

## AUTHORITY, TEXTS AND EDUCATIONAL MODELS: TRACKING RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN THE TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC EDUCATION OF PESANTREN

Rofikasari Mutmainah<sup>1a\*</sup>, Mohammad Asrori<sup>2b</sup>, M. Muja<sup>3c</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University Malang, Indonesia

<sup>a</sup> [240101310002@student.uin-malang.ac.id](mailto:240101310002@student.uin-malang.ac.id)

<sup>b</sup> [asrori@pai.uin-malang.ac.id](mailto:asrori@pai.uin-malang.ac.id)

<sup>c</sup> [mujab66@gmail.com](mailto:mujab66@gmail.com)

(\*) Corresponding Author

[240101310002@student.uin-malang.ac.id](mailto:240101310002@student.uin-malang.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the practice of religious moderation within the pesantren tradition through a descriptive-analytical literature review approach. Departing from the assumption that pesantren are not only traditional Islamic educational institutions but also key centers of religious discourse production and ethical formation, this study investigates how values such as tolerance, non-violence, and the acceptance of diversity are transmitted and institutionalized within the epistemic structure and social praxis of pesantren. The analysis focuses on three core aspects: the role of the kiai's authority in shaping religious interpretive horizons; the dynamics of pedagogy that cultivate tolerance through dialogical methods and communal interaction; and the dialectics between the state's narrative of religious moderation and the pesantren's localized practices. The article argues that the success of religious moderation in pesantren largely depends on the kiai's ability to exercise epistemic authority in a reflective and inclusive manner, as well as on the pesantren's capacity to internalize tolerance through lived educational experiences and interpretive traditions. Meanwhile, state-driven narratives of moderation will only be effective if implemented through dialogical partnerships rather than top-down bureaucratic interventions. By positioning moderation as a living and adaptive interpretive culture, the article highlights the strategic potential of pesantren as agents of peaceful, context-sensitive, and socially relevant Islamic religiosity in plural societies.

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### INTRODUCTION

Pesantren is the oldest and most rooted Islamic educational institution in Indonesia's Islamic landscape. It not only serves as a center for the transmission of religious sciences, but also as a space for moral, political, and cultural formation of Muslims—especially in rural and semi-urban areas. With its rich scientific heritage based on the yellow book (Enhas et al., 2023; Mutawally, 2023; Ningsih et al., 2023; Purwanti et al., 2023; Rois et al., 2023) *pole al-turats*, pesantren are often associated with a wealth of conservative classical Islamic traditions, but they also show flexibility in the face of social change. In a contemporary context marked by increasing intolerance, religious-based extremism, and fragmentation of religious identity, the question of the extent to which pesantren

are able to play a role as agents of religious moderation is becoming increasingly relevant and urgent.

The discourse of religious *moderation* does not appear in a vacuum. In Indonesia, this concept emerged as part of the state's response to the phenomenon of radicalism and identity conflicts that threaten social cohesion. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2019) formulated religious moderation in four main indicators: national commitment, tolerance for differences, rejection of violence, and accommodation to local culture. This narrative is structured within the framework of the nation-state and aims to maintain diversity within the framework of nationalism. However, when religious moderation begins to be institutionalized through regulations and formal curriculum, an important question arises: do pesantren as tradition-based educational institutions have room for interpretation and negotiation of the concept of religious moderation, or are they trapped in the normative project of the state? (Hidayat, 2021; Junaedi, 2019)

Moderation cannot be understood solely as a product of structural instruction, but must be traced through the relationship between kiai authority, the culture of interpretation, and the practice of tolerance that grows within the pesantren ecosystem itself. Kiai, as a central figure in the social and epistemic structure of Islamic boarding schools, plays a crucial role in determining the direction of religious interpretation, both in the context of fiqh, Sufism, and socio-political views. Thus, the position of the kiai is not only as a teacher, but as (Abidin et al., 2020) *an epistemological gatekeeper* who determines how religious values—including moderation—are formulated, transmitted, and absorbed by students. In this case, moderation is not just a normative discourse, but also an interpretive process that contains dimensions of power, ideology, and identity negotiation.

