



From Concept to Practice: The Reality of Religious Moderation in State Islamic Universities in Aceh

This study examines the implementation of Religious Moderation (Moderasi Beragama/MB) in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN) in Aceh, Indonesia, within the framework of national policy and local religious dynamics. Using empirical data and institutional analysis, the research identifies key structural and cultural factors affecting the success of this agenda. While the concept of moderation is compatible with Acehnese Islamic traditions, institutionalization remains limited due to its exclusion from strategic planning, inadequate funding, and varied reception among academic communities. UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh stands out for its more structured and sustained approach, supported by strong leadership and resource commitment. In contrast, other PTKINs show fragmented, ad hoc efforts shaped by institutional and financial constraints. The study finds that localized strategies—rooted in contextual theology, cultural practices, and credible religious authority—are more effective in embedding moderation values within academic settings. These findings underscore that successful implementation of religious moderation in higher education depends on integrating policy with institutional will and cultural engagement, allowing national agendas to resonate meaningfully within diverse local contexts.

Keywords: Religious Moderation, PTKIN, House of Religious Moderation, Aceh, Islamic Education.

Penelitian ini mengkaji implementasi Moderasi Beragama (MB) di Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri (PTKIN) di Aceh, Indonesia, dalam kerangka kebijakan nasional dan dinamika keagamaan lokal. Berdasarkan data empiris dan analisis kelembagaan, studi ini mengidentifikasi sejumlah faktor struktural dan kultural yang memengaruhi keberhasilan agenda moderasi tersebut. Meskipun secara teologis konsep moderasi sejalan dengan tradisi Islam di Aceh, proses institusionalisasinya masih terbatas karena belum terintegrasi dalam perencanaan strategis, minimnya dukungan anggaran, serta respons yang beragam dari komunitas akademik. UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh menonjol sebagai institusi dengan pendekatan yang lebih terstruktur dan berkelanjutan, didukung oleh kepemimpinan yang kuat dan komitmen sumber daya. Sebaliknya, PTKIN lain menunjukkan upaya yang terfragmentasi dan bersifat insidental, dipengaruhi oleh keterbatasan organisasi dan pembiayaan. Studi ini menemukan bahwa strategi yang dilokalkan—berakar pada teologi kontekstual, praktik budaya, dan otoritas keagamaan yang kredibel—lebih efektif dalam menanamkan nilai-nilai moderasi di lingkungan akademik. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan implementasi moderasi beragama di perguruan tinggi sangat bergantung pada integrasi antara kebijakan, kemauan institusional, dan keterlibatan budaya, agar agenda nasional dapat diterjemahkan secara bermakna dalam konteks lokal yang beragam.

Kata Kunci: Moderasi Beragama, PTKIN, Rumah Moderasi Beragama, Aceh, Pendidikan Islam.

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Introduction

Religious moderation as both a religious practice and a socio-cultural construct in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon. Historically, Indonesian society has possessed strong social and cultural capital in fostering communal life based on principles of tolerance, mutual respect, appreciation for diversity, and fraternal values.¹ These values have organically developed across the Indonesian archipelago and are embedded within all religious traditions, which fundamentally espouse universal humanitarian principles.² Within the context of Indonesian Islam, the concept of religious moderation is articulated through various terms, such as *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin* (Islam as a blessing for all creation), *Islam Nusantara* (Indigenous Indonesian Islam)³, progressive Islam, *Islam wasathiyah* (moderate Islam),⁴ and cultural Islam.⁵ Collectively, these concepts share a consistent vision, mission, and spirit in advocating for a peaceful, just, and harmonious religious life.

Over the past two decades, discourse on religious moderation has gained significant traction both nationally and internationally. The Indonesian government, through the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, has incorporated religious moderation into its Mental Revolution initiative and designated it as a priority in the

2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN).⁶ Globally, similar efforts are reflected in various forums and declarations, such as the International Assembly for Moderate Islamic Thought and Culture (2003), the establishment of the Center for Islamic Moderation and Renewal in Doha (2008), the Global Movement of Moderates Foundation (2021), and the Wasatiyyah Institute of Malaysia (2013). Key declarations, including the Amman Message (2005), A Common Word (2007), and the Mecca Declaration, further underscore the urgency of religious moderation in global religious discourse, particularly as a response to the rise of religious-based extremism and terrorism.

In Indonesia, religious moderation is articulated through four key pillars: tolerance, non-violence, the reinforcement of national identity, and the accommodation of local culture.⁷ The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs emphasizes that this concept is open and dynamic, necessitating continuous study, refinement, and adaptation to evolving socio-religious dynamics. Accordingly, the national strategy encompasses socialization, institutionalization through regulations and policies, and integration into national development planning (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019).

¹ Khairan M. Arif, "Concept and Implementation of Religious Moderation in Indonesia," *Al-Risalah: Jurnal Studi Agama dan Pemikiran Islam* 12, no. 1 (January 31, 2021): 90–106; Mohammad Syawaludin and Muh Sirojuddin Fikri, "The Socio-Cultural Roots of Religious Moderation in Indonesia: A Case Study of Palembang and Lampung, Southern Sumatra," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* (September 2, 2024): 14–30.

