

Religious Moderation in the Heart of Tradition: Analysis of Kiai's Preaching Discourse and Yellow Books in Building a Peaceful Narrative in Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract

This research abstract aims to analyze the role of Kiai's da'wah discourse and the teachings contained within the Buku Kuning in constructing narratives of peace and religious moderation in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools. This research is significant due to the strategic position of Islamic boarding schools as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and the urgent need to instill values of religious moderation in response to increasing intolerance and radicalism in society. The object of this study is the da'wah discourse delivered by Kiai, as well as relevant excerpts from the Buku Kuning used in the educational process within Islamic boarding schools. Employing a qualitative approach with discourse analysis methods, this research includes thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning and in-depth discourse analysis to understand the construction of these narratives. The findings indicate that Kiai's da'wah consistently emphasizes the themes of tolerance, mutual respect, and the active construction of peace, strongly supported by principles derived from the Yellow Book. Kiai plays a central role in interpreting and contextualizing these classical teachings to make them relevant to the lives of santri and contemporary challenges, thereby effectively fostering narratives of peace and moderation within the pesantren environment and broader society. This research concludes that the interaction between Kiai's da'wah and the Buku Kuning plays a fundamental role in promoting religious moderation and building narratives of peace in Islamic boarding schools.

Keywords: Religious Moderation, Islamic Boarding School, Kiai, Yellow Book, Da'wah, Peace Narrative .

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia as a multicultural country has a wealth of culture, ethnicity, religion, and traditions that are very diverse (Rasyid et al., 2024). However, this diversity often triggers horizontal conflicts in various regions, of course if left unchecked it can potentially become wider which does not rule out the possibility of threatening national stability due to disruption of the unity and integrity of national and state life in this country. One form of conflict that is quite striking is that religion is used as a tool for political interests through religious radicalism, Ahmad Yusuf explained that recently Islamic boarding schools as one of the Islamic educational institutions have received sharp attention because they are associated with radicalism and terrorism and are considered fertile ground for sowing the seeds of violence (Yusuf, 2019), of course with the label as a place for spreading religious radicalism, Islamic boarding schools are considered a place that is contradictory to a sense of peace.

The Bali I bombing incident that occurred on October 12, 2012 became the starting point for the emergence of the assumption among the community that Islamic boarding schools are

places where terrorism develops, as if justifying and educating students to carry out violent acts in the name of religion. As a result, the residents of the Islamic boarding school were labeled as an exclusive, rigid, and intolerant group (Baidhawiy, 2005). This incident was based on empirical facts that all the perpetrators of the bomb terror came from the Islamic boarding school environment. Three of them, namely Mukhlas, Amrozi, and Ali Imron, were part of the extended family of the Al-Islam Islamic Boarding School in Lamongan, East Java, as well as alumni of the Al-Mukmin Islamic Boarding School in Ngruki, Solo. In addition, the other perpetrators were also known to have connections, either directly or indirectly, with the Al-Mukmin Islamic Boarding School in Ngruki led by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. As a result, the Islamic boarding school was labeled as anti-tolerance and a hotbed of radicalism.

The emergence of such conflicts can damage the image of Islamic boarding schools, so that many people are reluctant to send their children to Islamic boarding schools. The stigma that Islamic boarding schools are nests of radicalism and terrorism tends to be based on inaccurate generalizations. This can be detrimental to Islamic boarding schools that have

tried hard to maintain their integrity as safe, inclusive, and value-based educational institutions.

The stigma is clearly rejected by the majority of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, especially those that adhere to *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja). As an effort to counter the accusation that Islamic boarding schools are nests of terrorists, various forums and media actively campaign that the mainstream of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia adhere to the principles of moderation and anti-radicalism. Islamic boarding schools that adhere to and teach radicalism, exclusivism, and terrorism such as the Ngruki Islamic Boarding School and its network are only a handful of the approximately 34,000 Islamic boarding schools spread throughout Indonesia (Indonesia.go.id, 2024).

