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Promoting Student Tolerance via Religious Moderation: Evidence from Indonesian Multicultural High Schools

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigated how religious moderation-based Islamic Education (PAI) strengthens interfaith tolerance and social harmony in an Indonesian multicultural public senior high school (SMAN 2 Palopo, South Sulawesi). Grounded in Social Learning Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Allport's Contact Theory, the research addressed three questions: how moderation values are structurally integrated into PAI instruction, how these values manifest in students' daily cross-religious social interactions, and how institutional support drives tolerance outcomes. Participants comprised N = 26 purposively selected key stakeholders: 3 administrators, 3 PAI teachers, 2 guidance counselors, and 18 students representing diverse religious affiliations (Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Hindu). Data were collected over three months via 14 classroom observations, 26 semi-structured interviews, and analysis of 12 institutional artifacts, and analyzed using Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña's interactive model. Rigor was established through Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness framework (Cronbach's α = 0.89/0.91 inter-coder agreement). Findings revealed three core mechanisms: (1) instructional integration through contextualized problem-based learning and multi-perspective theological reasoning; (2) authentic social enactments featuring equal-status cross-faith academic collaboration (88.8% positive peer interaction rate) and joint civic activities; and (3) an institutional ecosystem enforcing inclusive school regulations. The study formulates the Integrated Religious Moderation Ecosystem (IRME) Model, demonstrating that PAI acts as an operative vehicle for social cohesion when classroom pedagogy, teacher modeling, and inclusive governance converge.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Global multicultural societies face escalating pressures from identity politics, religious polarization, and digital misinformation, which collectively threaten democratic stability and social cohesion (Attahakul, 2025; Bukhari et al., 2025; Kamraju, 2025; Octavianne et al., 2024). In response, international education mandates

increasingly position secondary schools as crucial micro-arenas for nurturing democratic citizenship, intercultural competence, and peaceful coexistence (Culp, 2025; Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025). This global imperative is particularly acute in Indonesia—the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation characterized by vast ethno-religious heterogeneity under the national banner of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). While structural diversity constitutes a vital national asset, public institutions regularly contend with latent social friction, religious exclusivism, and discriminatory practices among youth (Danial et al., 2026; Saepulmilah et al., 2025; Siregar & Siregar, 2025).

Within the Indonesian national curriculum, Islamic Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI*) holds a strategic yet dual position. Historically criticized for concentrating on formalistic dogmatism and exclusive theological perspectives, PAI is now legally mandated to serve as a primary vehicle for character formation, human rights appreciation, and civic responsibility (Fasyiransyah et al., 2025; Komalasari & Yakubu, 2023). To resolve the tension between doctrinal fidelity and pluralistic harmony, the Ministry introduced the policy paradigm of *Moderasi Beragama* (Religious Moderation)—a balanced, non-extremist orientation emphasizing justice (*'adl*), equilibrium (*tawāzun*), tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), and national commitment (*komitmen kebangsaan*) (Gule & Keliat, 2025; Husain, 2025; Mahrus & Afandi, 2024; Ratnah et al., 2024).

Existing scholarship has heavily focused on conceptual frameworks of religious moderation or macro-level policy evaluations (Alias et al., 2025; Chotimah et al., 2024). Another prominent cluster of studies investigates moderation within homogeneous educational environments, such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) or private Islamic universities (Aprilianto et al., 2025; Azizah et al., 2025; Islamic et al., 2024). However, these studies present significant theoretical and empirical limitations. Methodologically, previous literature suffers from a descriptive bias, relying primarily on self-reported survey data without validating how abstract moderation values translate into observable, real-world interpersonal behaviors across religious divides. Theoretically, existing research lacks an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining how classroom instruction, institutional governance, and naturally occurring peer interaction simultaneously to foster social cohesion.

Crucially, empirical research within State Senior High Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Atas Negeri/SMAN*) remains underrepresented. Unlike private religious schools, public high schools represent authentic secular-multicultural environments where students of diverse faith backgrounds (Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist) interact daily under unified state regulations. Conducting empirical inquiry in High School 2 Palopo—a landmark public high school in South Sulawesi located in a historically multi-ethnic urban transit zone—offers a unique window into local interaction dynamics, localized peace-building practices, and everyday interfaith negotiations.

To address these critical knowledge gaps, this study examines how religious moderation-based PAI strengthens tolerance and social harmony within an Indonesian public high school setting. Grounded in Social Learning Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory by Vygotsky (Zajda, 2021), Lickona's (2022) Moral Development

Framework (Prabowo, 2024), and Allport's Contact Theory (Shamoa-Nir, 2024), this research is guided by three central research questions:

1. How are religious moderation values structurally integrated into PAI instructional planning and classroom delivery?
2. How are this moderation values enacted in students' daily cross-religious social interactions within academic and non-academic school spaces?
3. How do instructional integration and institutional culture structurally contribute to cultivating sustained tolerance and social harmony?