² Muria Khusnun Nisa et al., "Moderasi Beragama: Landasan Moderasi Dalam Tradisi Berbagai Agama Dan Implementasi di Era Disrupsi Digital," *Jurnal Riset Agama* 1, no. 3 (December 15, 2021): 731–748.

³ Syafieh Syafieh and M. Anzhaikan, "The Moderate Islam and Its Influence on Religious Diversity in Indonesia," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 23, no. 2 (2022): 177–192.

⁴ Lukmanul Hakim, Aziza Meria, and Sartika Suryadinata, "Religious Moderation in Indonesian Context," *Al-Albab* 12, no. 1 (June 27, 2023): 95–112; Damsy Jura, "Religious Moderation: An Approach of Religious Life

in Indonesia," *Jurnal Inovasi Penelitian* 1, no. 10 (February 24, 2021): 2049–2056.

⁵ Dhimas Febryansah and Liana Dewi Susanti, "Penerapan Moderasi Beragama Dalam Menanamkan Sifat Cinta Al-Quran Di TPA Imam As-Syafi'i Metro Timur," *Moderatio: Jurnal Moderasi Beragama* 1, no. 02 (December 23, 2021): 77–92.

⁶ Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, ed., *Moderasi beragama*, Cetakan pertama. (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019); Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, Rosila Bee Binti Mohd Hussain, and Rahimin Affandi Bin Abdul Rahim, "The Dissemination of Religious Moderation Through the Policy of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs," *QIJS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 12, no. 1 (August 28, 2024): 147–176; Rofiqi Rofiqi et al., "Moderasi Beragama: Analisis Kebijakan Dan Strategi Penguatan Di Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia," *Ulumuna: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 9, no. 1 (June 15, 2023): 16–36.

⁷ Mohamad Fahri and Ahmad Zainuri, "Moderasi Beragama Di Indonesia," *Intizar* 25, no. 2 (2019): 95–100.





In implementation, the Indonesian Ministry encourages Islamic higher education institutions, particularly State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN), to serve as vanguards in mainstreaming religious moderation. This effort is operationalized through the establishment of Houses of Religious Moderation (RMB) within PTKINs as centers for education, research, dissemination, and reinforcement of moderation. Through the Director-General of Islamic Education Circular Letter No. B-3663.1/Dj.I/BA.02/10/2019 and Decree No. 897 of 2021, RMBs have become strategic instruments for mitigating religious tensions, particularly among youth.

The urgency of strengthening religious moderation is further underscored by empirical findings highlighting students' vulnerability to radicalism and extremism. Research conducted by the Center for Religious and Cultural Studies (PPIM) at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta indicates that while young people's religious behavior generally appears moderate, their ideological leanings exhibit radical tendencies in religious interpretation.⁸ Subsequent studies by the PPIM at UIN Jakarta in 2020 and 2021 confirm the dominance of conservative narratives in digital spaces and an increase in violent extremism cases within higher education institutions, including PTKINs.⁹

Despite various institutional initiatives, the implementation of religious moderation within PTKINs continues to face critical challenges.¹⁰ This gap between normative policy frameworks and practical application underscores the need

for deeper theological engagement—particularly within the domain of practical theology, which focuses on how religious values are lived, embodied, and operationalized in real-world contexts. In this regard, the pervasive influence of intolerant ideologies—manifesting in both digital environments and campus spaces—demands more than administrative compliance;¹¹ it necessitates a theological reflection on how values such as *tawasuth*, *tasamuh*, and *ta'adul* are interpreted and integrated into institutional cultures. To date, research on religious moderation in Indonesia has predominantly centered on abstract conceptualizations, theoretical discourse, or central policy analysis, often neglecting the practical theological dimensions inherent in its implementation.

The present study positions Aceh as a strategic and theologically significant site for exploring these dimensions. As a province with special autonomy, a historically embedded Sharia system, and a dynamic Islamic public sphere, Aceh presents a complex environment where state-driven moderation initiatives, such as the Houses of Religious Moderation (MB), interact with deeply rooted local religious cultures. Unlike generalized national assessments¹², a focus on Aceh allows for an inquiry into how moderation is contextualized within a region that both exemplifies and tests the limits of state narratives on religious balance. Empirical studies that critically examine these dynamics—especially how PTKINs in Aceh implement and adapt moderation initiatives—remain notably limited. Therefore, this study aims to address

⁸ Rangga Eka Saputra, *Api Dalam Sekam: Keberagaman Generasi Z*, Convey Report (Banten: Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM) UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2018).

⁹ PPIM UIN Jakarta, *Konservatisme Di Dunia Maya: Bagaimana Mencegahnya Menjadi Ekstrimisme?*, Policy Brief (Jakarta: PPIM UIN Jakarta & Merit Indonesia, 2020), accessed May 3, 2025, <https://ppim.uinjkt.ac.id/download/konservatisme-di-dunia-maya-bagaimana-mencegahnya-menjadi-ekstrimisme/>.

¹⁰ Mastang Ambo Baba, Nur Fitriani Zainal, and Syahrul Mubarak Subaitan, "Religious Moderation:

Concept and Implementation in State Islamic Religious Universities," *Al-Ulum* 23, no. 2 (December 5, 2023): 426–441; Ainal Mardhiah et al., "Legal Implementation of Religious Moderation Policy at State Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia," *PETITA: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Hukum Dan Syariah* 10, no. 1 (April 1, 2025): 179–194.