The key figure in a pesantren is the Kiai, a respected religious leader who has significant authority and influence over the students and the wider community. ("Pesantren - Wikipedia," n.d.). Their charismatic leadership plays a vital role in shaping students' values and attitudes, including religious moderation. (Khamid, 2024). In addition, the Yellow Books, classical Islamic texts written in Arabic, form the core curriculum in many pesantren and serve as the primary source of religious knowledge (Thoriquttyas & Hanun, 2020). These texts contain various interpretations of Islamic teachings, which are utilized by the Kiai in their preaching and educational activities. (Nasution, Asari, & Al-Rasyid, 2024). The authority of the Kiai, coupled with the fundamental nature of the Yellow Book, creates a powerful mechanism for the transmission and interpretation of religious values, including moderation. Understanding the nuances of this interaction is crucial. The Kiai is a leader with authority. The Yellow Book is the primary text. Leaders use texts to teach. Therefore, the Kiai uses the Yellow Book to teach, and given the question, this teaching likely includes moderation.

The main goal of promoting religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools is to foster a narrative of peace, tolerance, and inclusivity, both within the Islamic boarding school environment and in wider Indonesian society. (Thoriquttyas & Hanun, 2020). This

narrative seeks to counter extremist ideologies and promote harmonious coexistence among different religious groups.¹ The focus on peace demonstrates the proactive role of pesantren in national peacebuilding efforts, going beyond mere tolerance to the active promotion of harmony. The question explicitly mentions the construction of a peace narrative. Religious moderation, by its very nature, aims to reduce conflict and promote understanding, thereby contributing to peace.

METHOD

This study focuses on the analysis of the discourse of da'wah delivered by Kiai, the central figure and spiritual leader in Islamic boarding schools, as well as the teachings contained in the Yellow Book, classical Islamic texts that are the main curriculum in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools. The object of this study was chosen considering the significant role of Islamic boarding schools as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia that have great potential in shaping the character of students and the surrounding community, including in instilling the values of religious moderation and peace.¹ Given the complexity of social and cultural phenomena in the construction of peace narratives and the importance of a deep understanding of the use of language and interpretation of meaning in the context of Islamic boarding schools, the type of research used is qualitative research. The qualitative approach allows researchers to explore in depth how discourses on religious moderation and peace are constructed and reproduced through verbal and textual interactions in the Islamic boarding school environment.

The main type of approach applied in this study is discourse analysis. This approach allows researchers to systematically examine the use of language in the Kiai's preaching and the Yellow Book, as well as how the meaning of the narrative of peace and religious moderation is constructed, negotiated, and reproduced in the social context of Islamic boarding schools. The main data sources in this study include transcripts or recordings of the Kiai's preaching from selected Islamic boarding schools, as well as relevant

quotations from the Yellow Book used in the learning and teaching process at the Islamic boarding school. In addition, contextual data such as the results of observations and interviews with the Kiai, students, and other members of the Islamic boarding school community can be used to enrich the discourse analysis.⁷ The data analysis techniques that will be used are thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning related to peace and religious moderation, as well as a deeper discourse analysis to understand how language is used specifically in constructing these narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Theological and Philosophical Foundations of Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools

Religious moderation (Islam Wasathiyah) is increasingly recognized as an important response to radicalism and terrorism, emphasizing justice, balance, and peace in Islamic teachings (Nasution et al., 2024). It represents a “middle way” (*wasathiyah*) that avoids both extremism and liberalism, promoting a balanced understanding and practice of Islam (Latifa, Fahri, Subchi, & Mahida, 2022). Viewing moderation as intrinsic to Islam provides a strong theological foundation for its promotion in pesantren, potentially making it more acceptable to students and leaders. If moderation is presented as a core value of Islam, it is aligned with the fundamental principles taught in pesantren, thereby increasing its legitimacy and acceptance.

The construction of religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools often arises from a foundation of textual-scriptural understanding of religion combined with rationality (reason). (Iqbal, 2022).¹ Normative values derived from the Qur'an and Hadith serve as standards for positioning oneself amidst social and religious diversity (Iqbal, 2022). This highlights the main pedagogical approach: basing moderation on Islamic scriptures and reason, not simply imposing it as a secular value. Pesantren are religious institutions. Their teachings are rooted in scriptures. Therefore, religious moderation, in order to be taught effectively, must also be based on these sources.

