

# THE ROLE OF MODERATE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ADDRESSING STIGMATIZATION AT THE AL HADI ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL IN PEKALONGAN

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**Abstract:** This qualitative case study examines how religious moderation education at Al-Hadi Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren) in Pekalongan, Indonesia, counters stigmatization against the local Shia community. Facing marginalization, community members often practice taqiyyah (religious dissimulation) for safety. In response, Al-Hadi Pesantren has institutionalized a framework of religious moderation within its educational model, striving to balance strong religious conviction with proactive tolerance to prevent extremism. Using in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis, the research found the pesantren successfully integrates moderation principles into its core curriculum. This fosters an environment encouraging critical engagement with contemporary socio-political issues. By applying key Islamic philosophical principles—balance (tawazun), justice ('adl), and wisdom (hikmah)—the institution cultivates student tolerance, intellectual openness, and constructive civic participation. The study concludes that Al-Hadi Pesantren is a potent model for Islamic education in Indonesia, effectively navigating sectarian stigmatization. It demonstrates how classical Islamic philosophy can be pragmatically applied in modern education to advance interfaith tolerance, meaningful dialogue, and sustainable social peace.

**Keywords:** Islamic Education, Pesantren, Religious Moderation, Social Cohesion, Stigmatization, Tolerance

## INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of religious moderation represents a critical imperative for fostering tolerant and harmonious societies, particularly within pluralistic nations like Indonesia, which hosts the world's largest Muslim population. In this complex tapestry of beliefs, the stigmatization of religious minorities, including Shia Muslims, persists as a deeply troubling phenomenon. This stigmatization transcends mere theological disagreement, profoundly impacting individual identity, social cohesion, and potentially escalating into overt conflict. It is within this charged context that Islamic boarding schools, or *pesantren*, traditionally the

bedrock of Islamic education in Indonesia, are redefining their roles. These institutions are no longer solely centers for spiritual and doctrinal transmission; they have evolved into crucial arenas for shaping societal attitudes towards religious difference and navigating the intricacies of modern citizenship.

Al-Hadi Pesantren in Pekalongan stands as a compelling exemplar of this evolution. As an educational institution with a distinct identity linked to the Ahlul Bayt tradition, it operates at the intersection of faith, identity, and social pressure. The pervasive stigmatization experienced by its community often

forces individuals into a state of defensive concealment, with *taqiyyah* becoming a pragmatic, though psychologically taxing, strategy for daily life. In response, the leadership and educators at Al-Hadi have consciously adopted and championed a paradigm of religious moderation. This paradigm is not conceived as a dilution of faith but as its authentic expression—a balanced path that harmonizes deep religious commitment with an equally deep respect for human diversity. This approach is fundamentally preventative, seeking to inoculate the community against the virulent strains of extremism and radicalism by providing a robust, intellectually sound, and spiritually grounded alternative.

The philosophical underpinnings of this approach are deeply rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition. The principles of *tawazun* (balance), *'adl* (justice), and *hikmah* (wisdom) are not merely abstract concepts taught in classrooms but are operationalized as guiding ethos for the pesantren's pedagogical and social engagements. *Tawazun* ensures that religious fervor is tempered with compassion and reason, preventing dogmatic excess. *'Adl* demands fair and equitable treatment of all, regardless of sectarian affiliation, thereby directly challenging the injustices of stigmatization. *Hikmah* provides the practical wisdom to navigate complex social realities, knowing when to speak, when to listen, and how to engage in constructive dialogue.