¹¹ Chusnul Chotimah, Qudsy, Saifuddin Zuhri, and Mirna and Yusuf, "Superficial Implementation of Religious Moderation in Islamic Educational Management," *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (December 31, 2025): 2442235.

¹² Sholehudin Sholehudin, "Strategies and Implementation of Religious Moderation in Islamic State Religious Higher Education Institutions" (2023).





that gap, not merely to showcase implementation models, but to contribute to the discourse on the theological praxis of moderation in localized Muslim settings.

Anchored in the national policy framework, particularly Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 on Strengthening Religious Moderation, this research aspires to inform both scholarly inquiry and institutional practice. Rather than claiming sweeping “substantive” impact, the study adopts a cautious, reflective stance—seeking to illuminate how moderation principles are negotiated, internalized, and challenged within the PTKIN context of Aceh. In doing so, it aims to offer strategic yet contextually grounded recommendations to optimize the function and relevance of the Religious Moderation Houses. Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how theological values can be translated into sustainable institutional practices, while remaining critically aware of the sociopolitical and ideological tensions that shape religious discourse in contemporary Indonesia.

Religious Moderation within the Dynamics of Islam in Aceh

Aceh is a region with a historically rich and complex Islamic tradition. As the former center of the largest Islamic Sultanate in Southeast Asia, Aceh has long been recognized for upholding Islamic values that are not only normative but also deeply rooted in its cultural and historical context. The Islamic identity of Aceh has been shaped through a prolonged process of dialogue between normative Islamic teachings and local practices, which are imbued with customary traditions (*adat*) and the region's unique social structures. Consequently, Islam in Aceh cannot be regarded as monolithic; rather, it is a synthesis of universal Islamic principles and local wisdom embedded within traditions, customary institutions, and social practices.

Within this framework, a moderate or *wasatiyyah* understanding of Islam has evolved. Theologically, this concept is rooted in the Qur'anic verse describing Muslims as *ummatan wasatan* (QS 2:143), which classical tafsir literature interprets as a community that adheres to a middle path—avoiding extremism both in belief and in social conduct. This interpretation was developed by classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn ‘Āshūr, who emphasized the necessity of balancing textual (*naṣ*) and rational (*‘aql*) dimensions in understanding Islamic law.¹³

In recent developments, new challenges have arisen as the Indonesian central government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, launched the Religious Moderation program. This national initiative aims to promote values of tolerance, justice, and balance within religious and social life. Anchored in principles of pluralism and inclusivity, this agenda has been implemented across all religious educational institutions, including PTKIN in Aceh. However, Aceh's special autonomous status and its implementation of Islamic law (*qanun*) place the region in a distinctive position. Known as the “*Serambi Mekkah*,” Aceh has institutionalized Islam within its socio-political structure—particularly after the 2005 Helsinki Agreement—leading to varied interpretations of the central government's moderation agenda. On one hand, the program aligns with the vision of Aceh's PTKI institutions in producing graduates committed to interreligious harmony. On the other hand, it is sometimes perceived as a standardization effort that may undermine local religious authority and the authenticity of Aceh's Islamic interpretation.

PTKIN institutions in Aceh, such as UIN Ar-Raniry, IAIN Langsa, IAIN Takengon, and STAIN Meulaboh, operate within a dynamic tension between localized Islamic identity and the national moderation agenda. As centers for the production and reproduction of religious

¹³ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: Art Printing Works, 1978); Shaikh Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur, *Treatise on Maqasid*

Al-Shariah (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2013).





knowledge, values, and social norms, these institutions serve as both discursive and ideological spaces where competing interpretations of Islam are debated and negotiated. While these campuses are committed to meeting national academic standards, they are also embedded in communities shaped by intersections between traditional Islam, local customs, and political Islam.¹⁴ In such a context, the implementation of the MB agenda faces practical challenges. Faculty and students often encounter epistemic and identity dilemmas—torn between loyalty to local religious authority and the obligation to comply with national policy. The historical narrative of resistance and autonomy in Aceh fosters critical attitudes toward any perceived centralist intervention, even when such interventions promote values like pluralism.

In practice, the establishment of Religious Moderation Houses (RMB) in various PTKI institutions in Aceh serves as a mechanism for integrating moderate values into academic life. Programs such as religious moderation courses, contextual discussions of classical Islamic texts, and interfaith social projects are implemented as part of the MB initiative. Theologically, an effective approach to moderation requires not only textual but also contextual epistemologies. This is where the relevance of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* becomes evident—an approach developed by al-Shāṭibī and expanded by contemporary thinkers like Jasser Auda. *Maqāṣid* emphasizes the ultimate objectives of Islamic law: the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property.¹⁵ This framework helps temper rigid textualism and offers normative grounds to reject religious practices that violate human dignity.

In Aceh—where public caning remains part of Islamic legal enforcement—*maqāṣid* can serve as a framework for legal revision by emphasizing the protection of life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*) and communal rationality.¹⁶ Consequently, jurisprudential methods such as *istinbāṭ*, *istihsān*, and *maṣlaḥah mursalah* must be revitalized to open up creative space for *fiqh* that responds to evolving local contexts.