2. METHOD

This study adopted an empirical qualitative case study design to investigate the complex social processes and institutional mechanisms of religious moderation within its natural setting. The case study approach was selected because it permits an in-depth, multi-perspective examination of contemporary educational practices where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred. The study was conducted at SMAN 2 Palopo, South Sulawesi, Indonesia—an institution specifically selected via theoretical sampling due to its diverse student demographic (76.4% Muslim, 18.2% Protestant, 4.1% Catholic, 1.3% Hindu) and its official designation as a pilot regional model for inclusive character education.

Participants were selected using purposive maximum variation sampling to capture comprehensive perspectives across institutional levels. The final research sample comprised N = 26 key informants. To ensure complete demographic transparency, participant profiles are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Category	Code	Count (N)	Gender	Key Demographic & Experience Attributes
School Leadership	ADM-01 to 03	3	2 M / 1 F	Principal (M.Pd, 18 yrs exp), Vice Principal Student Affairs, Vice Principal Curriculum
PAI Teachers	TCHR-01 to 03	3	1 M / 2 F	Certified PAI Senior Educators (8–22 yrs teaching experience; M.Pd and S.Pd)
Counseling Staff	CNS-01 to 02	2	1 M / 1 F	Guidance & Counseling Specialists (B.K. certified, 10+ yrs experience)
Student Council / Osis	STD-01 to 06	6	3 M / 3 F	Grades X–XII Student Leaders (4 Muslim, 1 Protestant, 1 Catholic)
General Student Body	STD-07 to 26	12	5 M / 7 F	Grades X–XII Cross-Faith Representatives (7 Muslim, 3 Protestant, 1 Catholic, 1 Hindu)

Data collection spanned three months (March–May 2026) utilizing three primary qualitative tools designed to ensure empirical saturation:

- Semi-Structured Interview Protocols: Individual in-depth interviews (30–65 minutes each) conducted with all N=26 informants using validated interview

protocols addressing pedagogical strategies, personal cross-religious encounters, and institutional climate.

- Structured Classroom & Field Observations: 14 dedicated observation sessions conducted across 6 PAI classrooms, school assemblies, cafeteria spaces, and student organization meetings using a standardized behavioral observation matrix.
- Institutional Document Analysis: Comprehensive review of 12 official artifacts, including PAI Module Syllabi, Lesson Plans (RPP/Modul Ajar), Student Council Charter, and School Rules Regulations.

To guarantee high academic standards, all draft instruments underwent formal Content Validity Evaluation by a panel of three independent experts in Islamic Educational Pedagogy and Educational Psychology. Expert judgment yielded a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.94, confirming strong structural alignment. Instrument reliability and inter-coder consistency were evaluated by double-coding 25% of raw interview transcripts across two independent qualitative coders, achieving a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of $\kappa = 0.88$ and a Holsti inter-coder agreement index of 91.2%, exceeding established thresholds for qualitative reliability (Miles et al., 2014).

Raw qualitative data were processed using Miles et al. (2014) Interactive Data Analysis Framework, executed through a systematic three-stage workflow:

- Data Condensation: Verbatim transcription of audio recordings followed by initial open coding, producing 142 discrete open codes. Codes were organized into sub-categories based on thematic convergence (e.g., 'theological contextualization', 'peer-mediated conflict resolution').
- Data Display: Construction of thematic cross-informant matrices and structured narrative displays to contrast responses across leadership, teacher, and student tiers.
- Conclusion Drawing & Verification: Formulating theoretical propositions through continuous comparison against empirical field notes.

Methodological trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria (Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability). Methodological triangulation was operationalized by cross-verifying interview statements against direct observation logs and documentary artifacts. Source triangulation was achieved by cross-comparing accounts from administrators, teachers, and minority/majority student groups. Finally, formal member-checking was executed with 6 key informants to validate the fidelity of transcribed quotes and interpreted themes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

To adhere to rigorous empirical reporting standards, the presentation of findings is structured chronologically in direct alignment with the study's three core research questions. Unfiltered narrative data, verbatim interview transcripts, and quantitative field observations are intentionally decoupled from analytical and theoretical interpretations. This methodological division preserves data integrity, minimizes

interpretive bias, and provides a transparent, verifiable foundation for subsequent theoretical synthesis and cross-case analysis.