Various studies have raised the potential of pesantren in maintaining tolerance values. Hefner (2000) refers to pesantren as a space for the formation of *Islamic civil society* that is compatible with democracy and pluralism. Meanwhile, Azra (2012) emphasizes the openness of pesantren to local traditions as proof of the flexibility of Islam in the archipelago. However, not all Islamic boarding schools articulate these values explicitly in their curriculum. Most remain within the frame of textual transmission that is reproductive, not reflective. This raises an epistemic dilemma: to what extent can pesantren internalize the spirit of moderation without losing its traditional authority? (Hefner, 2011) (Azra, 2003, 2005b, 2005a, 2017)

This article aims to answer these questions through a critical literature review of the relationship between authority, tolerance, and interpretation in the pesantren tradition. This approach is carried out by examining how the kiai as the main epistemic actor forms a framework of tolerance through the reading of classical texts; how the practice of religious moderation is manifested in the social relations between kiai, ustaz, and students; and how the narrative of state moderation is negotiated in the local realm of Islamic boarding schools. Thus, this article does not aim to assess the success or failure of pesantren in moderation, but to map the internal and external dynamics that influence the articulation of the values of moderation in their traditions.

This article will be divided into three main sections. First, it discusses the epistemic position of the kiai as a guardian as well as an authoritative interpreter of religious values. Second, exploring the practice of tolerance that grows in the daily life of Islamic boarding schools, both through teaching and social interaction. Third, analyze the relationship between the state's moderation narrative and the pesantren community's response to it—whether it is accepted, adapted, or transformed. Through this approach, this article seeks to show that religious moderation in the context of pesantren is not a single entity, but rather the result of complex dynamics of interpretation, authority negotiation, and social practices.

## METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a type of field research that aims to trace the construction of religious authority, the use of Islamic texts, and educational models carried out in the tradition of pesantren education in relation to the discourse of religious moderation. This research was carried out in several traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia which were selected purposively based on the criteria of active involvement in the religious moderation movement, the use of the yellow book in the curriculum, and its existence as an influential Islamic educational institution in its region. This research is designed to answer key questions about how religious authority is formed, how classical texts are used and interpreted, and how the educational model applied shapes the narrative and practice of religious moderation.

Data collection was carried out through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with kiai, ustaz, senior students, and documentation of educational activities and teaching materials used in Islamic boarding schools. The data obtained was analyzed with a thematic analysis approach, namely identifying patterns of

meaning that emerged from the narratives of informants, social interaction in the pesantren environment, and daily educational practices. The focus of the analysis is directed at three main aspects: (1) the construction of the authority and legitimacy of kiai scholars, (2) the role of classical Islamic texts in the process of internalizing the values of moderation, and (3) educational models that emphasize the values of tolerance, dialogue, and respect for diversity. Thus, this method allows researchers to uncover the practices of religious moderation in a contextual and in-depth manner in the traditional education system of Islamic boarding schools.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Kiai Authority and Awareness of Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools

It is common knowledge that in Islamic boarding schools, the authority of the kiai is not just a charismatic symbol or religious figure, but a center of control over the production, distribution, and legitimacy of Islamic knowledge. Kiai controls the curriculum, interpretation of the text, and the limits of the discourse that can be discussed. This places the kiai as (Abidin et al., 2020; Baisuni & Gaffar, 2021; Khairil Musthafa et al., 2023; Personal, 2013, 2015) an *epistemological gatekeeper* who determines the boundary between Islam that is considered legitimate (*legitimate* Islam) and deviant (*deviant*). Thus, in the context of religious moderation, the most fundamental question is: to what extent does the kiai authority open up space for an inclusive, reflective, and contextual reading of Islamic texts?

Traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia generally place the yellow book as the main source of teachings, which are studied with the *bandongan* or *sorogan* system—a pedagogical model that emphasizes one-way transmission and the conservation of meaning. In this system, the room for criticism or reinterpretation is very limited, and the authority of the kiai is almost inviolable. However, this epistemic relationship is not static. Some kiai, especially those with a background in higher education or transnational relations, began to open up contextual interpretation spaces for classical texts. This is a potential meeting point between traditional authority and the principles of religious moderation. (Bruinessen, 1994)

