

## Facing Religious Contemporary Challenges: Redefining the Partnership of Islamic Higher Education and Islamic Religious Instructors in Mainstreaming Religious Moderation

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the partnership of Islamic higher education with Islamic religious instructors in mainstreaming religious moderation values. This partnership is conducted to face some challenges in contemporary religious understanding. Religious moderation values, such as tolerance, justice, balance, and humanism, become individual and institutional needs. The type of this research is qualitative research using library-based analysis, which obtains the information from news documents and existing partnership documents. The object of this study is the State Islamic University (UIN) Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember and Islamic Religious Instructors in the Jember regency. This study concludes that the partnership between two institutions supports the mainstreaming of religious moderation values in several forms, including early mapping of religious conflicts, formulating strategies for resolving religious phenomena, and using digital media. These two institutions agreed on several points outlined in their "declaration." The functions of religious instructors include educative, consultative, informative, and motivational, and Islamic higher education's role is to become a bridge to assist and provide religious education to the community based on religious moderation values, such as tolerance, fairness, and egalitarianism.*

**Keywords:** Partnership, Islamic Higher Education, Religious Instructors, Religious Moderation

## INTRODUCTION

The reality of religious life in Indonesia is experiencing a contestation of religious reasoning. The dynamics of religious thought in Indonesia were a contestation dichotomy of civilized Islamic movements and radical-extreme Islamic lines with excessive flexibility. This issue clearly divided Hefner into the categories of civil Islam and uncivil Islam (Hefner, 2000). The structure of political opportunities provides a stage for all parties to play a more prominent socio-political role, one of which is shown by the appearance of various religious ideas. Carol Kersten comprehensively indicates the opening of democracy which is filled by multiple religious groups who present their respective agendas and discourses. The contestation not only revolves around the question of the socio-political role of Muslims in the public sphere but also concerns the nature of Islam as a religion (Formichi, 2017; Kersten, 2016).

The emergence of various religious groups does not base on humanity, but they are dogmatic-formalist and conservative (Hefni, 2020). For example, religious reasoning is the impact of the face of global Islamic thought that appears with the look of rigidity and fundamentalism (Chalmers, 2017). Acts of violence, brutalism, and even terror in the name of religion have occurred in this republic (Ahmad, *et al.*, 2020). This reality becomes a basis for the emergence of violent extremism, radicalism, and discrimination, for example, against different groups or women, as well as other minority groups, such as non-Muslims (Muhtador *et al.*, 2020). This reality is not following Islamic values and concepts that teach humanism and moderate (*wasathiyah*) (Gandi & Kusumaningrum, 2020).

As described above, the lack of teaching and assistance from community leaders to provide moderate religious understanding is a determining factor for the emergence of the gap. On the one hand, it is also caused by the emergence of a particular group that deliberately plays religious issues as a weapon to divide society. Thus, the question is, how to mainstream the values of Islam *wasathiyah*, known as religious moderation, among the community? What strategies should be used? These questions coincide with society's reality, which is enough concrete evidence of hate speech, biased actions, and various other forms of arbitrariness. This reality was triggered by an unequal, incomplete understanding, affecting people's thinking and point of view. Of course, this is the responsibility of all groups, without exception, to be able to provide religious guidance amid the reality of a pluralistic society.

Many groups adopted many strategies to strengthen the implementation of religious moderation. For example, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has collaborated with the Islamic Religious Instructors (*Penyuluh Agama Islam*) in maintaining religious guidance to enhance religious education through strengthening religious moderation teaching materials. In the Islamic education environment, religious moderation has also been conducted in schools, *Madrasah*, Islamic Boarding Schools, and *Madrasah Diniyah*, as well as at Islamic higher education, with different accentuations and partnerships.

In this article, the authors are interested in explaining the partnership of State Islamic University with Islamic religious instructors to promote the values of religious moderation to break the chain of extreme actions and behaviors that lead to radicalism and terrorism. Islamic religious instructors can develop counseling activities through counter-narrative radicalism and forming a forum for dialogue to counter radicalism. Islamic religious instructors can also create various dialogue models, for example, institutional discussion and interfaith dialogue (Sholahuddin & Eko Putro, 2020).