This research seeks to provide a nuanced exploration of how Al-Hadi Pesantren confronts the dual challenge of external stigmatization and the internal need for authentic religious expression. It moves beyond a superficial description of activities to

analyze the strategic integration of a "middle way" political and social approach that promotes moderation. The study investigates the tangible impact of this educational project on the political consciousness and civic participation of its students (*santri*) and the wider community. By employing a qualitative lens informed by the sociology of religion, this inquiry aims to generate profound insights into the transformative potential of religious moderation education. It posits that such education is indispensable for constructing a more inclusive and harmonious society, offering a replicable model for other religious educational institutions grappling with similar challenges in Indonesia and beyond. In an increasingly polarized global climate, the role of education in cultivating moderation has never been more critical. This research, therefore, aims to comprehensively illuminate these dynamics, contributing to a deeper understanding of the symbiotic relationship between religious moderation, Islamic philosophy, and active citizenship as embodied by Al-Hadi Pesantren in Pekalongan.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of religious stigmatization, particularly against minority sects such as Shia Muslims, constitutes a complex social problem that intersects the domains of sociology, religious studies, political science, and education. This review synthesizes existing scholarship on religious stigmatization, the concept and practice of religious moderation, and the evolving role of pesantren as agents of social change, with a specific focus on the context of Al-Hadi Pesantren.

Stigmatization, as conceptualized by Erving Goffman, is a powerful social process that reduces an individual from a whole person to a tainted, discounted one based on a

specific attribute—in this case, religious belief. For Shia Muslims in predominantly Sunni environments, this stigmatization can manifest as social ostracism, economic discrimination, and even physical threat. This environment of hostility often necessitates the practice of *taqiyyah*, a doctrine permitting the concealment of one's faith under duress. Scholars like Hamid Mavani have explored *taqiyyah* not merely as a theological tenet but as a sociologically significant survival strategy, highlighting the profound psychological and social pressures faced by stigmatized communities. This body of work underscores how stigma forces minority groups into a defensive posture, impairing open expression and full participation in public life.

In response to such sectarian tensions, the discourse on religious moderation has gained significant traction globally. Philosophers like Seyyed Hossein Nasr have long argued for a perennial philosophy within Islam that emphasizes its universal, inclusive, and balanced dimensions. Nasr's work posits that true religious understanding transcends political and sectarian divides, advocating for a spirituality that fosters coexistence and mutual respect among diverse faith traditions. This theoretical foundation is crucial for understanding religious moderation not as a modern political compromise but as a return to Islam's core spiritual and ethical principles. Contemporary research, such as that by Baker and Jones, further corroborates the efficacy of educational interventions in promoting moderation, particularly among youth who are vulnerable to radicalizing narratives. These studies demonstrate that when educational institutions actively teach critical thinking, empathy, and historical context, they can effectively counter

extremist ideologies.

The pesantren, as a quintessential Indonesian Islamic institution, occupies a uniquely influential position in this landscape. Traditionally viewed as conservators of orthodox tradition, many pesantren are now at the forefront of educational innovation aimed at promoting peace and tolerance. As an educational institution, pesantren may address contemporary Islamic issues and meet societal demands for Islamic law (Zulkhairi et al., 2024). Research by Akhmad and Yasin also illustrates the significant potential of pesantren in fostering religious moderation through curriculum reform and pedagogical renewal. A study by Hasan provides compelling case studies of pesantren that have successfully integrated values of tolerance, pluralism, and civic engagement into their educational programs, effectively acting as bulwarks against extremism. These institutions are redefining their mission, transforming from insular religious schools into dynamic community hubs that engage with modern complexities.

Within this broader context, Al-Hadi Pesantren emerges as a distinctive case. Scholarship specifically focusing on Al-Hadi, such as the work of Alavi, highlights its commitment to promoting Ahlul Bayt teachings through a lens of moderation and ethical conduct. Alavi's research details how the pesantren integrates moral philosophy with religious instruction, aiming to create an inclusive environment that respects intra-Islamic diversity. The pesantren's methodology, which encourages open dialogue and critical engagement with both classical and contemporary sources, represents a significant contribution to the model of "moderate Islam" in Indonesia. It demonstrates that a strong, particularistic religious identity is not

incompatible with a commitment to universal values of justice and tolerance.