The role of PTKIN institutions in this theological transformation is crucial. Beyond being academic spaces, campuses also act as mediators between textual doctrines and lived realities. The PTKIN curriculum in Aceh must evolve to include studies in *maqāṣid*, Islamic philosophy, and critical hermeneutics—enabling students to view religion as a dynamic and solution-oriented ethical system. Disciplines such as *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *ʿilm al-kalām*, and Islamic moral philosophy can equip students to transcend narrow legalism and instead understand *sharī'ah* as a system of values and ethics. As Fazlur Rahman emphasized, reform in Islamic thought can only succeed through historical, contextual, and rational engagement with religious texts.¹⁷ In the Acehnese context, this means making room for interpretations that account for local customs, historical conflict, social structure, and interreligious relations.

Contextualizing values such as *al-tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *al-i'tidāl* (balance), and *al-la'unf* (nonviolence) must involve aligning them with local frameworks, including Acehnese customs (*adat*), the role of *teungku dayah*, and reconciliation practices like *peusijek*. However, such adaptation is not always seamless—especially when national values are perceived as diminishing local religious authority or disrupting established interpretive consensus. In such cases, institutions like the *Majelis*

¹⁴ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, Paperback ed., Princeton studies in Muslim politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 2008).

¹⁶ Yasser Mohammed Abdel and Rahman Tarshany, "Protection of Life in Islamic Law" 9, no. 5 (2016).

¹⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).





Permusyawaratan Ulama (MPU) and the *Majelis Adat Aceh* (MAA) play vital roles as cultural intermediaries. They can legitimize or transform national agendas by anchoring them within local Islamic narratives. For example, in the "border preacher" (*dai perbatasan*) program, Acehese clerics disseminate the MB message in ethnically mixed areas using narrative approaches that promote "hosthood Islam," while maintaining a strong sense of local identity.

Implementation of Religious Moderation in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN) in Aceh

The promotion of religious moderation in PTKIN in Aceh serves as a strategic initiative in addressing the region's complex socio-religious dynamics. Of the five PTKIN institutions in the province, four—namely State Islamic Institute (STAIN) of Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh (2020), State Islamic University (UIN) of Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh (2021), State Islamic Institute (IAIN) of Lhokseumawe (2021), and State Islamic Institute (IAIN) of Langsa (2023)—had already established RMB before the fifth institution, State Islamic Institute (IAIN) of Takengon, followed suit in 2024. This initiative reflects a collective

institutional commitment to fostering moderate religious values within academic and societal spheres.

The establishment of RMB is grounded in formal regulations issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, forming part of a systematic effort to instill moderate religious attitudes in national and civic life. The implementation of this program relies on two key components: legal frameworks and budgetary allocations. Legal frameworks provide policy legitimacy and ensure sustainability through binding regulatory instruments, while sufficient funding is essential for executing RMB programs, thereby reinforcing their institutional presence.

Conceptually, the legal framework in this context refers to a set of regulations that establish the juridical foundation for policy implementation. In governance, such frameworks—including laws and ministerial decrees—serve as prerequisites for program execution, including religious moderation initiatives. Thus, the establishment of RMB in PTKIN is not merely a response to societal needs but also an alignment with the regulatory structures set by relevant authorities.

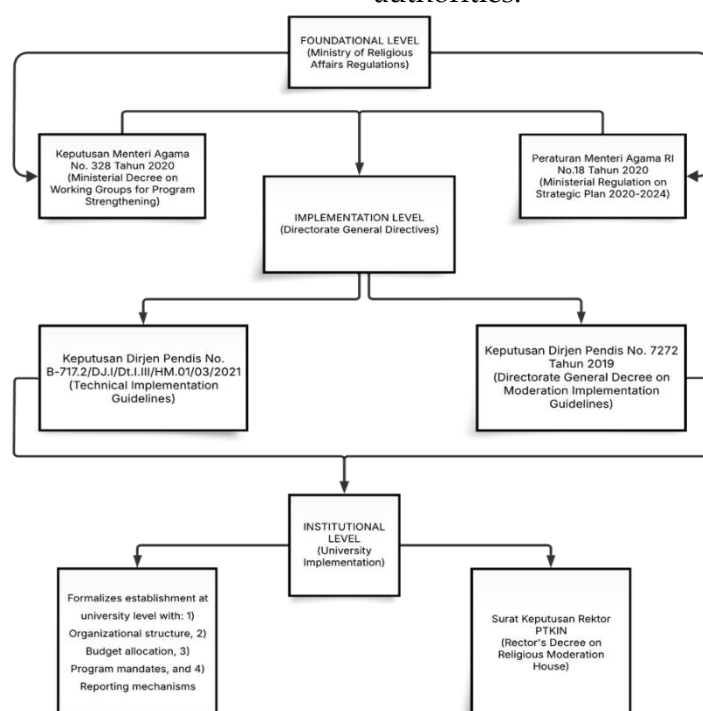


Figure. 1 Legal Basis for the Establishment of The House of Religious Moderation (RMB)





As part of the national policy implementation on strengthening religious moderation, the Faculty of Ushuluddin and Adab (FUAD) at IAIN Langsa held a working meeting focused on drafting a roadmap for the RMB at the faculty level. The activity was attended by RMB administrators, lecturers, educational staff, and students and was directly led by the Dean of FUAD, Dr. Muhammad Nasir. Dr. Nasir emphasized that all FUAD academic community members bear moral and institutional responsibility to actively participate in strengthening religious moderation. He stated:

"We are firmly committed to revitalizing the *Rumah Moderasi Beragama* (RMB) so that it can function as a strategic locomotive in safeguarding the integrity of the term 'Religious Moderation.' In recent years, this concept has often been misunderstood, misapplied, or even politicized—therefore, it is essential that RMB takes an active role in framing and overseeing its proper use".¹⁸

Similarly, the Chair of FUAD's RMB, Muhammad Roni, stressed the RMB's crucial role in fostering moderate attitudes among lecturers, staff, and students. He expressed hope that the working meeting would produce concrete and sustainable programs:

"I think the RMB plays a strategic role in instilling moderate values. I hope that the programs to be implemented such as the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), 'Moderate Friday', and community service initiatives rooted in moderation can strengthen the future policy direction of the RMB".¹⁹

Meanwhile, STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh, through its *Seuramoe Moderasi Beragama* unit, serves as a vital center for religious studies relevant to Aceh's local context. The Chair of STAIN, Inayatillah, asserted that the RMB is not merely an academic space but also a

strategic arena for shaping an inclusive and transformative religious character. In his interview, he stated:

"Students, as agents of social change and the hope of the people, must be equipped with balanced knowledge of nationalism, statehood, and religion. If this is achieved, a generation of moderate-minded millennials will emerge, capable of driving constructive societal change."²⁰

Meanwhile, UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh demonstrated further commitment by transforming its RMB into the Center for Spirituality and Religious Moderation (PKMB), signifying the integration of moderation values into the university's holistic development system. The PKMB's key programs include moderation pioneer training, book-writing workshops, public discussions on moderate economics, and public lectures on digital spaces. The Head of PKMB, Saifuddin A. Rasyid, stated:

"The establishment of the PKMB demonstrates that, with full support from the university leadership, religious moderation programs can become an integral part of campus development."²¹

This commitment was further reinforced through the involvement of UIN Ar-Raniry's Rector, Prof. Dr. H. Mujiburrahman, in the 2024 Master of Training (MOT) on Strengthening Religious Moderation alongside 25 other PTKIN leaders. This program, organized by UIN Raden Intan Lampung in collaboration with the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs' Research and Development and Training Agency (*Balitbang dan Diklat Kemenag RI*), exemplifies national synergy in promoting religious moderation in higher education. In his interview, Prof. Mujiburrahman emphasized:

¹⁸ Interview with M. Nasir, 2024.

¹⁹ Interview with M. Roni, 2024.

²⁰ Interview with Inayatillah, 2024.

²¹ Interview with Saifuddin A. Rasyid, 2024.





"We recognize that future national challenges demand universities to serve not only as centers of knowledge but also as centers of values. Religious moderation is not merely a ministerial agenda but a social necessity that must be addressed academically and practically by PTKINs, particularly in Aceh, which has a long history of diversity and unique religious dynamics".²²

UIN Ar-Raniry's active participation in the MOT was not merely symbolic but a manifestation of institutional transformation rooted in inclusivity, tolerance, and justice. The training also served as a concrete response to Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 on Strengthening Religious Moderation, which calls for systematic and sustainable program implementation across all bureaucratic levels, including religious higher education.

Meanwhile, IAIN Takengon, as the newest institution in RMB development, is in the early stages of implementation. Its strategy focuses on

integrating moderation values into community engagement programs. The Vice Rector II of IAIN Takengon, Hendrianto Bujangga, explained:

"Our strategic target for 2024–2025 is to ensure that the narrative of religious moderation is not only disseminated but also internalized by community leaders in the areas surrounding our campus. We believe that these local leaders—whether they are religious figures, educators, youth organizers, or cultural influencers—play a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes and maintaining social harmony."²³

This indicates a more external approach to expanding the influence of religious moderation, particularly in areas with limited access to inclusive religious literacy.

Furthermore, based on the data collected, various activities and programs have been implemented by PTKINs in Aceh. Below is a summary table of the activities managed:

Table 1

Table of Recapitulation of Religious Moderation House Activities of PTKIN Aceh

No.	State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN)	Activities performed
1	UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh	Orientation of Pioneers of Religious Moderation (Lecturers and Students), Moderation Book Writing Workshop, FGD on Religious Moderation & Sharia Economics, Public Lecture by the Indonesian Deputy Minister of Communication and Information, and Delegates of the Asia-Africa Conference.
2	STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh	Religious Moderation Webinar, Religious Moderation Socialization, and Religious Moderation Public Lecture
3	IAIN Lhokseumawe	Moderation Pioneer Orientation Plan and Religious Moderation Research Plan
4	IAIN Langsa	Newly formed RMB, program in planning stage
5	IAIN Takengon	Program Implementation Plan for 2024-2025

²² Interview with Dr. H. Mujiburrahman, 2024.