This article aims to answer two fundamental questions, 1) how do universities partner with Islamic religious instructors in strengthening the values of religious moderation, and 2) what is the role of Islamic religious instructors as an ambassador in mainstreaming religious moderation? The two questions above are fundamental and relevant to discuss because Islamic universities must implement the *tri dharma* of higher education. Meanwhile, Islamic instructors are religious movers who have been amid society and know the conditions and realities. So, the partnership between Islamic higher education and religious instructors becomes very relevant in establishing religious moderation in the community.

The type of this research is qualitative research using library-based analysis, which obtains the information from news documents and existing partnership documents. The object of this research is the State Islamic University (UIN) Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember and the Islamic religious instructor in Jember Regency.

## **DISCUSSION**

In the current situation, the need for moderate religious narratives is personal and institutional, both in local, national, and global contexts, especially amid the agitation for religious understanding that appears in society. The truth claim is far from tolerant, inclusive, and pluralistic values. Thus, Islamic higher education and religious educators become vital infrastructures as an ambassador of religious moderation in society (Sirry, 2020; Suyanto dkk., 2022).

### **The Significance of Religious Moderation Values**

Moderate is based on the balance in many ways, not leaning on one side. In religion, moderation must be accompanied by intelligence and maturity. In other words, religious moderation is a balanced perspective in faith. Whereas in Arabic, moderate is known as *wasath* or *wasathiyah*, which has the equivalent of *tawasuth* (middle), *i'tidal* (fair) and *tawazun* (balance). The opposite of *wasath* is *tatharruf* (excessive) and also *ghulum* (excessive), which in English are called extreme and radical (Tim Balitbang Kementerian Agama & Indonesia, 2019).

*Wasathiyah* Islam is a view that takes a middle position from two opposing poles and is excessive so that one of the two attitudes do not dominate. According to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, this can happen because humans often cannot escape from influence and bias, be it from environmental factors, traditions, thoughts, family, and social realities surrounding them (Al-Qaradhawi, 2010). In a broad sense, the term moderate can be understood as a balance between belief and tolerance, as everyone has certain assumptions but still has a balanced tolerance for other religions. At this point, the significance of the value of religious moderation finds its relevance. Attitudes and perspectives that are full of balance and justice are a necessity to be applied in a pluralistic society. It is undeniable that Indonesian society is a plural society consisting of various religions, ethnicities, ethnicities, races, cultures, and languages, and even many are minority groups (Litonjua, 2018).

In religious moderation, what matters is the way of religion and perspective in interpreting spiritual teachings. From this fair and balanced attitude, the principle of restraint can shape a person to have three main characteristics: wisdom, purity, and courage. In this context, the concept of a single interpretation that monopolizes the truth will be avoided (Subagyo, 2021). There is an attitude of respect for the interpretations and

approaches taken by other parties or people so that there is a solid common ground of understanding among the diversity of opinions.

In addition, the moderate concept firmly upholds egalitarian values (*musawab*) by not discriminating against others. Differences in beliefs, traditions, religion, language, and ethnicity, as well as between groups, do not cause the axis of arbitrariness to be ignited, which can suppress brotherhood ties. The development of excessive religious perspectives and practices and the growth of religious absolutism and subjective truth claims have become parasites of spiritual life (Akhmadi, 2019). In that context, the values of religious moderation as an understanding of the middle way to create a peaceful and harmonious life need to be strengthened (Ahmadi, 2019). A moderate view can lead to a strong brotherhood because it can erode disputes with unilateral claims. Thus, the values of religious moderation are intertwined with social institutions, which are expected to deliver spiritual understanding so that they can transform into a harmonious and tolerant social subsystem (Lessy & Rohman, 2022).

Mainstreaming the values of religious moderation is not limited to the duties of individuals or particular groups (Hefni, 2020). It is also the obligation of state Islamic universities, such as UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember. The grounding of the values of religious moderation that departs from universities can answer the assumption that universities are far from the community. The partnership between universities and the community, which in this case is an Islamic religious instructor, can be a concrete answer to synergy and closeness that marks two equal relations with the principle of mutual benefit. This inter-institutional partnership approach emphasizes the function of the *tri dharma* of higher education which includes education, research, and community service for the sustainability of higher education and the benefit of society.

