

Strategies for forming moderate religious attitudes among students at Kartika I-2 High School in Medan and Free Methodist High School in Medan

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ABSTRACT

Kartika 1–2 High School in Medan and Free Methodist High School in Medan promote religious moderation through curriculum integration, school culture, and extracurricular programs. This study aims to analyze the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers and their collaboration with teachers of other religious subjects in fostering religious moderation, as well as to examine the challenges encountered in implementing these values within the K13 and Merdeka curricula. The research adopts a qualitative approach, with data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using a deductive method. The findings indicate that religious moderation is strengthened through several key strategies: integrating moderation values into curriculum documents and classroom instruction; implementing project-based learning that promotes tolerance, mutual respect, and interreligious cooperation; organizing interfaith extracurricular activities and social service programs; and reinforcing moderate attitudes through religious celebrations, counseling, and school culture. The study also identifies several challenges, including external social influences and varying levels of parental involvement. Overall, the implementation of these strategies has contributed to improved student understanding and practice of religious moderation, as reflected in reduced SARA-based bullying, stronger interreligious solidarity, and more inclusive student leadership processes.

Keyword: strategy; attitude formation; religious moderation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as a pluralistic nation characterized by diversity in ethnicity, culture, language, and religion. This plurality forms the foundation of national identity and social interaction; however, it simultaneously presents complex challenges in maintaining social harmony amid differences (Yunus & Salim, 2020). Without proper management, pluralism may lead to prejudice, stereotyping, and intergroup tensions, as explained in social psychology perspectives (Walgito, 2003; Meiyanto, 1993).

Religious diversity represents one of the most sensitive dimensions of Indonesian pluralism. Islam, Christianity (Protestant and Catholic), Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism coexist within Indonesian society. Although interreligious relations are often harmonious, various incidents of intolerance and violence indicate that religious differences can still trigger social conflict (Pettalongi, 2019). In recent years, cases of violence and bullying in educational institutions have shown an increasing trend. Data from the Indonesian Education Monitoring Network (JPPI) recorded 573 cases of violence in schools in 2024, reflecting a significant increase compared to the previous year, with several cases associated with ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA). These conditions demonstrate that educational institutions must actively cultivate values that prevent intolerance and discrimination, particularly through character education (Arifin Tahir, 2014; Shoumi & Yuris, 2024).

The city of Medan reflects Indonesia's pluralistic character. According to the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of North Sumatra (2024), Islam constitutes 65.78% of the population, followed by Christianity

(24.78%), Buddhism (8.65%), and Hinduism (0.79%). Such diversity requires educational institutions in Medan to play a strategic role in nurturing mutual respect among students from different religious backgrounds through multicultural education approaches (Yaqin, 2005).

Religious moderation emerges as an important framework for addressing these challenges. It refers to a balanced and tolerant understanding of religion that avoids extremism while maintaining commitment to core religious teachings (Ikhwan et al., 2023; Faisal, 2020). In Islamic thought, this principle is reflected in the concept of *wasathiyah* (the middle path), as stated in Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 143, which describes Muslims as *ummatahan wasathan* (Ma'sum, 2024; Putri & Fadlullah, 2022). This concept emphasizes justice, balance, and proportionality in religious understanding (Kamali, 2017; Futaqi, 2018).

At the national level, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs strengthened this commitment by declaring 2019 as the Year of Religious Moderation (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019). This policy underscores the importance of integrating moderation values into various sectors, including education. The younger generation must be equipped with the ability to engage constructively with diversity in order to prevent the spread of intolerance and radical narratives (Ramadhan, 2021; Muchtar, 2025).

Within the educational context, the implementation of religious moderation can be carried out through curriculum integration, school culture, extracurricular activities, and teacher collaboration (Faisal, 2020; Lubis, 2016). Both the K13 and Merdeka curricula provide opportunities to internalize character education and tolerance values. However, in practice, the implementation of religious moderation often remains fragmented and dependent on individual teacher initiatives rather than systematic institutional strategies (Andika et al., 2026).

