programs and operational assistance serves as a significant catalyst. A pesantren administrator acknowledged: *"Religious moderation training programs from the Ministry of Religious Affairs provide us with new perspectives and methodologies. Meanwhile, operational assistance enables us to conduct real programs like visits to other houses of worship."* However, this support is a double-edged sword. Some external parties view moderate pesantren as "government agents," a stigma that Kyai must wisely address to maintain their religious credibility.

The most strategic external factor actually comes from the diverse social environment surrounding the pesantren. Geographical proximity to non-Muslim communities, such as Balinese Hindu villages or Christian settlements, creates a natural tolerance laboratory. A Kyai emphasized: *"We don't need to simulate harmony. Our students interact daily with neighbors of different beliefs. They learn directly that difference is not a threat but a richness."* This experience of peaceful coexistence serves as the most potent antidote to exclusive ideologies that teach isolation.

### 3.1.3.3 Inhibiting Factors: The Ideological Contestation Arena

Despite substantial support, this moderation education journey faces serious challenges. Radical external narratives, spreading rapidly through social media and messaging platforms, pose a real threat. A Kyai expressed his concern: *"We compete with content that has high production value, offering simple black-and-white answers. While we teach complexity and nuance, they offer absolute certainty. That's very tempting for teenagers searching for identity."*

The second challenge is the stigma against religious moderation itself. In certain circles, moderation is often labeled as "weak thinking" or a "compromise of Islamic values." An ustadz shared: *"We were once accused of teaching 'superficial Islam' because we weren't harsh enough in excommunicating other groups."* Facing this, Kyai must continually provide theological legitimization, demonstrating the roots of moderation in the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Islamic intellectual tradition.

The third challenge is internal—the difficulty in developing students' critical thinking. Not all students possess equal intellectual capacity and emotional maturity to engage in complex discussions about moderation. Some still tend toward dichotomous thinking. A teacher admitted: *"Teaching critical thinking is like walking a tightrope. On one hand, we want them to be critical, but on the other, we must ensure this critical attitude doesn't turn into doubting everything or, conversely, reverting to rigid thinking."* Building a culture of healthy questioning and debate, while maintaining respect for scholarly authority, is a continuous and challenging process.

Overall, the effectiveness of Kyai leadership heavily depends on their ability to orchestrate this entire ecosystem of factors. They must maximally utilize the internal cultural infrastructure while intelligently managing external dynamics, both supportive and inhibitory. Existing challenges, such as radical narratives and stigma, often actually strengthen internal cohesion and reinforce the pesantren's commitment to the path of moderation. Thus, the resilience of religious moderation education lies not in the absence of challenges, but in the capacity of the Kyai and the entire pesantren community to

continually adapt, engage in dialogue, and build cultural resilience amid the ever-changing arena of ideological contestation.

### **3.1.4. The Impact of Kyai Leadership on Santri Mindsets and Attitudes: Shaping Agents of Moderation in the Global Era**

This research reveals that the transformational and participatory leadership of the Kyai at Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah and Al Iman has yielded profound and multifaceted impacts on the mindset, attitudes, and even life trajectories of the santri. These impacts are evident not only during their educational tenure within the pesantren but prove sustainable upon their return to society, transforming them from passive recipients of knowledge into active agents of religious moderation.

#### **3.1.4.1 Mindset Transformation: From Dichotomy to Inclusivity**

The most fundamental impact lies in the transformation of the santri's mindset, shifting from a potentially dichotomous and exclusive orientation towards one that is inclusive and complex. This process is achieved through sustained exposure to a diversity of perspectives, both within and outside Islam. In an interview, a third-year student at Pondok Pesantren Al Iman reflected, "*I initially thought truth was singular and resided only within our school of thought (mazhab). But through bahtsul masail discussions and comparative mazhab studies, I realized that every opinion has its own basis and context. Difference is not a flaw, but a richness.*" This statement reflects a shift from a closed epistemology (belief in a single source of truth) towards an open epistemology that acknowledges the possibility of multiple interpretations within religious texts.