This research builds upon these established foundations. It aligns with Goffman's insights on stigma by examining its lived reality for the Al-Hadi community. It draws on the philosophical framework of Nasr to understand the intellectual roots of the pesantren's moderate approach. Furthermore, it engages with the contemporary educational research on pesantren to situate Al-Hadi within a wider movement of Islamic educational reform. However, it seeks to extend this literature by providing a deeper, qualitative exploration of the *mechanisms* through which religious moderation is taught, internalized, and practiced in a pesantren facing specific sectarian stigma. It investigates not just the "what" but the "how"—how principles of *tawazun*, *'adl*, and *hikmah* are translated from abstract philosophy into daily practice, shaping the worldviews and actions of students and the broader community. This nuanced, process-oriented understanding is essential for developing effective models of religious education that can foster genuine social cohesion in pluralistic societies.

## METHOD

To capture the intricate dynamics of religious moderation at Al-Hadi Pesantren, this study adopted a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study approach. This paradigm was selected for its capacity to provide a rich, contextualized, and deep understanding of complex social phenomena within their real-life settings. A purely quantitative approach would be insufficient to uncover the meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences that constitute the core of this investigation.

Data collection was conducted over an intensive period of field research and involved a triangulation of methods to ensure validity and depth. The primary source of data came from semi-structured interviews conducted with a purposively selected group of 15-20 participants. This cohort included senior kiai (religious leaders), ustaz (teachers), santri (students) from various levels of study, and influential members of the surrounding community. Purposive sampling was essential to ensure that the participants could provide informed, diverse, and critical perspectives on the pesantren's history, its philosophical approach, and the challenges of stigmatization. The interviews were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to elaborate on their personal experiences, the evolution of their understanding of moderation, and their views on inter-sect relations.

Complementing the interviews, focus group discussions were held with selected groups of santri and teachers. These discussions facilitated the exploration of collective views, shared experiences, and the dynamic process of consensus-building around sensitive issues. They proved particularly valuable for observing how ideas of tolerance and moderation are negotiated and reinforced within the peer group.

Furthermore, a comprehensive document analysis was undertaken to provide historical and curricular context. This included examining the pesantren's formal and informal curriculum, syllabi, teaching materials, published statements, internal policy documents, and relevant archival records. Analyzing these documents allowed for a cross-verification of the data obtained through interviews and observations and provided insight into the institutional intentionality behind the promotion of religious moderation.

The data analysis process followed a systematic thematic analysis framework. All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts, along with field notes from observations and summaries of documents, constituted the raw data. The analysis began with a process of familiarization, followed by initial coding, where significant phrases, patterns, and concepts were identified. These initial codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed, refined, and organized into a coherent thematic structure that accurately reflected the dataset. This iterative process ensured that the findings were firmly grounded in the empirical evidence gathered from the field, providing a nuanced and robust account of how Al-Hadi Pesantren enacts and promotes religious moderation in a challenging environment.

## FINDINGS

The data collected at Al-Hadi Pesantren reveals a multifaceted and deeply institutionalized approach to countering stigmatization and fostering religious moderation. The findings are presented not as disjointed facts, but as an integrated analysis of the strategies, outcomes, and lived experiences within the pesantren community.

A profound understanding of stigmatization and its psychological impact was universally evident among participants. Educators and santri alike narrated personal and collective experiences of discrimination and social isolation directly attributable to their religious affiliation. One santri poignantly articulated a common sentiment, stating, "We often feel the pressure to hide our beliefs, especially when we are in public spaces, not out of shame, but out of a calculated need for safety and social acceptance." This

revelation underscores the heavy burden of identity management carried by the community and highlights why *taqiyyah* is not an abstract theological concept but a daily social reality. The psychological toll of this constant vigilance was a recurring subtext in many interviews, pointing to a deep-seated desire for a social environment where their religious identity would not be a source of prejudice. It supports Mawardi (2024) who found that pesantren's activities have been successful because of several things, such as the facilities, teachers' preparedness, and the school's encouraging atmosphere (Mawardi et al., 2024).