Previous studies have examined religious moderation in Islamic education and multicultural settings, highlighting the importance of curriculum integration and teacher roles (Kamali, 2017; Putri & Fadlullah, 2022). Nevertheless, limited research has explored how teachers of different religious subjects collaborate in pluralistic school environments, particularly in institutions with contrasting majority–minority compositions. Moreover, empirical studies comparing the implementation of religious moderation within both the K13 and Merdeka curricula remain scarce. Kartika 1–2 High School in Medan and Free Methodist High School in Medan provide two contrasting yet complementary cases: Kartika 1–2 is predominantly Muslim, whereas Free Methodist High School has a majority of non-Muslim students, with Muslim students as a minority. Although both schools accommodate religious instruction and worship practices, challenges persist in fostering meaningful interreligious interaction, inclusive school culture, and consistent implementation of moderation values.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine: (1) the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers and their collaboration with teachers of other religious subjects in fostering religious moderation; (2) the implementation of religious moderation within the K13 and Merdeka curricula; and (3) the challenges encountered in the process. By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute theoretically to the development of religious moderation models in pluralistic educational contexts and practically to provide recommendations for strengthening inclusive school environments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Formation of Students' Attitudes

Attitude formation is commonly understood as a multidimensional process involving cognitive (beliefs and knowledge), affective (feelings), and conative (behavioral tendencies) components (Walgito, 2003). These components interact dynamically, shaping individuals' responses toward social objects, situations, and values. In educational settings, students' attitudes are not formed instantaneously but develop gradually through continuous interaction between internal psychological processes and external environmental influences.

Internal factors such as personal experiences, emotional conditions, and individual personality traits significantly influence how students interpret and respond to diversity. However, external factors—including family environment, peer groups, media exposure, and school climate—often play a more dominant role in shaping social and religious attitudes. Social learning theory suggests that students construct their attitudes by observing, imitating, and interacting with significant figures in their environment.

Within the school context, teachers function as central agents in the formation of students' attitudes. Beyond delivering academic content, teachers serve as role models who embody moral values, communication styles, and behavioral norms (Lubis, 2016). Their daily interactions, teaching strategies, and responses to diversity directly influence students' perceptions and evaluative judgments.

Interactive and participatory learning methods, such as discussions, case-based learning, and collaborative projects, provide students with opportunities to develop critical thinking and appreciation for differences. A safe and inclusive school climate further reinforces positive attitude formation. Conversely, limited information, social pressure, stereotypes, and exposure to intolerant narratives may hinder the development of balanced and objective attitudes.

B. Religious Moderation

Linguistically, moderation derives from the Latin word *moderatio*, meaning “moderate,” or neither excessive nor deficient. In the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI), moderation is defined as the reduction of violence and the avoidance of extremes. In a religious context, moderation refers to adopting a balanced and fair stance, avoiding both right-wing extremism and left-wing excess, and instead embracing a middle path. In Islam, moderation is known as *wasathiyyah*, referring to the concept of the middle way mentioned in Q.S. Al-Baqarah [2]:143. The term *al-wasath* signifies the best, just, balanced, and exemplary position. Thus, *wasathiyyah* emphasizes the importance of avoiding excessive (*ghuluw*) and extreme attitudes in religious life.

Muslim scholars explain that moderation is not limited to political dimensions but also encompasses intellectual, legal, moral, and behavioral spheres. According to Sheikh Wahbah al-Zuhayli, *wasathiyyah* represents balance in faith, morality, and social interaction. Similarly, Sheikh Ali al-Jum'ah analogizes moderation to standing at the peak of a mountain—the safest position from which one can observe the entire landscape.

The fundamental principle of religious moderation is justice and balance. Justice, in this sense, refers to the ability to maintain equilibrium among various aspects of life, such as body and spirit, revelation and reason, rights and obligations, and individual and social interests. Moderation encourages firm commitment to justice without harming others. According to Mohammad Hashim Kamali, religious moderation encourages individuals to avoid extremism, seek common ground, and uphold social harmony. A moderate attitude is more likely to develop when individuals possess wisdom, sincerity, and courage. In the digital era, the principle of religious moderation also helps individuals manage information critically, avoid fanaticism, and reduce the spread of misinformation.

