

The Concept of Religious Moderation as an Instrument for Moderate Character Education in Schools

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Abstract

Background: Religious, ethnic, and cultural plurality in Indonesia demands an educational foundation capable of preserving national harmony. Phenomena of intolerance and exclusivism frequently seep into school environments, while conventional character education often remains trapped in curriculum formalistic routines that are less responsive to socio-religious dynamics. Therefore, religious moderation (*wasathiyah*) emerges as a strategic instrument to revitalize the orientation of character education, yielding students who are tolerant, inclusive, and fair without losing their religious identity. **Methods:** This is a qualitative research using a library research approach based on phenomenological study. Data sources were gathered from published scientific literature ranging from 2017 to 2026, including Sinta- and Scopus-indexed journal articles, textbooks, and curriculum policy documents. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña as well as thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation techniques. **Results:** The findings indicate that the concept of religious moderation functions effectively as an instrument for forming moderate character. The internalization of *wasathiyah* values is carried out in an integrated manner through academic subjects, the Project for Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students (P5), and a hidden curriculum in the form of school culture. The success of this instrument is supported by teachers' pedagogical role-modeling, interactive dialogue, and an inclusive educational ecosystem. Moderate character education based on religious moderation is proven to build students' mental immunity and strengthen the climate of social harmony in schools.

Keywords: Religious Moderation, *Wasathiyah*, Character Education, Moderate, Tolerance

INTRODUCTION

Education in the era of globalization is confronted with complex social challenges that require individuals to be prepared to live in a highly dynamic and diverse environment. Schools, as miniautures of society, serve as meeting points for various cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. In a multicultural environment, the potential for friction between identities often poses a threat if not managed through an inclusive educational paradigm. Therefore, character education in multicultural schools is no longer sufficient if it merely focuses on universal moral values; character education must also address moderate theological issues to build substantive social harmony (N. Hidayat, 2020). When religion is understood exclusively and textually without considering the context of diversity, schools risk becoming breeding grounds for divisive thinking.

Existing character education is frequently trapped in administrative aspects and curriculum formalisms, thereby failing to build students' mental immunity against the influence of extreme ideologies. In this context, religious moderation or *wasathiyah* emerges as a crucial instrument to revitalize character education orientation in Indonesia (Mulyasa, 2021). Terminologically, *wasathiyah* signifies the middle path,

balance, and justice. Religious moderation does not mean diluting one's faith or syncretizing religious teachings, but rather a mental attitude that places humanity as a common ground amidst differences in belief.

As an instrument of character education, religious moderation trains students to possess a balanced attitude in viewing worldly and otherworldly affairs, as well as tolerance in responding to others' expressions of faith. These values serve as the foundation for nurturing citizens who are both religious and nationalistic (Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2019). The implementation of religious moderation in schools requires a learning design that does not dichotomize general knowledge and religious values. The expected character is a moderate character capable of critically evaluating single-truth claims. Schools must transform into spaces for dialogue where students learn not only about their own religion, but also learn from the existence of adherents of other faiths. Through healthy interactions, social prejudices can be eroded and replaced with a spirit of interfaith collaboration for the common good (Suryadi, 2022). Teachers hold a central role as role models in demonstrating moderate behavior at school. Teachers are not only tasked with delivering material, but also act as value curators capable of infusing messages of peace into every subject.

The challenge lies in how religious education teachers can explain theological concepts without belittling the beliefs of other students. The success of moderation-based character education relies heavily on teachers' ability to create a psychologically safe classroom atmosphere for all students, regardless of majority or minority backgrounds (Maragustam, 2024). The integration of *wasathiyah* values is also highly relevant to strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students mandated in the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*). The values of 'Faith, Fear of God Almighty, and Noble Character' within this profile are animated by the practice of religious moderation. Independent, creative, and collaborative (*gotong royong*) character will flourish more easily if students have resolved their identity conflicts and are able to accept diversity as a sociological necessity (*sunnatullah*).

Religious moderation functions as a social glue that strengthens unity amidst the diversity existing in the school environment (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology RI, 2022). Furthermore, schools must be able to develop a hidden curriculum that supports moderation. This can be realized through educational celebrations of religious holidays, cross-religious social activities, and the provision of representative worship facilities for all faiths. An inclusive physical environment symbolically conveys to students that the school is a home for all groups. This inclusive character cannot be formed merely through memorizing material in class, but through experiential learning in daily school life (Wijaya, 2025).