In response to this challenging context, Al-Hadi Pesantren has developed a sophisticated array of educational strategies explicitly designed to promote moderation. These strategies are not peripheral activities but are central to the pesantren's educational philosophy. A key finding is the deliberate design of an inclusive curriculum. The pedagogical framework intentionally incorporates teachings and perspectives from both Sunni and Shia traditions, presenting them not in a polemical fashion, but as legitimate, scholarly interpretations within the broader Islamic intellectual heritage. An educator emphasized this approach, noting, "Our lessons are structured to encourage santri to appreciate the internal diversity of Islam. We study different *madhahib* (schools of thought) not to create confusion, but to foster a respect for scholarly difference and a more nuanced understanding of our own faith. This comparative methodology serves to dismantle the "othering" of different sects and builds a foundation for intra-Muslim dialogue based on knowledge rather than caricature."

Beyond curriculum content, the

role modeling of ethical conduct by the kiai and ustazd emerged as a critical factor. The leadership of the pesantren consciously embodies the principles they teach, demonstrating through their own interactions the values of respect, patience, and open-mindedness. "We teach by example," one senior teacher explained. "When the santri see us engaging with differing opinions with respect, when they see us prioritizing ethics in our disputes, they learn that this is what it means to be a truly religious person."

The finding echoes Hajar et al. (2024), who found that Modeling behavior in teaching enhances students' internalization and application of concepts more effectively than lectures alone, motivating them to achieve success similar to the modeled exemplar. The findings support Zulkhairi and Hajar (2023), who found that students learn to respect each other and develop social skills through interactions within pesantren communities. Various activities foster honesty, responsibility, politeness, and respect, extending these values to those outside the community. The modeling transforms abstract principles like *hikmah* (wisdom) into tangible behavioral norms, creating a cultural ethos within the pesantren that actively repudiates bigotry and dogmatism.

The pesantren's commitment extends beyond its walls through proactive community engagement and dialogue initiatives. The research documented a consistent pattern of organizing events—such as public lectures, interfaith iftars (breaking of fast), and cultural festivals—that deliberately invite participation from the broader, religiously diverse community. These events function as strategic interventions to dismantle stereotypes and build relational bridges. A community member who

had initially held negative perceptions confessed, "I was wary of this place before. But after attending their events and speaking with the students and teachers, I realized how much we have in common. Their commitment to peace and community service is undeniable." This narrative illustrates a common trajectory observed in the data, where direct contact and shared experiences effectively countered preconceived stigmatizing notions, reducing community-level tensions.

The impact of these efforts is discernible in the development of the students. The research indicated a marked transformation in the santri's attitudes and competencies. Through their education, they develop not just religious knowledge but also the soft skills required for civic engagement: critical thinking, empathetic listening, and the ability to articulate their views constructively. They learn to navigate differences without feeling threatened, evolving from a position of defensive concealment to one of confident, principled engagement. This is the practical manifestation of the principle of *tawazun*—achieving a balance between holding a distinct identity and actively participating in a pluralistic society.

Despite these significant achievements, the findings also illuminate persistent challenges. Participants openly acknowledged that deep-seated societal prejudices remain a formidable obstacle. Some educators reported facing criticism from more conservative quarters outside the pesantren, who misinterpret their inclusive approach as a betrayal of religious principles. "While we promote moderation internally with great success," one teacher noted, "there are still powerful external currents of intolerance that we must constantly navigate. Changing the hearts and minds of the wider society is a slow, generational

project." This highlights the fact that the pesantren's work, while transformative within its immediate sphere, operates within a larger, often resistant, socio-religious ecosystem.

In synthesis, the findings present Al-Hadi Pesantren as a dynamic institution that has moved beyond a reactive posture to stigmatization. It has proactively constructed an alternative social and educational reality based on the active application of Islamic philosophical principles. Through a combination of curricular innovation, ethical role-modeling, and strategic community engagement, it fosters an environment where religious moderation is learned, practiced, and embodied. The students emerge not as individuals who have simply learned to hide their beliefs more effectively, but as empowered agents who can hold their identity with integrity while simultaneously contributing to the harmony and resilience of their pluralistic society.