Thus, religious moderation is not only a foundation for maintaining interreligious harmony but also a relevant framework for addressing the challenges of modern society. It emphasizes balance in religious understanding through four main indicators. National commitment serves as a foundation, where loyalty to the state—through acceptance of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution—is viewed as an integral part of religious practice. Tolerance highlights patience and recognition of the existence of other beliefs without compromising one's own principles. The principle of anti-violence rejects all forms of radicalism and terrorism in the name of religion, as the teachings of all religions fundamentally oppose violence. An accommodative attitude toward local culture reflects flexibility in embracing traditions and local wisdom in religious practice, as long as they do not contradict core religious teachings. Universal values such as *wasathiyyah* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *musawah* (equality), and *i'tidal* (justice) form the ethical foundation of these indicators, shaping religious life that is inclusive, peaceful, and harmonious with national and cultural contexts.

Religious moderation is a key approach in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) for instilling values of balance, tolerance, and respect for diversity. Principles such as the middle path and *rahmah* (compassion) provide a basis for fostering inclusive attitudes and preventing extremism. Its implementation requires a PAI curriculum that explicitly integrates moderation values, supported by active learning methods such as discussions, case studies, and project-based learning. PAI teachers play a central role not only as educators but also as role models and facilitators who cultivate a dialogical and harmonious classroom environment. At the school level, moderation values can be strengthened through extracurricular activities, commemorative events, and integration into school culture. Although supported by policies such as the Merdeka Curriculum and school leadership, challenges remain, including diverse family backgrounds and the influence of social media. Ultimately, these efforts aim to internalize moderation values—such as national commitment, tolerance, and anti-violence—into students' cognition and behavior, shaping a generation that is not only personally devout but also socially responsible and capable of contributing to national harmony.

C. The Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Schools

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers occupy a strategic position in strengthening religious moderation within schools. Their role extends beyond curriculum delivery to include character formation and value internalization. Effective moderation education requires teachers to integrate principles of justice, tolerance, and balance into instructional design, classroom interaction, and school activities.

Previous studies emphasize curriculum integration and teacher exemplarity as crucial components in promoting moderation. However, limited research has explored collaborative models between Islamic and non-Islamic religious teachers in pluralistic school settings. Moreover, comparative analyses of moderation implementation within both the K13 and Merdeka curricula remain underexplored. This gap highlights the need for empirical investigation into how religious moderation is operationalized in diverse school contexts and how inter-teacher collaboration contributes to shaping students' moderate religious attitudes.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to describe and analyze the process of forming religious moderation attitudes among students at Kartika I–2 High School in Medan and Free Methodist High School in Medan. This approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of religious moderation within schools characterized by high religious diversity, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the strategies implemented and the challenges encountered.

The research was conducted from October 20, 2025, to December 30, 2025, allowing sufficient time for intensive data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation. The study sites were purposively selected due to their contrasting religious compositions: Kartika I–2 High School has 559 students, consisting of 519 Muslim students (92.8%) and 40 non-Muslim students (7.2%), while Free Methodist High School has 387 students, consisting of 355 non-Muslim students (91.7%) and 32 Muslim students (8.3%). These contrasting majority–minority contexts enabled the researchers to examine how religious moderation strategies are implemented across different institutional settings.

The participants consisted of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, non-Muslim religious teachers, school principals, and students selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in religious education and moderation-related activities. At Kartika I–2 High School, the Islamic Religious Education teachers involved were Desi Ariska, S.Pd.I and Abdullah Minon, S.Pd, while at Free Methodist High School the Islamic Religious Education teacher was Arib Nurmansyah, S.Pd. The study also involved 12 students from Kartika I–2 High School (6 Muslim and 6 non-Muslim students) and 9 students from Free Methodist High School (5 Muslim and 4 non-Muslim students). In addition, one principal from each school and one non-Muslim religious teacher from each school participated in providing perspectives on school policies and interreligious interaction.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, and students to explore their experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of religious moderation. Observations were carried out in classroom settings and extracurricular activities involving students from different religious backgrounds to examine how moderation values were practiced in daily interactions. Relevant documents, including curricula (K13 and Merdeka), teaching materials, and reports of extracurricular activities, were also analyzed. Field notes were recorded to support data interpretation.