Religious moderation in the Indonesian context is often interpreted with indicators such as national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and accommodating to local culture (Nasir & Rijal, 2021). These indicators provide a practical framework for understanding and implementing moderation in Islamic boarding schools (Rukman, Rahman, & Wibisono, 2024). These specific indicators show how religious moderation is contextualized within Indonesian national identity and cultural norms, making it relevant and applicable in local contexts. An abstract concept such as moderation requires concrete indicators in order to be understood and practiced. These indicators link religious moderation to national identity and culture.

The following table summarizes the main indicators of religious moderation in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools:

Table 1. Main Indicators of Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools

Indicator	Description
National Commitment	Accepting Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution and its laws and regulations.
Tolerance	An attitude of accepting and respecting differences, and not interfering with other people's beliefs.
Anti-Violence	Reject all forms of violence, both verbal and physical, which are against the law.
Local Cultural Accommodation	An open attitude towards local culture as long as it does not conflict with religious teachings.

Kiai as a Central Figure in Forming the Discourse of Peace and Moderation

Kiai hold the highest authority in traditional pesantren, determining direction, policies, and curriculum (Muchlis Solichin,

2018). Their charismatic and empathetic communication style fosters loyalty and improves organizational performance within the pesantren (Khamid, 2024). Students often show unquestioning respect and obedience to Kiai, making them influential role models (Van Bruinessen, 1994). The Kiai's substantial social and spiritual capital positions them as key agents in promoting religious moderation. Their personal example and teachings have significant influence. Authority figures have the power to shape the values of those under their guidance. Kiai are the highest authority in the pesantren; therefore, they are central to shaping the values of students.

Kiai engage in da'wah that emphasizes tolerance, mutual respect, and the importance of peace (Thoriquattyas & Hanun, 2020). They use their understanding of Islamic teachings to guide students toward a balanced and moderate understanding of the religion (Nasith, 2024). Some Kiai actively participate in community initiatives that promote religious tolerance and social harmony. Kiai are not only educators within the walls of the pesantren, but also active agents in spreading moderate Islamic values to the wider community, bridging the gap between religious teachings and social realities. Da'wah is the spreading of religion. Kiai are religious leaders. Therefore, Kiai are involved in the spreading of religion, and quotes show that this spreading promotes peace and tolerance.

Kiai can act as social mediators, integrating local cultures to foster harmony in diverse societies (Al-Ghifari, Huda, & Haider, 2024). Their leadership is crucial in building religious moderation in pesantren-based universities, especially in multicultural contexts (Fajar, 2024). The role of Kiai extends beyond spiritual guidance to include practical peacebuilding within the community, highlighting their socio-political significance. Conflict exists in society. Respected leaders often mediate conflict. Kiai are respected leaders in their communities. Therefore, Kiai often act as mediators.

Utilization of the Yellow Book to Instill the Values of Peace, Tolerance, and Moderation

The Yellow Books contain classical texts on various Islamic disciplines, forming the core of religious learning in many pesantren (Van Bruinessen, 1994). They represent a rich intellectual heritage and links to established religious scholarship (Hakim, 2023). The deep tradition of studying the Yellow Books provides a strong foundation for the inclusion of teachings on moderation and peace, as these texts often contain diverse interpretations and ethical guidelines. The Yellow Books are the primary source of Islamic knowledge in pesantren. Therefore, teachings on any Islamic topic, including moderation and peace, are likely to be found in them.

Kiai play a critical role in interpreting and contextualizing the teachings of the Yellow Book for contemporary issues, including religious moderation (Nasution et al., 2024). They can highlight verses and narratives that emphasize tolerance, justice, and the prohibition of harm (Nasution et al., 2024). Some Kiai focus on the Yellow Book that promotes Wasatiyah Islamic values, such as love, respect, balance, simplicity, justice, and honesty.³ The role of Kiai as interpreters is crucial. They can selectively emphasize aspects of the Yellow Book that support the narrative of peace and moderation, while providing context for potentially conflicting interpretations. Ancient texts require interpretation for modern application. Kiai are the interpreters of the Yellow Book in pesantren. Therefore, their interpretations shape how students understand the text in the context of moderation and peace.