Structural Integration of Religious Moderation in PAI Instruction

Documentary analysis of Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam* or PAI) syllabi and lesson plans (*Modul Ajar Kurikulum Merdeka*) reveals a deliberate and systematic integration of religious moderation, explicitly embedded across 85% of evaluated instructional units. Rather than relegating moderation to an isolated conceptual module or mere theoretical abstraction, educators organically infused four core indicators—national commitment (*komitmen kebangsaan*), tolerance (*toleransi*), non-violence (*anti-kekerasan*), and accommodation of local culture (*akomodatif terhadap budaya lokal*)—directly into core Quranic exegesis (*Tafsir*) and Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) curricula. This structural embedding ensures that foundational religious principles are consistently juxtaposed with pluralistic civic values, cultivating a nuanced normative framework within the formal curriculum.

Complementing these instructional designs, field observations across 14 classroom sessions illuminated two predominant pedagogical mechanisms driving the practical operationalization of religious moderation: contextual problem-based discussions and multi-perspective theological reasoning. Teachers systematically utilized real-world socio-religious dilemmas to transition students from passive doctrinal reception to active contextual problem-solving. Furthermore, by introducing multi-perspective theological reasoning, educators encouraged students to critically engage with diverse interpretive traditions (*ikhtilaf*) within Islamic scholarship. This dual pedagogical approach effectively bridges the gap between prescribed policy and classroom practice, fostering critical analytical skills alongside moderate religious dispositions among learners.

"We do not teach religion in a vacuum. When discussing Sura Al-Hujurat (13) regarding human diversity, I explicitly ask students how this applies to our school cafeteria where Muslim and Christian students sit together. I emphasize that Islam commands justice ('adl) and kindness (ihsān) to all human beings, regardless of their faith." — (TCHR-01, Senior PAI Educator)

Observational logs confirmed that Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam* or PAI) educators deliberately contextualized and reframed classical Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) concepts to reinforce contemporary moderate values. Specifically, during instructional units covering social transactions (*mu'āmalah*), teachers systematically highlighted historical precedents of peaceful interfaith cooperation and civic engagement during the Prophet's Medina era, drawing explicit parallels to modern pluralistic realities. As detailed in Table 2, a quantitative breakdown illustrates the frequency and proportion of specific moderation indicators—ranging from tolerance to cultural accommodation—observed across the 14 classroom sessions, underscoring a consistent operationalization of moderate pedagogy in daily practice.

Table 2. The Quantitative Breakdown of Observed Moderation Indicators

Moderation Indicator	Observed Frequency (N=14)	Percentage (%)	Primary Pedagogical Execution
Mutual Respect & Tolerance (Tasāmuḥ)	14 / 14 sessions	100.0%	Group discussions on religious freedom & mutual respect
Justice & Balance ('Adl & Tawāzun)	12 / 14 sessions	85.7%	Case studies evaluating fairness in multi-religious societies
Anti-Violence & Civil Dialogue	11 / 14 sessions	78.6%	Analysis of digital hate speech and anti-radicalism debates
Cultural Accommodation & Civic Loyalty	10 / 14 sessions	71.4%	Exploration of local Bugis-Palopo heritage & national unity

¹⁴ As outlined in Table 2, the empirical data demonstrates a pervasive integration of religious moderation principles across the 14 observed instructional sessions, with Mutual Respect & Tolerance (*Tasāmuḥ*) emerging as the most dominant indicator (100.0%, $n = 14$). This indicator was universally operationalized through collaborative group discussions centered on religious freedom and pluralistic co-existence. Furthermore, Justice & Balance (*'Adl & Tawāzun*) was systematically articulated in 85.7% of sessions ($n = 12$), primarily executed via real-world case studies that evaluated socio-ethical fairness within multi-religious societies. The high prevalence of these core dimensions suggests that educators prioritized foundational ethical values and cognitive frameworks essential for navigating contemporary interfaith dynamics before addressing broader societal challenges.

In contrast, indicators requiring higher-order critical engagement and contextual synthesis were operationalized with slightly lower, yet substantial, frequencies. Anti-Violence and Civil Dialogue was observed in 78.6% of sessions ($n = 11$), deployed predominantly through critical analyses of digital hate speech and anti-radicalism debates to foster peaceful conflict resolution skills. Meanwhile, Cultural Accommodation & Civic Loyalty was documented in 71.4% of sessions ($n = 10$), executed through the exploration of local Bugis-Palopo cultural heritage alongside broader narratives of national unity. Collectively, these empirical findings illustrate a structured pedagogical progression—moving from universal Islamic principles of tolerance and justice toward localized cultural integration and proactive counter-extremism dialogues within the Islamic Religious Education (*PAI*) classroom environment.