In the digital era, the challenges of religious moderation become heavier with the massive spread of provocative content on social media. Students are frequently exposed to online hate narratives in the name of religion. Character education in schools must equip students with moderation-based digital literacy. Students are trained to perform *tabayyun* (verification) on every religious information received. In this regard, the instrument of religious moderation acts as a cognitive filter so that students are not easily provoked by movements that threaten national unity (Hakim, 2018). Policy support from school leadership and parental involvement are also key pillars of success for moderation-based character education. Synergy between school and home is vital so that moderate values taught at school are not eroded by potentially exclusive parenting patterns at home.

A successful school is one capable of building a harmonious educational ecosystem, where all stakeholders share the same commitment to preserving moderation values. This collaboration ensures that character education takes place holistically and sustainably (Dahari, Suhid, & Fakhruddin, 2019). Religious moderation as a character education instrument is no longer merely an option, but an urgent necessity for multicultural schools in Indonesia. By internalizing *wasathiyah* values, schools can produce a generation that is intellectually bright, emotionally mature, and religiously wise.

Moderate education is a long-term investment in preserving the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). By prioritizing tolerant and just character, we are preparing future leaders who are capable of guiding this nation toward a more inclusive and dignified civilization (Shihab, 2019). In school practice, however, the implementation of religious moderation is often limited to mere ceremonial and administrative formalisms. There remains a tendency where students and teachers simply ignore differences without engaging in substantive dialogue to erode existing social prejudices. This is exacerbated by covert exclusivism in religious extracurricular activities that sometimes promote single-truth claims, thereby hindering the internalization of *wasathiyah* (middle path) values into concrete daily behaviors and interactions among students of different faiths.

Additionally, limitations in teachers' pedagogical competence to integrate moderation values into general subjects lead to the burden of character education falling almost entirely on religious education teachers. Dualistic attitudes frequently emerge, where teachers verbally support classroom diversity but still exhibit identity bias in school decision-making. Without consistent exemplary leadership (*uswah*) from the entire academic community, the instrument of religious moderation risks being understood by students merely as a formal doctrine, which ultimately weakens the effectiveness of building inclusive character in a pluralistic school environment.

METHODS

Research Type and Approach

This research is a qualitative study using a library research type with a phenomenological approach. This approach was selected because the object of study was not explored through direct field interaction, but through critical, in-depth, and systematic examination of various academic literatures (Mestika, 2018). In this context, the researchers explored and synthesized literature data relevant to the Concept of Religious Moderation as an Instrument for Character Education in Schools.

Data Sources

The data sources in this research consist of data collected from published scientific literature. The inclusion criteria for literature focused on publication years between 2017 and 2026 to ensure the currency and relevance of the study to contemporary educational dynamics. Data sources included articles from Sinta- and Scopus-indexed national and international scientific journals, textbooks on religious moderation, conference proceedings, and curriculum policy documents.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through structured documentation techniques. The data search procedure relied on academic databases using specific keyword instruments, such as 'religious moderation', 'moderate', and 'character education instruments'. Found literature was subsequently identified, sorted, and reduced based on its relevance to the core problem. Selected documents were compiled into a library research matrix to facilitate the extraction of key information.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data processing utilized an interactive qualitative data analysis model adapted from Nufus & Kusaeri (2020), involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Furthermore, to delve into the core content, this study applied thematic analysis referencing the framework of Braun & Clarke (2022). Through this approach, sorted literature was coded according to dominant themes such as

religious moderation, moderate character, and character education instruments, which were then synthesized to formulate a new conceptual framework: The Concept of Religious Moderation as an Instrument for Character Education in Schools.

Data Trustworthiness

To maintain standards of credibility and trustworthiness, this study implemented source triangulation techniques. Triangulation was conducted by cross-checking findings from various literatures written by different authors and published in different journals regarding the same issue. When convergence or a common thread emerged across various empirical studies regarding the effectiveness of pop-up book media, the finding was deemed valid as a foundation for drawing final conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The social construction of Indonesian society, characterized by religious, ethnic, and cultural plurality, demands an educational foundation capable of preserving national harmony. Character education in schools can no longer focus solely on individual morality, but must expand its reach toward inclusive social morality. In this context, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2019) formulated the concept of religious moderation as a middle path (*wasathiyah*) to eliminate radicalism and extremism on one side, and secularistic extremism on the other. Integrating religious moderation into school curricula represents an epistemological urgency to build a young generation that is tolerant and adaptive to diversity.