²³ Interview with Hendrianto Bujangga, 2024





The available data indicates that UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh has emerged as the leading institution among Aceh's PTKIN in implementing religious moderation programs. The university demonstrates consistent and intensive program execution, reflecting its strong institutional commitment to promoting moderate and inclusive religious value.²⁴ UIN Ar-Raniry's active engagement not only highlights the successful management of its RMB but also underscores its capacity to develop religious narratives that align with local socio-religious contexts while adhering to pluralistic national principles.²⁵

Across Aceh's PTKIN institutions, participation in religious moderation initiatives shows adaptive and progressively inclined characteristics. While variations exist in program intensity among different institutions, the emerging patterns demonstrate a collective awareness of moderation's importance as an integral component of Islamic higher education's scholarly and societal mission.²⁶ In this context, UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh can be seen as a potential exemplar, indicating how Islamic universities might serve as agents of social transformation through a *wasathiyah* (moderate) religious approach.²⁷

Challenges And Obstacles in Implementing Religious Moderation by PTKIN in Aceh

The implementation of religious moderation by PTKIN in Aceh faces significant institutional, financial, and cultural challenges, hindering its comprehensive adoption despite national mainstreaming through the 'Grand Design of PTKI 2020–2045'. A major structural obstacle is

the absence of religious moderation integration into core strategic planning documents, such as the Strategic Plan (Renstra) and Master Development Plan (RIP). This lack of a formal policy framework results in low consistency and sustainability of moderation programs at the campus level. Budgetary constraints severely compound this issue. The intended driver of moderation programs, the Religious Moderation House, often lacks formal recognition within campus organizational structures and operational guidelines (*ortaker*). This directly impacts budget management, preventing independent allocation and forcing programs to be integrated into existing annual activities on an ad hoc basis. As Rector of UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Prof. Dr. H. Mujiburrahman, emphasized:

"One of the main challenges we currently face is that the Religious Moderation Program has not yet been formally integrated into the official organizational and operational structure (*ortaker*) of PTKIN. As a result, this initiative often operates on an ad hoc basis, lacking the institutional authority and administrative clarity needed for effective implementation."²⁸

This lack of structural and financial anchoring creates widespread operational difficulties. The Rector of IAIN Langsa, Dr. H. Ismail Fahmi Arrauf Nasution, noted his institution navigates regulatory and budgetary gaps through adaptive strategies:

"In the absence of formal and dedicated funding for the *Rumah Moderasi Beragama* (RMB), we are challenged to think

²⁴ Mardhiah et al., "Legal Implementation of Religious Moderation Policy at State Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia."

²⁵ Maizuddin Maizuddin, Dedy Sumardi, and Zulihafnani Zulihafnani, "Implementasi Kebijakan Moderasi Beragama Pada Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri (PTKIN) Aceh," *Al-Adyan: Jurnal Studi Lintas Agama* 18, no. 2 (December 31, 2023): 243–274.

²⁶ Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, "Moderasi Beragama: Agenda Strategis Nasional," <https://balitbangdiklat.kemenag.go.id/berita/Moderasi%20Beragama>

[ma:%20Agenda%20Strategis%20Nasional](https://balitbangdiklat.kemenag.go.id/berita/Moderasi%20Beragama), last modified 2024, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://balitbangdiklat.kemenag.go.id/berita/Moderasi%20Beragama:%20Agenda%20Strategis%20Nasional>; Maizuddin, Sumardi, and Zulihafnani, "Implementasi Kebijakan Moderasi Beragama Pada Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri (PTKIN) Aceh."

²⁷ Mardhiah Et Al., "Legal Implementation of Religious Moderation Policy at State Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia."

²⁸ Interview with Dr. H. Mujiburrahman, 2024.





creatively and strategically. We must identify and utilize existing policy loopholes or flexibilities within the current regulatory framework to ensure that RMB activities continue to receive optimal support."²⁹

Similarly, STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh struggles to develop structured RMB work programs due to funding shortages and workload issues, relying instead on sporadic initiatives like webinars. Newly upgraded institutions face acute problems; the Vice Rector II of IAIN Takengon highlighted:

"Several PTKINs that previously held STAIN status and have recently transitioned to IAIN still receive budget allocations at the same scale as before, significantly limiting the RMB's operational capacity."³⁰

Reports from IAIN Lhokseumawe confirm difficulties realizing programs due to funding shortages and insufficient support. To provide a clearer picture of the dynamics in the implementation of RMB at PTKIN, Table 2 below summarizes the main developments and challenges.

Table 2

Development and Challenges of Religious Moderation House of PTKIN Aceh

No	State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN)	Name of Unit Religious moderation	Year Established	Operational Status	Remarks
1	STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh	Seuramoe Moderasi Beragama	2020	Active, but limited	No fixed budget; manager has other duties
2	UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh	Pusat Kerohanian dan Moderasi Beragama (PKMB)	2021 (restructuring in 2023)	Active and massive	Already integrated into LP2M; Has sufficient budget
3	IAIN Lhokseumawe	Rumah Moderasi Beragama	2021	Active, but limited	Limited budget; program not yet optimal
4	IAIN Langsa	Rumah Moderasi Beragama	2023	Active but limited (Newly established)	Administrative and budgetary challenges
5	IAIN Takengon	Rumah Moderasi Beragama	2024	Active but limited as it is still in its early stages	Focus on future program planning

Table 2's comparative analysis starkly illustrates these disparities: only UIN Ar-Raniry has optimized its RMB (now PKMB) through robust structural support and stable budgets. Other PTKINs exhibit sporadic, initiative-

dependent operations vulnerable to policy changes, underscoring the need for comprehensive structural reforms and standardized funding to achieve consistent implementation.³¹

²⁹ Interview with I.F.A. Nasution, 2024.