## DISCUSSION

The case of Al-Hadi Pesantren transcends a mere institutional case study; it offers a compelling model for understanding how religious moderation can function as a dynamic catalyst for broader social cohesion. This discussion synthesizes the findings to elaborate on the pesantren's multifaceted role and its implications for theory and practice in Indonesia and beyond.

The imperative of religious moderation in a nation as diverse as Indonesia cannot be overstated. Al-Hadi's approach demonstrates that moderation is not synonymous with relativism or a weakening of faith. On the contrary, it represents a confident, intellectually robust engagement with one's own tradition and the surrounding world. By grounding its philosophy in core Islamic principles

like *tawazun*, *'adl*, and *hikmah*, the pesantren legitimizes moderation from within the tradition itself. This is a crucial strategic move, as it prevents critics from dismissing moderation as a foreign or secular imposition. The curriculum at Al-Hadi, which integrates critical thinking and comparative religious studies, does not dilute students' religious identity; it fortifies it by equipping them with the intellectual tools to understand and articulate their beliefs in a complex world. This process of fortification through education is fundamental to countering extremism, as it addresses the ideological roots of radicalization by promoting a version of Islam that is secure, inclusive, and engaged.

A particularly significant aspect of Al-Hadi's model is its reconceptualization of political engagement. In many traditional contexts, religious education and political participation are kept separate, or the latter is viewed with suspicion. Al-Hadi, however, actively encourages a form of political engagement deeply informed by ethical and religious values. This is not about endorsing specific political parties but about cultivating a sense of civic responsibility rooted in the Islamic imperative for justice (*'adl*). By educating students on governance, civic rights, and social justice, the pesantren empowers them to become agents of positive change within their communities. This transforms the santri from passive subjects of political processes into active citizens who see political participation as a religious and moral duty. This model challenges other religious institutions to consider how they can prepare their adherents not just for the afterlife, but for ethical and constructive roles in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, the path of moderation is fraught with challenges, primarily in the form of persistent

stigmatization and sectarian tensions. The labeling of Al-Hadi as a site of "deviance" or potential radicalism, despite its clear peace-building agenda, is a stark reminder of the power of prejudice. This external stigmatization creates a paradox: an institution dedicated to fostering social harmony is itself a victim of the disharmony it seeks to heal. This highlights that the work of moderation is not merely an educational task but also a communicative one. Pesantrens like Al-Hadi must continually engage in public diplomacy to correct misconceptions and demonstrate their contributions to the national fabric. Their struggle underscores the necessity for sustained, multi-level dialogue initiatives that involve not just religious figures but also community leaders, media, and government officials to collectively combat the narratives of intolerance.

The integration of religious values into daily practice is where the philosophy of Al-Hadi truly comes to life. The findings show that the principles taught in the classroom are consistently reinforced through the pesantren's culture and its community outreach. The high level of student participation in community service projects is a practical application of the value of social responsibility. The emphasis on conflict mediation showcases the principle of *hikmah* in action—seeking wise and peaceful resolutions to disputes. This holistic approach ensures that religious values are not compartmentalized but become the guiding force for all aspects of life, from personal conduct to social interaction. The character of students is shaped by social interactions within the pesantren community and with the surrounding community, and environmental factors related to learning and communal living also play a significant role in

influencing their character (Zulkhairi and Hajar, 2023). This seamless integration is a key factor in the pesantren's effectiveness, as it creates a consistent and reinforcing environment for the development of a moderate and engaged character.

Finally, the role of Al-Hadi as a mediator and community leader cannot be overlooked. In a society where state institutions are sometimes distant or mistrusted, religious institutions often hold significant moral authority. Al-Hadi leverages this authority to act as a neutral arbiter in local conflicts, particularly those with a religious or ethnic dimension. Its high success rate in mediation, as reported by the community, is a testament to the trust it has cultivated. This role positions the pesantren not just as an educational center, but as a pivotal institution for local governance and social stability. It demonstrates how religious institutions can be proactive forces for peace, filling a critical gap in civil society and strengthening the social infrastructure necessary for a cohesive community.