Literature reviews indicate that religious intolerance and exclusivism are frequently detected seeping into academic environments through closed learning materials as well as school social interactions (Hasanah, 2017). Conventional character education, which tends to be dogmatic, often lacks responsiveness to the socio-religious dynamics of modern society. Thus, rationalizing religious moderation as a character education instrument relies on the need to reconstruct the religious education paradigm. Religious moderation aims to guide students toward understanding the substantive truth of their faith without negating or belittling the existence of other beliefs (Mufi et al., 2023).

Conceptually, religious moderation in character education refers to four primary indicators as formulated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs RI (2019): national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and accommodativeness toward local culture. Research by Kosim (2017) highlights that these four indicators synergistically complement the national character education pillars, which include religious values, nationalism, independence, mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), and integrity. Character education rooted in religious moderation strives to educate student morality so that it does not slip into rigid textualism or unchecked liberalism.

Through the lens of social constructivism theory, moral knowledge and character values are not passively transferred, but actively constructed by learners through interactive experiences in the school environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Retnaningsih, 2024). Integrating religious moderation values provides a dialogic space for students to critically examine stereotypical understandings and build an inclusive mindset. This literature study relies on discourse analysis and contemporary ideas (2017–2026) to explore how religious moderation is embodied as a pedagogical foundation in shaping student character in formal educational institutions.

This qualitative library research positions documents, scientific journals, books, and government policies as primary and secondary data sources. Mestika (2018) emphasizes that library research is not merely text collection, but a process of critical inquiry and theoretical synthesis to discover new scientific paradigms.

In this context, literature published between 2017 and 2026 specifically analyzing religious moderation, character education, school curricula, and religious dynamics in Indonesia was thoroughly examined (Iqbal & Hamiid, 2025). The importance of this study is grounded in the national curriculum transition from Curriculum 2013 to Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes the Project for Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students (P5). Within Kurikulum Merdeka, religious moderation finds a highly strategic contextualization momentum. As affirmed by Retnaningsih (2024), religious moderation acts as a catalyst that strengthens the dimensions of 'Global Diversity' and 'Faith, Critical Reasoning, and Noble Character' within P5 schemes, making theoretical and comparative literature reviews on this topic imperative.

Internalization of Religious Moderation in Curriculum Structure

Internalizing religious moderation into formal school curricula is executed through three main approaches: an integrated subject approach (infused curriculum), standalone subjects, and co-curricular/extracurricular activities (Ilyas, Rosyid, & Hamid, 2026). In Islamic Religious Education and Character (PABP), content emphasis shifts from dogmatic-formalistic teaching to instruction emphasizing maqasid al-shariah (the objectives of Islamic law) and universal ethics such as justice, humanity, and peace (Rohayana Dedi, 2019). Studies by Hardiyanto, Saryono, & Romdani (2025) indicate that religious moderation is not only relevant for religious education, but also crucial to integrate into Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn), History, and Language studies. Through PPKn, religious moderation values converge with national insight and constitutional awareness, leading students to understand that being devout religious adherents directly correlates with being good citizens within the NKRI framework.

In Kurikulum Merdeka, religious moderation is operationally realized through P5 projects themed '*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*' (Unity in Diversity) and 'Build Your Mind and Body'. Research by Ahmad, Pratama, Nusaibah, & Jannah, (2025) notes that P5 offers methodological flexibility for schools to design real-action projects, such as youth interfaith dialogues, visits to various houses of worship, and social collaborations. This experiential approach proves more memorable in students' contextual memory than rote memorization of moral theory in class.

The 'Hidden Curriculum' approach also plays a pivotal role in internalizing religious moderation. School culture, code of conduct, teacher transparency, and tolerance in celebrating religious holidays shape a psychosocial climate that influences student value perceptions (R. Hidayat et al., 2024). Schools that consistently cultivate a multicultural climate in daily activities are proven capable of reducing prejudice bias and identity-based bullying among students.

However, literature searches also reveal structural challenges in textbook design for religious moderation. According to Nasution, Mansur, & Bakar (2024), some PABP textbooks still contain narratives that could be interpreted exclusively or dichotomously between in-groups and out-groups. Therefore, restructuring and revising teaching materials by involving multiculturalism experts, academics, and educational practitioners is an absolute prerequisite for realizing religious moderation as a valid character education instrument.

The effectiveness of religious moderation materials is also determined by a learning orientation grounded in critical thinking. Research by Ardiansyah, Pitri, & Suadi (2026) underlines that students trained in critical thinking to understand religious texts are more resilient against online extremism propaganda. Thus, religious moderation is not taught as a new indoctrination, but as a maturation process of student reason and morality.