This inclusive mindset is further reinforced by direct interaction with diverse social realities. The live-in program within non-Muslim communities, part of the hidden curriculum, functions as a powerful "trust therapy." A santri who spent a week in a Christian village recounted, "*I saw them praying devoutly, helping neighbours, and living honestly. It shattered the stereotypes I had gathered from radical sermons on social media. I learned that goodness and piety are not the monopoly of one religion.*" Such empirical experiences build inclusive empathy—the ability to understand and respect the religious experiences of others—which forms a sturdy buffer against narratives of hatred and hostility.

#### **3.1.4.2 Attitude Consolidation: Tolerance Rooted in a Strong Identity**

A subsequent impact is the consolidation of a tolerant attitude, born not from doubt in one's own beliefs, but rather rooted in a deep and self-assured understanding of Islam. The Kyai in both pesantren deliberately teach that tolerance (*tasamuh*) is an integral part of Islamic creed, not a neglect of it. An ustadz explained, "*We instill that respecting the beliefs of others is a manifestation of faith in the verse that states 'laa ikraaha fid-diin' (there is no compulsion in religion). A tolerant attitude is a logical consequence of our belief, not a denial of it.*"

This manifests in the santri's daily conduct. Observations noted how senior santri fluently guided non-Muslim guests visiting the pesantren, explaining their traditions with pride yet humility, without feeling the need to conceal their Islamic identity or being unsettled by the presence of guests of different faiths. A female santri stated, "*We are taught to be confident Muslim women, not ones who are closed off and fearful of differences. My hijab is my identity, but my smile and respectful attitude are universal.*" This attitude represents what can be termed confident tolerance—a tolerance born from the strength of identity, not from doubt about that identity.

#### **3.1.4.3 Multiplier Effect: Santri as Agents of Moderation in Society**

The most strategic impact is the transformation of many alumni into active agents of moderation across various sectors of society. They do not merely remain products of a moderate educational system but become disseminators and preservers of its values.

Many alumni continue their roles as educators, whether in pesantren, madrasas, or universities. An alumnus of Pondok Pesantren Darul Islah, now a lecturer at a State Islamic Institute (IAIN),

expressed, "In the classroom, I continue what I learned from the Kyai: encouraging students to think critically, respect differences, and reject takfiri attitudes (easily excommunicating others). I see myself as an extension of my pesantren's mission." Their role as educators is crucial in extending the reach of moderation to subsequent generations.

In the realm of civil society, alumni also emerge as peacemaking figures. An alumnus of Pondok Pesantren Al Iman, now active in a peace NGO, shared his experience facilitating an inter-village conflict rooted in ethnic and religious issues. "The approach I used was exactly as taught by the Kyai: sitting together, listening to all parties without judgment, and seeking common ground based on universal human values, not by prioritizing dogma," he said. Their ability to act as bridges within a fragmented society demonstrates a profound internalization of moderation values.

Overall, the impact of Kyai leadership on the santri is transformative, sustainable, and multiplicative. It successfully shapes individuals who possess not only cognitive flexibility (inclusive mindset) and social empathy (tolerant attitude) but also agency for change. The strong alumni network from these two pesantren creates a supportive moderation ecosystem, where the values instilled in the pesantren continue to live, be reinforced, and be disseminated. Consequently, the contribution of the pesantren towards building a peaceful and harmonious society becomes tangible and enduring.

### 3.2. Discussion

This study's findings provide not only an empirical picture of Kyai leadership practices but also open a space for in-depth discussion to enrich theoretical discourse, strengthen conceptual frameworks, formulate more effective policy implications, and map future research directions. This discussion will elaborate on how the study's findings interact with existing theory, Indonesia's socio-religious context, and contemporary challenges.