### **Islamic Higher Education as a Center for Strengthening Religious Moderation**

State Islamic universities are Islamic educational institutions that have a strategic function in strengthening and grounding the values of religious moderation. State Islamic Universities are very appropriate to be laboratories of religious moderation and relevant to be a place for seeding national ideas, constructing critical thinking, teaching multiculturalism values, delivering peaceful and tolerant spiritual messages, and spreading the love for humanity (Ali *et al.*, 2021; Hakam *et al.*, 2022).

State Islamic universities, such as the State Islamic College (STAIN), State Islamic Institute (IAIN), and State Islamic University (UIN), are mentioned by Lukens-Bull (2013) as proponents of moderate Islam, along with community organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah (Lukens-Bull, 2013). Religious universities have a significant role in establishing peace and tolerance. Since 2019, every state Islamic university has been required to develop a center of religious moderation. This research center strengthens the values of religious moderation, both within the university's internal and external environment. This was stated in the Circular Letter of the Director General of Islamic Education Number B-3663.1/Dj.I/BA.02/10/2019, October 29, 2019, concerning the role of the research center of religious moderation in Islamic higher education. Meanwhile, Islamic Religious Instructors guided religious communities in mental, moral, and devotional development as stated in the Regulation of the Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia number 791 of 1985. This role aligns with their educative, consultative, informative, and motivational tasks (Jaya, 2017).

The UNESCO declaration (1998) stated several things related to the vision of a university. *First*, universities must contribute to sustainable development and community development. *Second*, universities must promote and disseminate knowledge through research and provide relevant expertise to assist the community in developing cultural, social, economic, and other creative works (Hidayat *et al.*, 2020). *Third*, universities also have a role in understanding, interpreting, maintaining, developing, and disseminating national, regional, and international historical cultures in cultural pluralism and diversity. In this third role, Islamic religious universities are very relevant in fostering love and forming the basis of democratic citizenship based on the spirit of religious humanism. The role of universities is very significant in building anti-radicalism attitudes of students through the integration of character education values (Ali *et al.*, 2021; Chalim, 2018; Lukens-Bull, 2013).

Religious life in Indonesia is faced with various challenges, for example, the strengthening of individualism, increasing conflicts that turn on identity politics marked by the fading of affiliation to religious institutions, the shift of religious authority, and the change from pluralism to tribalism (Hefni, 2020). However, the optimism to maintain stability and harmony of spiritual life in Indonesia remains strong by maintaining the distinctive character of the Indonesian nation, which is polite, tolerant, and respectful of differences. Thus, Islamic universities can play a role in fostering the spirit of socio-religious moderation as a spirit of togetherness in maintaining harmony among fellow citizens of the Indonesian nation (Arifianto, 2019).

Islamic religious universities are the most responsible element in maintaining religious moderation in Indonesia, with several arguments. *First*, Islamic religious universities are under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, a government agency that is very concerned and responsible for mainstreaming religious moderation in Indonesia. This reality confirms that the intellectual work of religious universities is indeed based on the content of moderate intellectualism. *Second*, Islamic religious colleges are centers of Islamic studies, as the religion embraced by most religious people in Indonesia. As is well known, several cases of extremism or radicalism in Indonesia are closely related to adherents of certain Islamic sects or groups in Indonesia. In the context of UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, the existence of the center for religion have a significant capital to strengthen the values of religious moderation, which consist of tolerance, balance, humanism, egalitarianism, and justice. Institutionally, the institutional tasks of the RMB UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember are to strengthen the essence of religious teachings in people's lives, manage the diversity of religious interpretations by educating spiritual life, and in general, take care of Indonesian weaving. In this case, *khittab wasathiyah* is a significant work of UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember. A research center for religious moderation is an essential instrument in implementing religious moderation in preventive, promotive, and curative aspects, both in the internal and external environment of the university. From this center, discourses on inclusive and progressive religious narratives were born and grew in academic nuances. This inclusive and critical intellectual reasoning can significantly strengthen a tolerant and progressive literary tradition, but not beyond boundaries (Ali *et al.*, 2021)

To intensify the grounding movement, partnerships with Islamic religious instructors in Jember Regency are complementary to be directly accepted by all levels of society. Islamic religious educators are "spokesmen" who directly interact with grassroots communities. The data obtained show that Islamic religious educators follow up the

seeding of religious moderation values produced by universities in Jember Regency for dialogue and dissemination with the community.