³⁰ Interview with Hendrianto Bujangga, 2024.

³¹ Daniel Suryadarma and Gavin Willis Jones, *Education in Indonesia*, vol. 1 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013).





Beyond these structural and financial hurdles, deeply embedded cultural factors present critical and often more intractable obstacles. Field observations reveal highly varied understanding within academic communities, sometimes manifesting as direct resistance to core moderation concepts. During one forum, a lecturer articulated a common theological reservation:

"I respectfully disagree with the notion of integrating the concept of religious moderation into the realm of *tauhid* (monotheism). *Tauhid* is the core theological foundation of Islam, a realm that deals with the absoluteness of God's oneness, which is non-negotiable and not subject to contextual reinterpretation. Religious moderation, on the other hand, is a socioreligious approach designed to foster tolerance, coexistence, and mutual respect in a pluralistic society. While religious moderation is crucial in managing interfaith and intrafaith relations, it should operate within the domain of social ethics and public discourse, not within the sacred, immutable domain of *aqidah*. Mixing these two distinct realms risks diluting the purity of Islamic monotheism and may lead to theological confusion among the faithful."³²

Similar reservations exist regarding practices like interfaith greetings, viewed by some as conflicting with MUI fatwas. These perspectives reflect persistent exclusive and normative interpretations of doctrine, hindering genuine tolerance. Faculty reported self-censorship, and students expressed apprehension about engaging with moderation, fearing social repercussions or contradicting local teachings. This cultural friction was encapsulated by a senior lecturer:

"The biggest hurdle isn't resources; it's the deep-seated belief among many students, and even some colleagues, that what we call 'moderation' is actually a compromise of the 'strong' Islam we learned growing up here in Aceh. There's a fear that embracing these ideas means diluting our faith or betraying our local traditions."³³

This pervasive perception of moderation as "Weak Islam" or an external imposition threatens Aceh's distinct identity.

These findings collectively highlight the complex interplay of structural weakness, resource scarcity, and cultural resistance hindering religious moderation. The implementation gaps across PTKINs, as detailed in Table 2, demonstrate that while ideological and socio-cultural factors—such as local interpretations of religious identity, community expectations, and historical traditions—significantly influence reception (aligning with Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description"),³⁴ deeper structural and institutional deficiencies are fundamental. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*³⁵ explains how Aceh's history, conflict legacy, and conservative education create ingrained dispositions (*habitus*) viewing moderation initiatives as threats to the established social/symbolic order, actively defended by conservative *ulama* networks maintaining the religious *doxa*.

The perception of moderation as an external agenda resonates with Talal Asad's critique of the secularization and power dynamics in defining "moderate" religion,³⁶ where the national agenda is seen as central state regulation of Aceh's distinct identity, fueling resistance framed as defending autonomy. Previous

³² Religious Moderation Socialization Forum, 2024.

³³ Religious Moderation Socialization Forum, 2024.

³⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³⁶ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).





research on Aceh supports this,³⁷ confirming the emphasis on Islam and *adat* post-conflict and conservative institutional resilience. The potency of localized conservative media aligns with Manuel Castells' concepts of network power.³⁸

However, the strong correlation between institutional commitment (structural integration, budget) and success, exemplified by UIN Ar-Raniry versus others, affirms that cultural resistance alone doesn't explain disparities.³⁹ Affirmative central government policies (Ministry of Religious Affairs) establishing uniform guidelines and equitable support are urgently needed to consolidate commitments, strengthen RMB frameworks, and ensure sustainable funding. Crucially, overcoming cultural barriers requires strategies engaging local frameworks (*maqasid al-shariah*, compatible *adat*), empowering credible local moderate voices in the Acehese context, and demonstrating moderation strengthens Aceh's Islamic identity and social harmony, gradually shifting the prevailing *habitus*. Only through addressing both the institutional foundations *and* the cultural meaning systems can religious moderation evolve from fragmented discourse into consistent academic practice across Aceh's PTKINs.

The Strategic Role of Aceh's Islamic Universities in Countering Intolerance and Strengthening Religious Moderation

PTKIN in Aceh occupy a pivotal position in shaping moderate religious discourse and practice within Indonesia's pluralistic society. These institutions have implemented concrete measures through the Religious Moderation program initiated by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. As part of a national

movement to foster tolerant, inclusive, and harmonious religious life, this program requires careful adaptation to local contexts.

In Aceh—a province with a deep Islamic history and strong religious identity—the narrative of religious moderation demands contextual approaches. Reza Idria, a lecturer at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, emphasizes that the government's moderation concept must align with Aceh's local culture and history. He asserts:

"While contemporary religious moderation concepts originate from Western academic traditions, Islam has long embraced similar principles through *washatiyah*—the doctrine of balance and middle position (*umatan wasatan*). Our challenge lies in articulating these values using language and approaches familiar to Acehese society."⁴⁰

This perspective underscores the need to bridge global moderation values with local wisdom. PTKIN institutions like UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh and STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh serve as catalysts for religious transformation, promoting an open and inclusive interpretation of Islam while preserving traditional roots.