Manifestation of Moderation in Student Social Interactions

Observational data gathered across non-academic campus environments—including school grounds, dining facilities, library facilities, and extracurricular assemblies—demonstrated substantial levels of spontaneous interfaith social integration. Quantitative analysis of student group dynamics revealed that out of 45 observed peer clusters, 40 (88.8%) exhibited mixed-faith compositions actively participating in collaborative learning activities or informal socialization. Crucially, qualitative interactions

confirmed that non-Muslim students experienced a pronounced sense of psychological safety and social validation within the broader school ecosystem, underscoring an inclusive institutional culture that extends beyond formal classroom instruction.

"As a Protestant student, I initially felt anxious attending a public school with a strong Islamic majority. However, during group assignments, my Muslim classmates never isolate us. In fact, during Friday prayers, our Muslim peers perform congregational prayer while we utilize the library for self-study. We routinely study together for end-of-semester exams without any religious barriers." — (STD-11, Grade XI Protestant Student)

Interfaith collaboration was systematically embedded within student governance and leadership architecture. The Student Executive Council (*Organisasi Siswa Intra Sekolah* or OSIS) organizational framework explicitly mandates cross-religious representation, ensuring institutional equity across student body demographics. Empirical observations confirmed that minority student leaders held strategic executive portfolios, actively directing major campus event planning and managing community outreach initiatives. This deliberate inclusion within governance structures transcends symbolic tokenism, serving as a functional mechanism for institutionalizing pluralism and empowering minority leadership in extracurricular governance.

"In OSIS, we do not divide committees by religion. During the Ramadhan Charity Drive, non-Muslim committee members actively organized logistics and food distribution for underprivileged local families. Conversely, Muslim students assisted in preparing logistics for the Christmas campus gathering. It is an established reciprocal culture here." — (STD-02, OSIS Vice President (Muslim))

Institutional Support and Fostering Social Harmony

Triangulation of qualitative data from administrative interviews and official policy documentation confirms that the pedagogical success of religious moderation is fundamentally sustained by a supportive, inclusive institutional ecosystem. At the structural level, High School 2 Palopo enforces rigorous anti-discrimination school bylaws (specifically, Bylaw No. 04/2023), which establish definitive legal and behavioral boundaries prohibiting religious bullying, coercive dress code mandates, and exclusive faith-based group formations. By institutionalizing these regulatory safeguards, the administration mitigates structural inequities and creates a protected social space wherein pluralistic norms can take root without institutional resistance.

Beyond regulatory enforcement, institutional support is actively operationalized through equitable resource allocation and infrastructure management. School leadership deliberately provides dedicated physical spaces and organizational backing for the non-Muslim Christian Student Fellowship (*Rohani Kristen* or ROHKRIS) alongside the established Muslim Student Activity Group (*Rohani Islam* or ROHIS). This structural parity ensures that religious minority groups enjoy equal institutional visibility and access to co-curricular development, thereby transforming abstract policies of accommodation into a concrete environment of mutual recognition and civic equality.

"Harmonious education cannot rely on classroom lectures alone; leadership must create structural fairness. We guarantee equal facilities for Christian and Hindu student mentoring. If a teacher or student engages in religious intolerance, school administration intervenes immediately through mandatory counseling and corrective action." — (ADM-01, School Principal)

Discussion

The empirical findings provide compelling insights into how religious moderation-based Islamic Education cultivates tolerance and social harmony in multicultural public high schools. By synthesizing empirical data with established social theories, this section critically analyzes the underlying mechanisms, addresses data nuances, and evaluates the theoretical contributions.

Theoretical Synthesis and Mechanistic Interpretation

First, the observed instructional effectiveness of PAI educators strongly supports Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Teachers functioned ²¹ not merely as conduits of theological information, but as primary social models of inclusive behavior. By modeling respectful dialogical engagement and contextualizing scripture around universal ethics, educators provided behavioral scripts that students observed, internalized, and reproduced in daily peer interactions. Second, the findings validate Vygotsky's Social Constructivism: moderation values were negotiated through collaborative problem-based learning tasks, enabling students to construct shared ¹⁸ understandings of civic tolerance within a scaffolded classroom environment (Suparto et al., 2026; Syafii et al., 2025).

Third, the high frequency of cross-religious peer interactions (88.8% mixed-group integration) provides robust empirical validation for Allport's Contact Theory ⁹ (Shamoa-Nir, 2024). Allport posited that intergroup contact reduces prejudice under four necessary conditions: equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and explicit institutional support (Pettigrew, 2021). At High School 2 Palopo, all four conditions were structurally realized: mixed-faith academic groups established equal status; OSIS project execution established common goals; joint charity initiatives fostered cooperation; and administrative anti-discrimination bylaws provided robust institutional backing.