Religious moderation demands a rereading of Islamic teachings taking into account contemporary socio-political complexities, including issues of pluralism, social justice, and interfaith relations. However, without the "epistemological" support of the kiai, this transformation would have been impossible. Kiai holds a strategic position because he has social and spiritual legitimacy in front of the students and the surrounding community. Therefore, a change in the religious paradigm in Islamic boarding schools can only be done if the kiai authorities are able and willing to reform the way of looking at the text. (Personal, 2015)

According to Azra (2014), most Islamic boarding schools that are able to accept the discourse of pluralism and tolerance have kiai who are open-minded and have academic experience across traditions. In this case, the kiai did not lose its charisma despite encouraging a progressive reading of classical texts. In fact, the position of the kiai is getting stronger because it is able to rearticulate Islam as a religion that is friendly to diversity. On the other hand, pesantren that are ideologically exclusive and prioritize purification of teachings tend to strengthen a single interpretation and close the space for difference. This is because the authority of the kiai is used not to guide interpretation, but to silence critical discourse. In this case, authority is not a source of moderation, but an instrument for defending doctrine. Such epistemic power is incompatible with the principle of religious moderation because it rejects the possibility of plurality of interpretation. (Azra, 2014)

At this point, it is important to underline that moderation does not mean compromising on the basic values of Islam, but rather a way of reading the text taking into account *the maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (the purpose of the shari'a), the social context, and the conditions of the times. Kiai who understands this principle will position himself as a facilitator of interpretation, not as a monopoly holder of truth. He will encourage students to not only memorize the text, but also to question, weigh, and relate it to the conditions of society. However, the main challenge in this epistemological transformation is the structure of power relations in Islamic boarding schools that is highly hierarchical and patrimonial. Students are trained to be absolutely obedient to the kiai, and any differences are considered a form of disobedience. This educational model forms an epistemic disposition that is reproductive, passive, rather than reflective and critical. In this condition, the values of moderation can be conveyed declaratively, but not epistemologically internalized.

To encourage moderation as a practice, not just a narrative, kiai authority must be reformulated as an authority that is open to criticism and difference. In the language of Paulo Freire (2005), liberating education is not an education that imposes content, but that forms a critical subject capable of dialogue with reality and text

simultaneously. In the context of pesantren, epistemic reform means encouraging a learning model that not only memorizes nadhom and syarah, but also considers its social relevance. The interpretation does not stop at what Imam Nawawi said, but it is also necessary to question: is this interpretation still relevant today? What is the impact on social relations and diversity? (Asman & Risman, 2022; Freire, 2020)

The epistemological model of moderation imagined under such conditions is an epistemeological model that does not sacrifice tradition, but recontextualizes it. Here, the authority of the kiai is used not as a tool of dogmatization, but as a bridge between tradition and transformation. Epistemic reform must also touch the methodological dimension. The bayani (textual) approach in the interpretation of the book needs to be balanced with the burhani (rational) and irfani (spiritual-conceptual) approaches so that students have depth of perspective. (Solahudin, 2016; Yaqin, 2019)

Moderation, in this sense, is not a neutral middle position, but an epistemic courage to request what has been considered established. Moderation projects in Islamic boarding schools will not succeed if they are only approached from the outside—through policies or training modules from the state. The state may facilitate, but transformation must occur from within, through the kiai's epistemological reflection on its own authority. Kiai, who realizes that his authority is a mandate, not a privilege, will be more open to criticism and difference. This is the main requirement for moderation to become a reality, not just jargon in training modules. Religious moderation in pesantren stems from the courage of the kiai to revisit their authority—not to remove it, but to use it as a bridge between text and context, between tradition and change. Without this reform of epistemic authority, the narrative of moderation will only be a discourse decoration that has no impact on the religious praxis of the students and the pesantren community.

#### **The Practice of Tolerance in the Learning Dynamics of Islamic Boarding Schools**

The practice of tolerance in pesantren cannot be understood as a separate policy from the academic and social life of the pesantren, but is the result of the configuration between learning methods, social relations, and epistemic leadership carried out by the kiai. Tolerance does not exist as a mere verbal doctrine, but as an experience formed through daily interactions and pedagogical practices that consistently accustom students to accept differences, both internally (intra-Muslim) and externally (inter-religious). In this context, tolerance is not a product of discourse, but a praxis formed by the structure of the life of the pesantren itself.