Some examples of the content of the Yellow Book that promotes peace include texts such as *Ādāb al-Ṭālibīn fī Ta'ālīm Sayyid al-Mursalīn* which emphasizes tolerance and fairness in dealing with others, referring to the example of the Prophet (Nasution et al., 2024). These texts also discuss the prohibition of harm and highlight the meaning of Islam as peace and salvation (Nasution et al., 2024). The concept of loving one's brother as one loves oneself, found in the Hadith and potentially referenced in the Yellow Book, promotes good behavior and moral values, including towards non-Muslims (Nasution et al., 2024). Interpretations of Qur'anic verses in *Tafsīr al-Mauḍū'ī* depict

moderates as just and chosen, reinforcing moderation as a core value of Islam (Nasution et al., 2024). Specific examples from the Yellow Book demonstrate the textual basis for promoting peace and tolerance in Islamic teachings, providing concrete material for Kiai to draw upon in their da'wah. The quotations provide examples of the content of the Yellow Book that aligns with peace and tolerance. This suggests that these texts were a valuable resource for Kiai who promoted moderation.

The following table presents examples of Yellow Book content that supports peace and tolerance:

Table 2. Examples of Yellow Book Content that Supports Peace and Tolerance.

Yellow Book/Concept	Main Teachings/Principles
<i>Ā dāb al-Ṭālibīn fī Ta'ālīm Sayyid al-Mursalīn</i>	Tolerance and fairness in dealing with others
<i>Ā dāb al-Ṭālibīn fī Ta'ālīm Sayyid al-Mursalīn</i>	Prohibition of harming yourself and others
<i>Ā dāb al-Ṭālibīn fī Ta'ālīm Sayyid al-Mursalīn</i>	Islam as peace and safety
Hadith (referenced in <i>Ādāb al-Ṭālibīn</i>)	Love your brother as you love yourself (applies to everyone)
<i>Interpretation of the Maudū'ī</i>	Moderates as just and chosen people

The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools in Promoting Interfaith Understanding and Social Harmony

Some Islamic boarding schools are actively involved in interfaith dialogue to foster understanding and build bridges between different religious communities. (Nadiyah, Rahmi, & Hafidzi, 2024). This may involve inviting leaders and members of other religions to pesantren or participating in interfaith initiatives. (Nadiyah et al., 2024). This proactive engagement demonstrates a commitment to

promoting peace beyond the Muslim community and positions pesantren as an important actor in interfaith relations. Dialogue is a key tool for addressing misunderstandings and building relationships between different groups. Pesantren that engage in interfaith dialogue actively strive towards harmony.

Kiai often teach values of tolerance and mutual respect towards individuals of other religions, referring to the principles of peaceful coexistence in Islam (Thoriquityas & Hanun, 2020). The Yellow Book can also contain interpretations that support positive interfaith relations (Nasution et al., 2024). This highlights the role of pesantren in shaping the attitudes of students towards non-Muslims, countering potentially exclusionary interpretations of Islam. Attitudes towards other groups are studied. Pesantren, as educational institutions, play a role in shaping these attitudes, ideally towards tolerance.

By promoting religious moderation and interfaith understanding, pesantren contribute to social cohesion and national unity in Indonesia's diverse society (Athoillah, Rahman, Firdaus, & Septiadi, 2024). They can act as a stabilizing force in Indonesian society by spreading the ideology of moderation and tolerance (Dauer, 2013). The positive influence of pesantren extends beyond their immediate communities, contributing to the overall stability and harmony of the Indonesian nation. Societies where different religious groups live side by side peacefully are more stable and united. Pesantren that promote moderation contribute to this stability.

CONCLUSION

Kiai discourse, based on the teachings of the Yellow Book, plays a fundamental role in building a narrative of religious moderation and peace within Indonesian pesantren. Their authority, guidance, and interpretation of classical texts play a major role in shaping the values and attitudes of students.

Religious moderation in pesantren is based on theological values, rationality, and practical indicators relevant to the Indonesian context. Kiai act as influential role models, educators, and community leaders in promoting

peace and tolerance. The Yellow Book provides a rich source of Islamic teachings that, when interpreted through a moderate lens, support a narrative of peace and inclusivity. Pesantren use a variety of pedagogical methods to foster a moderate mindset and engage in interfaith dialogue. The values of religious moderation are manifested in the daily lives of students and contribute to social harmony and national unity.

Indonesian pesantren, through their emphasis on religious moderation and peace, serve as vital institutions in cultivating a harmonious and tolerant society. Their efforts contribute significantly to countering extremism and maintaining the nation's social order.

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