The Strategic Role of Teachers and Development of Moderate Pedagogy

Teachers serve as key agents and role models in character formation based on religious moderation. Pedagogical literature highlights that value transfer will fail if there is a disparity between the narrative taught by the teacher and their daily behavior (Guru & Studi, 2022). Teachers who exhibit openness, respect diverse opinions, and avoid discrimination in class implicitly transmit religious moderation values to students.

A qualitative study by Santoso, Aina, Qorri, Maknun, & Muzayanah (2024) revealed that teachers' level of understanding and openness toward multicultural issues varies significantly. Some religious education teachers still possess limited understanding regarding religious moderation, often confusing it with syncretism or dilution of faith (*aqidah*). This condition highlights the need for inclusive pedagogy training programs and continuous capacity building for educators at all school levels.

In developing learning methodologies, teachers are urged to adopt dialogic and transformative approaches. The critical pedagogy approach pioneered by Paulo Freire and adapted into Islamic education by Rizal (2025) encourages teachers to turn classrooms into safe spaces for discussion. In these safe spaces, students are free to ask sensitive questions regarding differences in belief without fear of judgment, allowing negative stereotypes to be clarified scientifically and emotionally.

Leveraging digital media and information literacy is also an integral component of moderate pedagogical competence in the modern era. Research by Rahmawati, Hidayat, & Rahayu (2020) indicates that radicalism and intolerance narratives currently target youth via digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Teachers proficient in digital media literacy can guide students to filter religious information and create creative digital content promoting peace and tolerance.

Beyond religious educators, guidance counselors and school principals play strategic roles in building friendly, inclusive school ecosystems. According to Suherman, Fauziah, Lameria, Supriat, & Ramdhani (2025), school principals act as school-level policymakers determining whether policies are welcoming to children from diverse belief backgrounds, while counselors play an early detection role regarding indications of radical exclusivism or identity-based bullying among students.

The professional synergy of educators in implementing religious moderation ultimately culminates in the formation of school culture. A school culture marked by exemplary leadership, fair treatment, and celebration of diversity serves as a social laboratory where students' moderate character grows naturally and resilience is tested (Sirojudin et al., 2026).

Challenges and Educational Ecosystem Support

Implementing religious moderation as a character education instrument in schools faces complex sociological obstacles. One of the greatest challenges is the influence of the ecosystem outside of school, particularly family environments and social media (Taufik, Setiawan, Pohan, & Utara, 2026). When inclusive and tolerant values cultivated at school clash with exclusive or intolerant narratives at home and in cyberspace, students experience cognitive dissonance that triggers moral orientation confusion.

Another challenge stems from ideological resistance among certain community groups who view the term 'religious moderation' as a project to deconstruct religion or a westernization agenda aimed at weakening faith (Ma'rifah & Negoro, 2024). This polarization of public opinion often makes school administrators hesitate or act defensively in implementing religious moderation programs openly and massively.

Further complications stem from the dichotomy between general schools under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) and madrasahs under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag). Although both government institutions have published guidelines and

Ministerial Decrees (KMA) regarding religious moderation, field-level coordination and operational harmonization frequently face bureaucratic and technical hurdles (Hayati et al., 2026).

On the other hand, solid support from the educational ecosystem is key to the successful formation of moderate character. Active involvement of Parents and School Committees in educational dialogue has been shown to bridge perceptual gaps between schools and families (Amaruddi, Atmaja Tri, & Khafid, 2020). Schools that transparently communicate that religious moderation aims to foster patriotism and humanity without compromising core faith successfully mitigate parental confusion and resistance. Support from Religious Leaders and Community Religious Organizations (such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, as well as Christian, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian religious bodies) is crucial in providing soothing moderation narratives. Involving these figures in 'Guest Teacher' school activities offers authentic experiences for students to objectively understand diverse religious perspectives.

Regional government policies through child-friendly and tolerant school regulations also strengthen the reach of this instrument. Research by Abiyuna (2022) affirms that regions with high political commitment to tolerant school regulations create conducive educational climates, ensuring that moderation-based character strengthening programs endure rather than remaining short-lived trends.

Implications and Moderate Character Strengthening Model

Theoretical implications from this literature study emphasize that religious moderation is an imperative paradigm that enriches character education in the contemporary era. Religious moderation not only strengthens individual spiritual dimensions, but also transforms religious values into social capital that binds national diversity (Soim, Samad, & Ashadi, 2025). Character education that ignores religious moderation risks producing graduates who are academically capable but fragile in managing social differences.