The data were analyzed using qualitative analysis procedures involving theme categorization, interpretation of relationships among findings, and the formulation of conclusions regarding the effectiveness of religious moderation strategies in both schools. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, this study applied source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking to confirm the consistency and accuracy of the collected data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

The findings suggest that the formation of religious moderation attitudes in both schools cannot be reduced to curricular integration alone. Although moderation values are formally embedded within the K13 and Merdeka curricula, the data indicate that institutional culture and pedagogical interaction function as decisive mediating variables. In other words, the curriculum provides a normative framework, but relational practices within the school transform abstract values into lived attitudes. This supports constructivist perspectives on attitude formation, which argue that values are internalized through social negotiation and experiential engagement rather than mere cognitive transmission.

The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) with interfaith themes illustrates a pedagogical shift from content-centered religious instruction to dialogical and participatory learning. Such an approach aligns with experiential learning theory, in which meaning is constructed through shared activity and reflective

practice. By engaging students in collaborative interreligious projects, moderation is not taught as a defensive response to extremism but as a proactive social competence. This reframes religious moderation from a preventive discourse into a developmental educational objective.

More significantly, cooperation between Islamic Religious Education teachers and non-Muslim religious teachers demonstrates an institutional model of moderation. Previous studies often focus on teacher exemplarity or curriculum design independently; however, the present findings indicate that cross-religious teacher collaboration operates as a structural mechanism for modeling inclusivity. Teachers do not simply advocate tolerance—they enact it through shared program planning, interfaith discussions, and joint facilitation of extracurricular activities. This institutional enactment of moderation reflects the substantive meaning of *wasathiyah* as balance and justice within social relations, not merely theological moderation.

Nevertheless, the persistence of external influences—particularly family environments that promote exclusivist narratives and algorithm-driven social media exposure—reveals structural limitations of school-based moderation programs. These findings resonate with contemporary research on digital radicalization, which highlights how online ecosystems amplify polarizing content and reinforce identity-based boundaries. The data therefore suggest that religious moderation education must extend beyond doctrinal clarification to incorporate critical digital literacy and family engagement strategies. Without such expansion, school efforts risk being counterbalanced by stronger informal socialization processes.

The contrasting demographic compositions of the two schools further reveal that moderation strategies operate differently within majority–minority contexts. In majority-Muslim settings, moderation functions primarily as minority protection and inclusivity reinforcement, whereas in minority-Muslim contexts it operates as identity negotiation and coexistence management. This contextual variation suggests that religious moderation is not a universal formula but a situationally adaptive practice shaped by institutional demographics. Overall, the study contributes theoretically by proposing an ecological model of religious moderation in education, in which curriculum, pedagogy, institutional culture, inter-teacher collaboration, family influence, and digital environment interact dynamically in shaping students' attitudes. Practically, the findings affirm that sustainable moderation programs require systemic alignment across these domains rather than isolated curricular reform.

B. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the formation of moderate religious attitudes in both schools closely aligns with the conceptual framework of *wasathiyah* as balance and justice in religious understanding. Scholars such as Kamali (2017) and Yusnita (2022) emphasize that moderation in Islam is not a compromise of principles but a balanced application of religious teachings in social life. The integration of moderation values into both the K13 and Merdeka curricula reflects this normative foundation. However, the present study indicates that curriculum inclusion alone is insufficient; moderation becomes effective only when translated into participatory learning practices.

The implementation of project-based learning with interfaith themes supports constructivist views of attitude formation (Walgito, 2003), which posit that attitudes are shaped through social interaction and experiential engagement. Activities such as interfaith discussions, anti-bullying campaigns related to SARA issues, and research on places of worship demonstrate that moderation is internalized through collaborative action. This finding resonates with Yaqin's (2005) argument on multicultural education, which emphasizes cross-cultural understanding as a foundation for democratic coexistence. Furthermore, Futaqi (2018) and Ma'sum (2024) highlight that *wasathiyah* in the Qur'anic perspective entails active justice and openness in social relations—principles reflected in the observed school practices.