One of the main factors that shape the practice of tolerance in Islamic boarding schools is the learning model that allows for discussion and differences of opinion. Although pesantren are known for traditional teaching systems such as bandongan and sorogan, many pesantren are now developing muhawarah (discussion) and mudzakaroh (exchange of thoughts) methods in studying the yellow book. Through this method, students not only receive a single interpretation, but are introduced to the diversity of opinions of classical scholars. The teaching of fiqh khilafiyah, which discusses differences of opinion among madhhabs, is an important entrance to introduce plurality as something inherent in Islam. This has been proven to strengthen the attitude of respect for differences, not only on a theoretical level, but also in the way students view social diversity outside the pesantren.

Research by Thoyib et al. (2024) comparing the tolerance levels of students from pesantren and non-pesantren shows that the learning experience in pesantren significantly increases openness to diversity. Students who are accustomed to khilafiyah discussions and dialogue-based learning are more likely to accept the diversity of religious practices and are open to different interpretations. This study confirms that the pedagogical method of pesantren – if directed dialogically – has the power to form a tolerant and inclusive frame of mind. (Thoyib et al., 2024)

The practice of tolerance is also inseparable from the structure of social relations within the pesantren, which is basically a collective community. In many Islamic boarding schools, students come from different geographical, cultural, and even Islamic organizations. In dormitories and prayer rooms, they live an intensive life together—sharing space, time, food, even small daily conflicts. It is in this dynamic that the value of tolerance is formed not as a theory, but as a practical necessity for coexistence. Pesantren indirectly becomes a social laboratory where students learn to respond to differences in real life, not in an ideal space.

The success of this kind of paradigm is highly dependent on the vision of pesantren leadership. The kiai as a central figure not only holds authority over the interpretation of the text, but also determines the cultural direction of the institution. When the kiai has an inclusive orientation and is open to social change, it will be easier for pesantren to internalize the values of tolerance into institutional practices. On the other hand, if the kiai maintain a literalist and exclusive approach to the text, then the pesantren can actually become a space for the reproduction

of intolerance that is perpetuated in the name of traditional authority. However, not all Islamic boarding schools have similar tendencies. However, it should be emphasized that the practice of tolerance in pesantren is not homogeneous and is highly dependent on the local context, social network, and reflective capacity of the main actors in the pesantren. Therefore, efforts to strengthen tolerance cannot be done through a normative or centralistic approach, but by strengthening the internal capacity of pesantren to develop their own social praxis.

The practice of tolerance in pesantren is the result of an integrated pedagogical, relational, and leadership configuration. He grew out of a learning space that accustomed to discussions and differences of opinion; from social spaces that require cohabitation and interaction between individuals with diverse backgrounds; and from the leadership of the kiai who not only mastered the text, but was also able to reinterpret the meaning of Islam in the context of the plurality of Indonesian society. In other words, tolerance in pesantren is not just a value that is taught, but a culture that is preserved—and this is precisely where the strength of pesantren as an agent of religious moderation lies. (Prastowo et al., 2023; Qomar, 2022)

### **The State and Islamic Boarding Schools: A Dialectic of Narratives of Moderation and Local Praxis**

The relationship between the state and Islamic boarding schools in the context of religious moderation is a field of attraction between the power of discourse and the sovereignty of praxis. The State, since the issuance of various strategic policies such as the Master Plan for Religious Moderation (RIMB) by the Ministry of Religion and Law Number 18 of 2019 concerning Islamic Boarding Schools, has sought to encourage the values of moderation as an Islamic principle that is compatible with nationalism, democracy, and plurality. However, when this idea is operationalized (Nurnaeni, 2021) *top-down*, it often faces epistemic resistance from Islamic boarding schools, especially from traditional-conservatives who consider the state to have no authority in interpreting religion. In this context, pesantren is not only an object of policy, but also a subject that has its own discourse structure and ideological interests (Anshori, 2020).