#### 3.2.1. Strengthening and Enriching Transformational Leadership Theory in a Religious Context

The findings regarding the Kyai's transformational-participatory leadership model make a significant contribution to transformational leadership theory (Bakker et al., 2023) by introducing a distinctive contextual dimension. This theory, born from studies of Western organizations, typically emphasizes four pillars: Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. In the pesantren context, these four pillars undergo profound adaptation and enrichment.

First, Idealized Influence, in the pesantren context, does not stem solely from the Kyai's personal vision or charisma as in corporate settings. This influence instead derives from institutionalized spiritual authority. A Kyai is followed not merely because of an appealing vision, but because he is viewed as an heir to the Prophet (*waratsatul anbiya*) and a guardian of authentic Islamic tradition. The exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*) demonstrated by the Kyai—from his manner of worship and speech to his treatment of people of different beliefs—becomes a living text more powerful than mere motivational speeches. This finding aligns with studies on "spiritual leadership" (Karim et al., 2025) that emphasize intrinsic values and a sense of calling, yet it possesses a uniqueness as it is built upon a foundation of charismatic-rational authority within the Islamic tradition, where the Kyai's charisma is inseparable from his depth of religious knowledge.

Second, Intellectual Stimulation is uniquely manifested through the dialogical and contextual methodology of studying the *kitab kuning*. Unlike intellectual stimulation in business aimed at product innovation, in the pesantren, its goal is religious understanding innovation that remains rooted in tradition. Forums like *bahtsul masail* and critical discussions of classical texts not only train critical thinking skills but also build intellectual humility—the awareness that absolute truth belongs only to God, while human understanding is relative. This reinforces the findings of Arifin et al., (2024), but this study further shows that this process of intellectual stimulation becomes effective precisely because it is guided by the Kyai's authoritative expertise, thus preventing a descent into confusing relativism.

Third, the transformational-participatory hybrid model identified in this study addresses criticisms that transformational theory is overly leader-centric. By involving students in organizational and educational decisions through student councils and peer-mentoring systems, the Kyai create a distributed leadership ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, the values of moderation are not only transmitted vertically but also spread horizontally among the students themselves. Thus, this study not only strengthens transformational theory but also enriches it by demonstrating how its integration with participatory principles, within a traditional religious community context, can create a more robust and sustainable mechanism for value transmission.

### 3.2.2. *Wasathiyah* Islam as a Theoretical and Practical Framework: From Concept to Action

This research provides concrete empirical evidence of how the concept of *Wasathiyah* Islam (Middle Path Islam) is operationalized in daily educational practice. The study demonstrates that *Wasathiyah* is not merely a slogan, but a living praxis framework.

First, the contextual approach in studying the *kitab kuning* is a manifestation of the *Wasathiyah* principle, which rejects rigid textualism (literalisme) while simultaneously rejecting liberalization that disregards the text (liberalisme). The Kyai in both pesantren act as cultural translators who bridge classical texts with modern realities. This strengthens the findings of Nasir & Rijal (2021) on the importance of contextual interpretation in Indonesia. However, this study reveals the mechanism: contextualization is taught not by abandoning the authority of the *kitab kuning*, but precisely by deeply studying and re-contextualizing it. This is a shrewd strategy because it builds religious moderation upon the foundation of traditional authority, making it less vulnerable to being attacked as "deviant new thinking."

Second, the findings regarding challenges faced—such as the stigma against moderation—confirm that *Wasathiyah* is situated within an intense field of discursive contestation. The *Wasathiyah* narrative must compete with more exclusive, ideological, and populist religious narratives, as identified by Khoiriyah et al. (2024). What is interesting in these findings is the strategy employed by the pesantren to face this contestation. Rather than avoiding it, they use the contestation itself as pedagogical material. Debates with extremist groups on social media, for example, are analyzed with students within the framework of *munaqosyah* (scholarly debate) to train argumentation and ideological resilience. Thus, the pesantren does not only teach *Wasathiyah* as doctrine but also trains students to defend and advocate for it intellectually in the public sphere.