### **Redefining the Partnership: Synergy of Islamic Higher Education with Islamic Religious Instructors**

The partnership between UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember and Islamic religious instructors in Jember Regency was organized in the workshop. This workshop is an initial mapping for the early detection of religious conflicts, formulating strategies for resolving cases and spiritual phenomena and using digital media. Several agreements were made at the workshop organized by the Religious Moderation House of UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember with Islamic religious educators in the Jember Regency, including the reading of a joint declaration. The declaration is an affirmation to ground the values of religious moderation. The statement that was read out expressly described the strong partnership between UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember and the Islamic religious counselor of Jember Regency in mainstreaming *wasathiyah* Islam. The synergy carried out in the program between UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq and Islamic religious instructors in Jember regency, among others, in the fields of advocacy and religious complaint services, community service, religious assistance, religious community guidance, religious conflict resolution, and handling diversity issues.

The declaration is:

1. *Indonesian Islam is a religion of rahmatan lil alamin that upholds the values of moderation (tawassuth), balance (tawazun), tolerance (tasamuh), and justice;*
2. *We are determined to maintain the style of Indonesian Islam and continue to strengthen it to respond to the challenges in terms of religious understanding;*
3. *We are determined to promote Indonesian Islam as a solution for world peace and the creation of a more civilized global order based on the values of brotherhood (al-ukhummah), equality (al-musawah), deliberation (asy-syura), helping each others (at-ta'awun), and mutual respect (at-tarahum);*
4. *We reject all forms of exaggeration or overreach (al-ghuluw), whether in actions or words, which are the seeds of tyranny, violence, radicalism, hostility, and terrorism which are real threats to the destruction of civilization and humanity.*

Islamic religious instructors are the pillars of the religiosity and harmony of society (Andrian, 2019; Fauzi, 2018; Sholahuddin & Eko Putro, 2020). The closeness and intensity of Islamic religious instructors with the community directly put them as actors. According to their competence, Islamic religious instructors guide and assist the community toward a knowledge society. In other words, Islamic religious educators are knowledge workers who are the main actors in the community's spiritual development.

Islamic religious educators also play a significant role as community counselors and facilitators. Of course, Islamic religious educators cannot solve various problems amid society as a whole but require collaboration with other parties, as the results of the interview with Zubaidi as the Coordinator of Islamic Counseling in Jember Regency. He revealed the difficulties faced by Islamic religious educators in Jember Regency in providing spiritual assistance and counseling, among others, the rush of information through technological sophistication, which then caused the community to be polarized due to scattered information, including religious details. On a broader aspect, strengthening radical religious ideas is also the biggest challenge for Islamic extension workers. In addition, the

internal challenge is the lack of methodological competence of Islamic religious instructors regarding spiritual counseling strategies. This relates to the issue of content and extension materials (Jaya, 2017). Some of the difficulties, as illustrated, can also be seen in the results of Indra Jaya's research (2017) on the revitalization of Islamic religious instructors in their function as counselors and community companions.

Following their functions, Islamic religious instructors play a significant role, for example, in improving the quality of understanding and practicing spiritual teachings, increasing religious harmony, and several other things (Dachlan *et al.*, 2018; Fauzi, 2018). If viewed from the function, the partnership between the State Islamic University (UIN) Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq and Islamic Islamic educators in Jember Regency can be detailed in several aspects. First, the informative function (conveyor of information/informants) is communicating the tongue of the community, like religious services. In this function, Islamic religious instructors have a decisive role in guiding and directing religious narratives in society.

In the Indonesian Muslim community, the pattern of religion, in general, is still determined by the logic and paradigm of faith in the construction of fiqh. What is very concerning, in a more extreme way, is that the bearers and religious elites understand the structure of fiqh in religious texts and then teach to the public using a textual approach to fiqh combined with a literal approach. The implication is that this conception of understanding then turns into an exclusive nature which in the end gives rise to discriminatory attitudes, for example, in terms of praying together, saying religious holidays for the heads of different groups, and other spiritual knowledge that requires further and comprehensive explanations.