In conclusion, the Al-Hadi Pesantren model illustrates that religious moderation is a proactive, strategic, and multifaceted endeavor. It involves intellectual rigor, ethical formation, civic empowerment, strategic communication, and community leadership. By excelling in these areas, Al-Hadi does not merely protect its own community from stigma; it actively contributes to the creation of a more tolerant, just, and peaceful society. Its experience provides a valuable blueprint for other religious communities navigating the challenges of identity, difference, and citizenship in the modern world.

## CONCLUSION

Al-Hadi Pesantren stands as a powerful testament to the potential of religious institutions to serve as

dynamic engines for social cohesion and positive change. Its experience demonstrates that a strong, particularistic religious identity is not a barrier to but a foundation for fostering inclusive citizenship and inter-community harmony. Through its holistic educational model, which seamlessly blends deep theological instruction with the values of tolerance, critical thinking, and civic engagement, the pesantren successfully prepares its students to navigate a pluralistic world with confidence and integrity. The operationalization of classical Islamic principles—*tawazun*, *'adl*, and *hikmah*—provides a robust internal framework for this project, grounding the pursuit of moderation firmly within the Islamic intellectual tradition rather than presenting it as an external imposition.

The pesantren's proactive engagement in the socio-political sphere, through promoting ethical political participation and acting as a trusted mediator, extends its impact far beyond the classroom. It redefines the role of a religious school in the 21st century, transforming it from an insular sanctuary into a vital hub for community development and conflict resolution. Despite facing significant external challenges, including persistent stigmatization and societal intolerance, Al-Hadi's resilience and commitment to dialogue have allowed it to gradually dismantle prejudices and build bridges of understanding within its local context.

Based on the empirical evidence and analysis presented in this study, we propose a new theoretical framework: "Religious Moderation as a Catalyst for Social Cohesion." This theory posits that religious moderation, when strategically and holistically implemented by faith-based institutions, can activate a virtuous cycle of positive social

outcomes. The theory is composed of three interconnected core components:

First, Holistic Ethical Education serves as the foundation. This involves an educational paradigm that moves beyond doctrinal transmission to integrate comparative religion, ethical philosophy, civic studies, and conflict resolution into its core. This cultivates individuals who are not only faithful but also empathetic, knowledgeable, and equipped with the skills to engage constructively with difference.

Second, Principled Civic Agency describes the outcome of this education. It refers to the empowerment of individuals to participate in the public sphere as ethical actors, driven by religiously grounded values of justice and social responsibility. This transforms citizens from passive subjects into active contributors who advocate for equity and good governance, thereby enriching the democratic process.

Third, Institutional Bridge-Building defines the external role of the religious institution. This involves the institution leveraging its moral authority and community trust to act as a neutral mediator, a convener of intergroup dialogue, and a collaborative partner with governmental and civil society actors in addressing shared social challenges.

This theory contends that these three components are synergistic. Holistic education fosters principled civic agency, and both are amplified by institutional bridge-building. Together, they enable religious institutions to catalyze social cohesion by reducing intergroup prejudices, resolving conflicts, and empowering citizens, thereby strengthening the very fabric of a pluralistic society.

The contributions of the Al-Hadi model, understood through this

theoretical lens, are twofold. For society, it promotes tangible social harmony by reducing sectarian conflict, strengthening the moral and ethical foundations of the community, empowering civic engagement, and providing effective, grassroots-level conflict resolution. For the government, the pesantren acts as a vital partner in maintaining national stability, offers a proven model for reforming religious education policy, facilitates crucial interfaith and intrafaith dialogue, and serves as a frontline ally in national counter-radicalization efforts.

In essence, Al-Hadi Pesantren illuminates a path forward. It shows that the challenges of stigma, polarization, and extremism can be met not through suppression or isolation, but through a confident, thoughtful, and proactive application of the deepest values of the religious tradition itself. Its journey offers not just a case study but a hopeful paradigm for religious institutions worldwide, demonstrating that faith, when educated in balance, justice, and wisdom, can indeed be one of the most powerful catalysts for a more peaceful and cohesive world.

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