Critical Dialogue with Contemporary Literature

Unlike previous studies that reported superficial or policy-disconnected implementations of religious moderation (Chotimah et al., 2024), this study demonstrates that moderation can successfully transition from abstract policy ²⁰ into lived social practice when embedded in public high school curricula. While earlier research by Aprilianto et al. (2025) and Azizah et al. (2025) highlighted moderation in higher education and pesantren settings, their findings were constrained by homogenous student demographics. Our study extends the literature by demonstrating how PAI

operates within a heterogeneous, multi-faith public school setting, proving that Islamic Education can serve as an inclusive bridge rather than an exclusive boundary.

Addressing Nuances, Challenges, and Structural Contradictions

Despite overwhelmingly positive findings, critical qualitative analysis revealed latent challenges and subtle contradictions during implementation. First, observational data showed minor pedagogical variance among educators: while senior PAI teachers effectively utilized contextual problem-based learning, less experienced instructors occasionally defaulted to traditional rote-learning methods, missing opportunities for reflective dialogic engagement. Second, student interviews indicated that incoming Grade X students initially exhibited subtle peer self-segregation during their first months, reflecting socio-religious segregation from their prior junior high school environments. This indicates that religious moderation is not a static binary state, but a dynamic, longitudinal socialization process requiring continuous institutional reinforcement.

The Integrated Religious Moderation Ecosystem (IRME) Model

To synthesize the theoretical and empirical contributions of this study, we propose the Integrated Religious Moderation Ecosystem (IRME) Model. The IRME model conceptualizes religious moderation as a tripartite system comprising:

- Instructional Core: Contextualized PAI curriculum, multi-perspective hermeneutics, and dialogic pedagogy.
- Institutional Enablers: Equal-access facilities, anti-discrimination governance, and administrative leadership modeling.
- Social Enactments: Equal-status cross-faith peer collaboration, joint civic action, and reciprocal interfaith support.

This conceptual framework advances character education theory by demonstrating that social harmony emerges only when instructional inputs, institutional governance, and peer social enactments operate in continuous alignment. Theoretical Framework Contribution: IRME Model

The Integrated Religious Moderation Ecosystem (IRME) Model demonstrates that religious moderation-based PAI achieves maximum efficacy when (1) pedagogical contextualization in the classroom is reinforced by (2) inclusive school governance and leadership modeling, which together empower (3) authentic, equal-status cross-faith peer enactments across academic and non-academic school spaces.

4. CONCLUSION

⁵ This study concludes that religious moderation-based Islamic Education (PAI) provides a highly effective operational framework for cultivating interfaith tolerance and social harmony in multicultural public high schools. By investigating SMAN 2 Palopo, the study demonstrates that when PAI instruction shifts from rigid dogmatism toward contextualized, multi-perspective reasoning, it equips students with the

cognitive and ethical tools necessary for peaceful coexistence. The primary theoretical contribution of this manuscript lies in the formulation of the Integrated Religious Moderation Ecosystem (IRME) Model, which bridges the theoretical divide between classroom pedagogy, institutional governance, and real-world student social interactions.

The empirical insights yield actionable implications for key educational stakeholders seeking to institutionalize religious moderation. For educators, instructional design must shift from rote doctrinal memorization toward problem-based, dialogic learning that actively contextualizes classical Islamic texts to address contemporary multicultural challenges. At the administrative level, school leaders must enact clear anti-discrimination policies, ensure equitable infrastructure and mentoring resources for religious minority students, and foster inclusive student governance structures. Furthermore, educational policymakers—specifically within the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs—should integrate the proposed framework into national teacher professional development modules and overarching character education guidelines to standardize inclusive pedagogical practices nationwide.

Notwithstanding these contributions, several methodological and contextual limitations outline critical pathways for future inquiry. First, as a single-site qualitative case study conducted in Palopo, South Sulawesi, the findings cannot be statistically generalized across all Indonesian regions; future research should therefore employ multi-site comparative designs across provinces with diverse socio-religious demographics. Second, given the study's three-month observational timeframe, longitudinal tracking is necessary to evaluate whether high school tolerance outcomes endure as students transition into higher education and civic life. Finally, future studies should address the study's reliance on qualitative inquiry and school-centric micro-environments by implementing mixed-methods approaches—utilizing psychometric scales like the Tolerance Index or Intergroup Anxiety Scales—and examining how external digital media consumption and family backgrounds interact with institutional moderation initiatives.

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