*Second* is the educative function. Many triggers occur amid a community that eventually creates a textualist-dichotomous frame of mind that divides human reality only at two different poles, even opposites: white-black, right-wrong, light-dark, holy-dirty, and others. As a result, the two-way view that is a capital for dialogue disappears under the confines of the imagination of self-affirmation that kills the other party. On the other hand, this is influenced by the traditional heritage of the Arab community, who are in tribal leadership, so they are perched in the tribal fanaticism (Susanto *et al.*, 2021). In fact, in a more extreme religious attitude, symptoms of disbelief, misdirection, and labeling appear, especially for thoughts that are against or against the mainstream and the majority view. This reality becomes a crucial problem in the dynamics of spiritual development, especially the strengthening of homogeneous and centralized thinking (Roshandel & Chadha, 2006; Wijaya, 2018). In this context, Islamic religious instructors of Islam will undoubtedly provide the right and proper understanding to clarify arrangements that are already rigid and textual.

*Third*, the consultative function, namely the Islamic religious instructor, is a place for the public to ask questions and consult about various problems of a spiritual and social nature in general, including protecting the public from exposure to radicalism originating from hardline splinter groups. In this function, Islamic religious educators can strengthen the essence of religious teachings in people's lives and manage the diversity of religious interpretations by educating the religious life (Wahab, 2018). This issue is critical in the continuation of harmonious religious life. *Fourth* is the motivational function, where Islamic religious instructors have a role in providing religious motivation. In their motivational part, extension workers deliver solutions and religious explanations for the community. This is manifested in strengthening understanding, such as joint calls to care for

Indonesianness, the bond between religious spirit and national commitment, and building awareness with *tasamuh*, *ta'adul*, and *tawazun*. Not limited to that, Islamic religious instructors can provide religious guidance, for example, in guiding efforts to form a *sakinah family* and other religious directions.

The partnership created between universities, in this case, UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq, and Islamic religious instructors in Jember Regency can increase social capital for the role of Islamic religious educators. The social capital includes increasing scientific knowledge obtained in joint workshops, for example, the material on the early mapping of potential conflicts, advocacy strategies, counseling strategies, and religious guidance, and also from the aspect of strengthening commitment as a driver of religious moderation in grounding and campaigning for love of religion. This partnership is an excellent strategy for enhancing religious moderation amidst society. It will be a trajectory to be back to the emergence of Islam that was based on Islam *wasathiyah*, an Islamic style that has characters such as *tawasuth* (moderate), *tawazun* (balanced), *i'tidal* (fair), *tasamuh* (tolerant), *ishlah* (reformist), *ta'awwun* (cooperation), *syura* (consultation), *muwathanah* (*nationalism*), and *musawa* (*egalitarianism*). The partnership between UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq and Islamic religious instructors in Jember Regency will enhance the connection between Islam and local Indonesian traditions as a distinctive Islam that pays attention to local customs. It will answer the condition of Indonesian Islam that teaches peace, tolerance, harmony, and unity in diversity on the one hand. But on the other hand, it also explains the factors of appearing conflict, friction, and even rejection in society.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the above critical analysis, this study concludes that Islamic higher education, such as UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, synergizes with Islamic religious instructors in the Jember regency in mainstreaming religious moderation in several ways. This partnership was conducted to face some challenges in contemporary religious understanding. Mainstreaming the values of religious moderation is not limited to the duties of individuals or particular groups. It is also the obligation of state Islamic universities, such as UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember. The grounding of the values of religious moderation that departs from universities can answer the assumption that universities are far from the community.

The partnership was conducted, for example, in mapping early detection of conflict religion, formulating strategies for resolving cases and religious phenomena, and using digital media to strengthen the values of religious moderation. These two institutions have agreed on several points outlined in the "declaration" text. As we know, Islamic religious instructors can develop counseling activities through counter-narrative radicalism, building dialogue, and forming a forum for counter-radicalism. Islamic religious instructors can also create various dialogue models, for example, institutional discussion and interfaith dialogue. Religious instructors' functions, including educative, consultative, informative, and motivative, and the role of Islamic higher education are to become a bridge to assist and provide religious education to the community based on religious moderation values, such as tolerance, fairness, and egalitarianism.

This study only describes and analyzes the significance of the partnership between UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq and Islamic religious instructors in the Jember regency in mainstreaming religious moderation. This is a pilot project for a religious moderation

program. So, this research requires further study, for example, how the effectiveness, challenges, and obstacles in mainstreaming religious moderation in society.

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