Cooperation between PAI teachers and teachers of other religions extends previous research that primarily focuses on teacher exemplarity (Lubis, 2016) or curriculum policy (Lartutul & Fahrany, 2026). The findings suggest that cross-religious teacher collaboration functions as an institutional model of moderation, where inclusivity is not merely taught but structurally enacted. This supports the Ministry of Religious Affairs' (2019) framework, which identifies tolerance and anti-violence as core indicators of religious moderation. By modeling cooperation across religious lines, teachers provide students with practical demonstrations of peaceful coexistence.

However, the identified barriers—particularly family influence and social media exposure—indicate that moderation education operates within a broader social ecosystem. According to Meiyanto (1993), social attitudes are shaped not only by formal education but also by environmental reinforcement. The influence of digital media further complicates this dynamic. Ramadhan (2021) argues that the rapid circulation of unverified information on social media may strengthen exclusivist narratives and weaken critical reflection. Similarly,

Muchtar (2025) notes that radical discourse often spreads through engineered political and digital channels, affecting youth perceptions. These insights confirm that school-based moderation initiatives must be complemented by digital literacy programs and family engagement strategies.

Overall, the findings contribute to the broader discourse on religious moderation in Indonesia (Yunus & Salim, 2020; Pettalongi, 2019) by demonstrating that effective moderation in pluralistic schools requires an integrated approach combining curriculum design, collaborative pedagogy, institutional culture, and external social support. The contrasting majority–minority compositions of the two schools further highlight that moderation strategies must be context-sensitive rather than uniform. In this regard, the study reinforces Shihab's (2019) interpretation of *wasathiyah* as a dynamic principle that adapts to social realities while maintaining ethical balance.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the formation of religious moderation attitudes at Kartika I–2 High School and Free Methodist High School in Medan has been effectively implemented through an integrated and collaborative approach involving curriculum design, pedagogy, institutional culture, and inter-teacher cooperation. The integration of moderation values into the curriculum, project-based learning activities, and inclusive extracurricular programs plays a significant role in fostering students' understanding of tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. In particular, collaboration among teachers of different religious subjects emerges as a central mechanism for strengthening moderation values, as such cooperation not only broadens students' perspectives but also models interfaith dialogue and respect in practical and observable ways. An inclusive school culture further reinforces these values by creating a safe and supportive environment for interaction among students from diverse religious backgrounds.

Despite these positive outcomes, external influences—especially unsupportive family environments and exposure to intolerant narratives through social media—remain significant challenges. These findings indicate that the success of religious moderation education cannot rely solely on school-based interventions but requires broader systemic support involving families, communities, and digital environments. Strengthening partnerships among schools, parents, and community stakeholders, along with the implementation of critical digital literacy programs, is therefore essential to counter radical and exclusionary discourses that may undermine educational efforts.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of a contextual model of religious moderation in pluralistic educational settings, particularly in institutions with contrasting majority–minority compositions. It demonstrates that moderation is not a fixed pedagogical formula but a context-sensitive process shaped by institutional culture, collaborative teaching practices, and socio-environmental influences. Practically, the findings affirm the strategic role of schools as agents of social transformation capable of nurturing tolerant, inclusive, and socially responsible generations. Accordingly, educational institutions are encouraged to strengthen curriculum integration of moderation values across subjects, expand interfaith extracurricular activities, and promote structured collaboration among teachers of different religious backgrounds. Continuous professional development for educators in inclusive pedagogy and interreligious dialogue is also essential.

Furthermore, active parental involvement and community participation should be fostered through seminars, forums, and collaborative social initiatives so that moderation values cultivated in schools are reinforced within the home and community environments. Future research is recommended to examine the long-term impact of religious moderation education on students' attitudes and behavior beyond schooling, as well as to conduct comparative studies across diverse sociocultural contexts. Investigating the role of digital media and information literacy in shaping students' religious perspectives also represents an important direction for subsequent research, given the increasing influence of online environments on youth identity formation.

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