Third, the concept of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a mercy to all creation), which is the spirit underlying all educational strategies in these pesantren, shifts the focus of religiosity from individual piety towards universal social contribution. The live-in programs and cross-religious community service are implementations of this principle. This shows that *Wasathiyah*, in practice, is an Islam that is proactive in building civilization, not a defensive and closed Islam. It is a social ethic that prioritizes empathy, justice, and universal benefit—all values that can find common ground with global society.

### 3.2.3. Policy Implications: Designing a Holistic Support Architecture

The findings of this study have strategic policy implications for strengthening moderate Islamic education in Indonesia. These implications concern not only curriculum content but also leadership structure, networking, and the approach towards pesantren.

#### 3.2.3.1 Leadership Training: From Managerial to Transformational

Policy has thus far tended to focus on training the managerial capacity of Kyai and pesantren administrators. These findings affirm that this approach needs to be expanded. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and donor institutions need to design transformational leadership training programs specifically tailored to the pesantren context. These programs should include:

- a. Transformational Capacity Building Modules: How Kyai formulate and communicate an inclusive Islamic vision, and build consistent exemplary conduct.

- b. Participatory Leadership Modules: Techniques for empowering students and creating democratic organizational structures within the hierarchical pesantren environment.
- c. Ideological Contestation Management: Training in digital literacy and public communication to help Kyai and senior students effectively counter radical narratives and correct stigma against moderation in online and offline spaces.

### 3.2.3.2 Curriculum Development: Organic, Not Mechanical Integration

Government policy promoting the integration of religious moderation into the curriculum can learn from these findings. A "sticker badge" approach, adding a special subject called "Religious Moderation," could be counterproductive as it might be perceived as external intervention. Instead, policy should encourage organic integration.

- a. Resource Provision: Instead of prescribing a fixed curriculum, the government could provide a repository of modules for the contextualization of the *kitab kuning* for specific topics (such as Muslim-non-Muslim relations, gender, and democracy) developed by moderate pesantren. This allows Kyai to adopt them while maintaining their scholarly autonomy.
- b. Holistic Assessment: The outcome assessment system for pesantren education should not only measure academic achievement (such as memorization) but must also develop instruments to measure the development of students' inclusive attitudes, tolerance, and critical thinking skills.

### 3.2.3.3 Networking and Collaboration: Building an Ecosystem of Resilience

The third implication is the need to build more systematic networks. Policy must not view pesantren as isolated entities.

- a. Networks Among Moderate Pesantren: The government can facilitate a consortium of moderate pesantren to share resources, organize student exchanges, and collectively voice the *Wasathiyah* narrative. This would create a positive echo chamber and strengthen a shared identity.
- b. International Collaboration: As underscored by the importance of "religious resilience" (ASPI, 2020), collaboration with international institutions working in peace and conflict resolution can enrich the pesantren's perspective. Exchange programs with Christian seminaries or other religious schools in Southeast Asia, for instance, could provide invaluable comparative perspectives on challenges and strategies for promoting moderation in different religious environments.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study establishes that the leadership of *kyai* is pivotal in fostering religious moderation among *santri* within Indonesian *pesantren*, primarily through a hybrid leadership model that combines transformational and participatory approaches. By embodying moral exemplarity, engaging in dialogical pedagogy, and fostering community involvement, *kyai* transcend their spiritual roles to become influential agents of social change, promoting a balance between Islamic orthodoxy and openness to diversity. The research contributes to transformational leadership theory by contextualizing it within the unique socio-cultural dynamics of *pesantren*, and offers practical strategies for Islamic education policy and leadership development. Methodologically, it affirms the value of qualitative case studies in capturing the nuanced dynamics of religious leadership. However, the study's scope is limited by its small, purposively selected sample of two *pesantren* in Lampung Province and its cross-sectional design, which constrain the generalizability and temporal depth of the findings. Future research should employ broader, mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches across diverse *pesantren* types and regions, and explore comparative analyses with other Islamic educational institutions to enhance understanding of the varied implementations of religious moderation.

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