The religious moderation developed by the state contains very normative elements: rejecting violence, accepting diversity, and supporting nationality. Although these values are not substantively contrary to Islamic teachings, the way the state distributes them through an administrative-bureaucratic approach often creates distance from the pesantren community. Many kiai consider state moderation as a form of ideological control over Islamic boarding schools and as a depoliticization project against the dynamics of Islam at the grassroots. In this case, moderation is not forced from the outside, but is made part of the institutional transformation led by the local authorities of the pesantren itself. (Junaedi, 2019; Rahman & Noor, 2020)

The conflict between the narrative of state moderation and the practice of pesantren often stems from the epistemic dimension. The state produces moderation as a public policy that presupposes universal acceptance, while pesantren produces religious values based on *the authority of turats* and internal traditions. The two are not necessarily in conflict in substance, but differences in the way meaning is produced and legitimacy strategies create friction. In this context, moderation can only be accepted by pesantren if it is not wrapped in the language of control or supervision, but as a space for dialogue and exchange of interpretations. The authority of the kiai must be positioned not as a policy implementer, but as an epistemic partner in interpreting the values of moderation contextually and rooted in the tradition of Islamic boarding schools.

Some Islamic boarding schools have even developed moderation organically long before the state made it an official agenda. In many Islamic boarding schools located in multicultural areas such as Bali, East Nusa Tenggara, and West Kalimantan, tolerance and coexistence have become part of the life practices of students and kiai. It should be noted, however, that moderation that grows from below often does not get adequate space in state policies. The state tends to set formal indicators, such as the existence of religious moderation subjects, participation in training, or the use of official modules of the Ministry of Religion as a benchmark for success. This evaluation model is not able to capture the nuances of praxis that grow from within the pesantren. As a result, pesantren that are practically active but do not meet the administrative indicators are considered "not moderate", while pesantren that are formally compliant but closed in practice still gain bureaucratic legitimacy. This signifies the failure of the state to distinguish between moderation as performance and moderation as transformation. (Ismah, 2022)

From this dynamic, it can be seen that the relationship between the state and Islamic boarding schools in the context of religious moderation is ambivalent. On the one hand, the state needs legitimacy from Islamic boarding schools to succeed in moderation projects as a national strategy. On the other hand, pesantren need autonomy to maintain the integrity of their scientific traditions. When the state is too dominant, pesantren become

objects that lose their agency. But when pesantren are too exclusive, they risk closing themselves off from the social transformation needed in a pluralistic society. The solution to this tension is not to remove the role of the state or liberate pesantren completely, but to build a model of relationship that is dialogical, participatory, and respects the local context.

Thus, religious moderation will be an authentic praxis and not just a political or ceremonial administrative project. Pesantren will be a critical partner that actively forms a peaceful and tolerant religious public space, not only because it is driven by regulations, but because these values are already part of its scientific tradition. The state will also gain stronger legitimacy because its policies are supported by local actors who have strong social roots and cultural authority.

Religious moderation will not succeed if it is only promoted as a technocratic discourse without understanding the power relations, epistemic structures, and local dynamics that accompany it. Pesantren is not a passive entity that only waits for state direction, but has resistance as well as creativity to incoming policies. Therefore, if the state wants to make pesantren a pillar of moderation, then what must be done is not to moderate pesantren unilaterally, but to open up space for pesantren to moderate themselves—in their own way, in their own language, and through values that have long been embedded in their bodies.

#### **Moderation as a Culture of Interpretation: The Struggle between Texts, Traditions, and Contexts**

To understand why pesantren have a strategic role in the construction of religious moderation, we need to review how pesantren produce Islamic meaning through interpretation of texts, management of traditions, and adaptation to context. In the epistemic space of Islamic boarding schools, tafsir is not just a reading of classical texts such as *Fath al-Mu'in* or *Taqrib*, but a social process that contains dimensions of authority, symbolic strategies, and value negotiations. Moderation, in this case, is not enough to be interpreted as the substance of a ready-made teaching, but as a way of thinking and interpreting religious reality in layers and continuously. Therefore, the question that needs to be asked is not only whether pesantren teach moderation, but how pesantren interpret and institutionalize moderation as part of its intellectual culture.