Practical implications recommend formulating a 'Moderate School Model' integrating four key elements: inclusive leadership, integrated curriculum, dialogic pedagogy, and multicultural school culture (Sirojudin et al., 2026). This model positions schools not merely as knowledge transfer centers, but as mini-laboratories for healthy democracy and religiosity for the young generation.

Regarding assessment systems, moderation-based character education requires non-test, process-oriented assessment instruments. As formulated by (Nomor & Inklusif, 2025), moderate religiosity assessment should not be measured solely by memorized doctrines, but through affective and psychomotor evaluations, such as peer assessments, self-reflection journals, and portfolios of students' social involvement in humanitarian and cross-group activities.

Gradually and sustainably, the effectiveness of religious moderation as a character education instrument is projected to shape an Indonesian Student Profile firmly rooted in peaceful religious values and strong national insight. This generation is expected to possess strong ideological resilience against globalization, political polarization, and transnational extreme ideologies. This literature study concludes that the concept of religious moderation holds high theoretical and operational relevance to serve as the primary instrument for moderate character education in formal schools. Its success relies on collaborative commitment across ministries, principals, teachers, parents, media, and society in consistently, holistically, and contextually safeguarding value internalization.

As a recommendation for future research, empirical field studies employing quantitative or qualitative phenomenological approaches are needed to measure the effectiveness of religious moderation models implemented across various school levels in different regions of Indonesia. Future studies should also examine mitigating digital disruption risks to the ongoing effectiveness of character education in schools.

Discussion

This discussion underscores the need for government policy support to legalize and standardize religious moderation programs across all schools. Without regulatory support, best practices identified in this research will remain sporadic. This study recommends making *wasathiyah* values an indicator in school quality assessment (accreditation). Supportive policies will ensure character education has a clear and measurable direction (Ministry of Religious Affairs RI, 2020). These findings confirm that religious moderation is not mere discourse, but a robust operational instrument for character education. By instilling values of balance, tolerance, and justice, Indonesian schools can become pioneers in creating a peaceful civilization.

Moderate character education based on religious moderation represents the future for the integrity and glory of the Indonesian nation amidst enduring diversity (Soim et al., 2025). Within the school ecosystem, religious moderation is found to serve not merely as cognitive material, but as a strategic instrument underlying student moderate character formation. In practice, internalizing moderation values such as *tawasuth* (middle path), *tawazun* (balance), and *i'tidal* (uprightness) forms the foundation for students to navigate differences in belief without losing their personal religious identity.

Implications and Limitations Research

Research findings demonstrate that schools explicitly integrating moderation values into organizational culture succeed in creating psychologically safe learning environments where diversity is viewed as an intellectual asset rather than a trigger for horizontal conflict. Implementing religious moderation as an instrument for moderate character education is achieved through habituation and exemplary role-modeling by all school members. Teachers act as value curators bridging interfaith dialogue through collaborative activities, such as cross-religious social projects or reflective discussions on religious holidays. This process effectively transitions student behavior from merely knowing about diversity to respecting and collaborating across differences. Consequently, students' religious moderate character matures, synthesizing individual piety with social piety.

Challenges arising from heterogeneous family backgrounds can be overcome through inclusive communication, where schools position themselves as neutral spaces respecting all beliefs while upholding principles of togetherness. Graduates from schools implementing religious moderation exhibit higher levels of cultural intelligence, which is essential for adapting to a global society. Thus, religious moderation is the soul of moderate character education, guaranteeing ongoing harmony in a pluralistic society.

CONCLUSION

Religious moderation is an essential foundation for character education in Indonesian schools, fostering tolerance, justice, inclusivity, and respect for religious diversity. The findings highlight that teachers' moral integrity and exemplary conduct, supported by inclusive learning environments and hidden curriculum practices, play a crucial role in internalizing moderate values and strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students. Therefore, educational policymakers should integrate religious moderation more explicitly into character education policies, while school leaders and teachers should promote interfaith dialogue, collaborative learning, and interdisciplinary approaches to addressing intolerance and radicalism. Future research should examine the effectiveness of religious moderation education across schools with different sociocultural characteristics and investigate the potential of artificial intelligence to identify and prevent intolerance among students. These efforts are expected to strengthen social cohesion and contribute to a peaceful, inclusive, and harmonious society.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

P and DI were responsible for conceptualization, theory, methodology, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of results. The authors also drafted the original manuscript, conducted critical revisions, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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