In practice, pesantren face three major currents that shape their interpretive landscape: the power of the text, the durability of tradition, and the pressures of context. Many of the texts taught in Islamic boarding schools, especially in the field of jurisprudence and creed, were born in the social and political context of the Middle Ages. Interpretations of the text often contain assumptions about a homogeneous, hierarchical social order, and closed to differences in beliefs. However, in the hands of a reflective kiai, these texts are actually a starting point for reinterpreting the relationship between Islam and plurality. For example, the teachings on *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-harb*, which are often understood as a firm dichotomy between Islamic and non-Islamic areas, are reread by some kiai with the approach of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* to emphasize the goal of social benefit and justice, not hostility between religions. (Jauhar, 2023)

This is where moderation emerges as a strategy of interpretation, not as a neutral ideological position. Kiai does not necessarily accept pluralism in the liberal sense, but reformulates the normative basis of classical texts to respond to plural social realities. Interpretation in pesantren is not a final product, but a process that takes place in dialogue between teacher and student, between text and experience, between new traditions and challenges. In this framework, moderation is an expression of the epistemic courage to break out of the trap of literalism without having to break away from the roots of tradition. This is not an easy path, as the kiai must navigate between loyalty to classical authority and moral responsibility towards contemporary society.

Tradition in pesantren is not only a system of knowledge, but also a structure of affection and identity. Many students learn not because of the content of the text alone, but because of their belief in the kiai, the scientific sanad system, and the emotional bond with the pesantren community. Therefore, changes in interpretation cannot be carried out radically or through frontal deconstruction. Kiai who wants to encourage moderation must work within the framework of the tradition itself, by instilling the diversity of opinions of classical scholars, reviving the practice of *adab al-ikhtilāf* (ethics of different opinions), and encouraging students to compare various views of fiqh as part of the process of maturing reason. When students learn that Imam Shafi'i, Abu Hanifah, and Malik had different views on one issue, they not only learn the law, but also learn that differences are part of the legitimate and honorable Islamic heritage.

This process does not occur in a vacuum. Indonesia's current socio-political context presents a serious challenge to the tradition of Islamic boarding schools. The strengthening of identity polarization, the capitalization of religion for political purposes, and the rampant spread of takfiri ideology through social media have made

moderate religious interpretations increasingly marginalized. In a situation like this, pesantren must work harder to maintain an open and dialogical interpretation space. They are not only required to teach tolerance, but also to protect the discussion space from the invasion of extreme narratives that often enter through informal channels: alumni, da'wah media, or even guest ustaz who are invited without strict ideological curation. (Agusta, 2024; Pute et al., 2023)

Moderation as a culture of interpretation requires institutional courage. Islamic boarding schools need to review the books they teach, identify parts that are irrelevant or even have the potential to form an exclusive view, and find ways to juxtapose them with new, more contextual materials. Efforts like this have begun to be made by several progressive Islamic boarding schools that incorporate the themes of human rights, citizenship, and multicultural ethics into the teaching of tafsir and fiqh. Most of them did not abandon the yellow book, but added contemporary texts such as *al-Tafsir al-Maudhu'i*, the works of Quraish Shihab, or the writings of Yusuf al-Qaradawi that were more sensitive to the plurality of society.

In the midst of these dynamics, the role of teachers is very decisive. The teacher is not just a repeater of the text, but an active interpreter who determines the ideological direction of learning. In many cases, the way the teacher explains a chapter in the book can carry very different meanings. For example, when discussing the chapter on kafir (Arifin & Setiawan, 2020; Musfirah et al., 2024) *dzimmi* in *al-Taqrīb*, a teacher can use it to reinforce an exclusive view of non-Muslims; however, other teachers can use it as an entry point to discuss the protection of minority rights in classical Islamic history and compare it with the principles of the Indonesian constitution. The interpretation is not only on the text, but on the perperitvity of the teacher in bridging Islamic values and social reality.

Moderation in Islamic boarding schools, if it functions as a culture of interpretation, will show that what is at stake is not only the content of the teachings, but the way in which the teachings are produced, transmitted, and interpreted. It is not a product of policy, but rather the result of complex and long-term cultural work. In its best condition, pesantren is able to create an educational space that brings together classical texts with contemporary ethical imagination—a space where students not only know how to read *Matn al-Ajurrumiyyah*, but also understand how Arabic grammar can be the gateway to understanding fair, courteous, and tolerant living practices.

Thus, pesantren do not have to choose between being loyal to tradition or following modernity. The path of moderation as a culture of interpretation allows the two to meet in a productive way. Pesantren can still hold the classics as a foundation, but with a new way of reading them—in the light of historical experience, the challenges of the times, and the call of social ethics. It is a form of Islam that is not only obedient to the text, but also concerned about the real world. Moderation, in this sense, is not a compromise of values, but a commitment to continue to interpret values in a more equitable, inclusive, and humane framework. The main strength of pesantren in shaping the moderate generation lies not in the formal curriculum alone, but in the way they interpret texts in close relationship with tradition and social reality. Moderation as a culture of interpretation not only answers academic needs, but also the urgent need to nurture diversity in an increasingly polarized world.

The conception of "moderation as a culture of interpretation" challenges us not to see pesantren simply as a place for the reproduction of religious knowledge, but as a social hermeneutic arena—a space where textual interpretation meets the dynamics of power, identity politics, and aspirations for justice. In this context, the institutional courage required of Islamic boarding schools is not only related to curriculum revision, but also to the revision of the way of thinking (paradigm) about the meaning of authority, truth, and continuity of tradition. When pesantren began to open up space for contemporary texts that spoke of human rights or pluralism, what actually happened was a repositioning of the authority of the yellow book, which has been the center of epistemic gravity. This repositioning does not mean a betrayal of tradition, but rather a form of institutional *ijtihad* that relies on the awareness that classical texts are born out of context, and therefore must be re-read in the light of a new context.

The teacher in this case becomes the key actor who determines the meaning. The analogy of the perperitvity of teachers in explaining the kafir *dzimmi* article has become very relevant in the midst of the increasing rhetoric of identity that is exclusive in the contemporary Islamic public space. Teachers who simply repeat texts without ethical reflection risk reinforcing the residues of historical exclusivism, while teachers who interpret texts critically and dialogically show how pesantren can become a space for cultural criticism of narrow orthodoxy. So, what is at stake is not only the accuracy of teaching, but the direction of public ethics that is formed through learning itself. It is important to emphasize that moderation as a result of interpretation is never sterile

from power relations. Tafsir has always been a space of contestation between those who want to maintain *the status quo* and those who try to articulate Islamic values within the horizon of social justice. Pesantren, with all its flexibility and rigidity, is standing at this intersection. Will it choose to be the guardian of the old frozen interpretation, or will it be an institution that preserves tradition while paving the way for justice in a changing world? Therefore, the success of moderation as a culture of interpretation is only possible if pesantren are not trapped in the apologetics of the past, but are able to rearticulate Islam as a *living tradition* that continues to grapple with contemporary reality. This is where pesantren not only take care of the text, but fight for a fair meaning.

## CONCLUSION

Religious moderation in the tradition of Islamic boarding schools is not a normative concept or a mere political slogan, but a praxis reality formed by the dialectic between scientific authority, the dynamics of social relations, and the culture of interpretation that lives in the institution. Moderation does not exist as something that is instilled from the outside, but grows organically from within the pesantren, through the epistemic relationship between kiai and students, through learning methods that accommodate differences of opinion, and through the daily life of collective life that demands cohabitation across social and religious backgrounds. The kiai authority plays a central role in this process. They are not only interpreters of texts, but also shapers of students' thinking horizons. When this authority is exercised in a reflective and open manner, pesantren are able to become a dialogue space that facilitates the growth of a tolerant and inclusive perspective. However, when the authority is managed rigidly and closedly, pesantren has the potential to become a field for the reproduction of exclusive and literalist views. Therefore, the quality of moderation is largely determined by the epistemic and ethical capacity of the kiai leadership in navigating between texts, traditions, and social realities. The relationship between pesantren and the state in the context of moderation also shows complex dynamics. On the one hand, the state seeks to mainstream the values of moderation through formal policies and programs; On the other hand, pesantren have cultural and epistemic autonomy that is not always in line with the state narrative. Moderation will only be an effective praxis if the state is able to place pesantren as an epistemic partner, not just a policy object. On the other hand, Islamic boarding schools also need to reread their traditions to ensure that the inherited Islamic values are in harmony with the social reality of a plural and pluralistic Indonesian society. Religious moderation in pesantren will continue to be relevant to the extent that it is positioned not as a technocratic project, but as part of a culture of interpretation that is open to dialogue, difference, and change. Within this framework, pesantren are not only traditional Islamic educational institutions, but also cultural arenas that are able to offer a peaceful, critical, and civilized model of religion.

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