The RMB within PTKIN campuses function as vital instruments for implementing these values. For instance, the RMB at STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh actively conducts socialization programs, webinars, public lectures, and student empowerment initiatives to cultivate tolerance and counter extremism.

Waled H. Khairul Azhar, newly elected Chair of *Nahdlatul Ulama* Branch Office (PCNU) of West Aceh's Executive Board, stresses that campus moderation efforts must transcend

³⁷ Suraiya Kamaruzzaman, "Women and Peace Processes in Aceh," in *Reconfiguring Politics: The Indonesia – Aceh Peace Process* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2008); Michelle Ann Miller, *Rebellion and Reform in Indonesia: Jakarta's Security and Autonomy Policies in Aceh* (London: Routledge, 2009); Edward Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

³⁸ Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁹ Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, *Moderasi beragama*; Suryadarma and Jones, *Education in Indonesia*, vol. 1, p..

⁴⁰ Interview with Reza Idria, 2024





theoretical discourse and manifest in concrete actions involving all academic community members. He highlights students' strategic role as conduits of inclusive religious reasoning to society while warning against the dangers of fanaticism and *takfiri* tendencies (accusations of apostasy), which require countering through reasoned, contextual religious education.

UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh demonstrates institutional commitment through initiatives like its 2024 Religious Moderation Pioneer Orientation for faculty and staff. Dr. Muhammad Yasir Yusuf, Vice Rector for Academic and Institutional Affairs, articulated the university's vision during the event:

"As Muslims, we must cultivate personalities that bring goodness, comfort, and benefit wherever we work, live, and practice—not only to fellow Muslims but to people of different faiths and all living creatures."⁴¹

This statement reflects how religious moderation constitutes both a national strategic agenda and an inherent Islamic teaching. The *wasathiyah* (moderate) Islam concept provides the theological foundation for educational strategies addressing radicalism and intolerance. At UIN Ar-Raniry, moderation programming has been implemented systematically through conceptual training sessions, curriculum integration, and practical skill-building workshops, contributing to a growing awareness of inclusive religious values within the academic community. Documented activities—such as seminars, collaborative publications, and inter-institutional dialogues—demonstrate how academic resources are being utilized to foster broader moderation networks and generate discourse surrounding Islam as a peaceful and inclusive faith tradition. These initiatives, as evidenced in program reports and participant testimonies, illustrate the institution's role in

promoting religious moderation beyond the campus setting.

Overall, the cultivation of moderate values within PTKIN institutions must begin with a systematic and sustained educational and cultural process embedded in the academic environment. Religious moderation cannot remain confined to conceptual frameworks or normative rhetoric; rather, it must be actualized through pedagogical strategies that foster open theological literacy, heightened social sensitivity, and the capacity for empathetic interfaith dialogue among students.⁴² This educational orientation is crucial for shaping an adaptive religious identity—one that upholds the principles of pluralism while actively resisting the rise of social and religious intolerance.

In this regard, PTKINs are uniquely positioned not only as centers of Islamic scholarship but also as agents of broader social transformation. By embedding moderation as a foundational institutional value, these universities can contribute meaningfully to the formation of critically minded, tolerant, and socially engaged Muslim youth. Within the diverse socio-religious landscape of Indonesia, such efforts are especially significant, offering a proactive response to growing polarization and ideological rigidity.

Among Islamic higher education institutions in Aceh, UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh stands out for its comparatively advanced implementation of the religious moderation agenda. Its strategic programs and institutional commitment demonstrate how religious moderation can be integrated not only into academic curricula but also into the broader institutional culture. This model provides a valuable reference for other PTKINs—particularly within regions like Aceh, where the interplay of religion, culture, and politics creates both opportunities and challenges for the implementation of nationally formulated moderation policies.

⁴¹ Interview with Muhammad Yasir Yusuf, 2024

⁴² Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, *Moderasi beragama*.





In regions characterized by complex religion–state dynamics, such as Aceh, the promotion of religious moderation is not merely an academic concern. It serves a vital role in fostering social cohesion and contributing to the broader project of national integration. Importantly, the success of religious moderation in Aceh’s PTKIN institutions hinges on their ability to localize and internalize the discourse of moderation—not as an abstract or externally imposed framework, but as a theologically grounded, contextually relevant, and culturally sensitive initiative.

Ultimately, these dynamics underscore that the implementation of religious moderation is not solely a curricular or administrative endeavor. It is a multidimensional process involving negotiations of theology, institutional authority, cultural identity, and political reality. When PTKINs are able to navigate these dimensions with reflexivity and critical engagement, they can transform religious moderation from a policy mandate into a living discourse that resonates meaningfully within their communities.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of religious moderation in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN) in Aceh operates within a unique socio-religious and institutional context. While the concept of religious moderation aligns with theological principles familiar in Acehnese Islamic traditions, its integration at the institutional level remains uneven. The absence of formal inclusion in strategic documents, organizational structures, and dedicated budgets contributes to inconsistent program development and limited sustainability. Among the PTKINs examined, UIN Ar-Raniry demonstrates a more structured and continuous approach, supported by leadership commitment and clearer institutional direction.

Cultural and theological responses to religious moderation also vary across institutions.

Some segments of the academic community express reservations, particularly when moderation is perceived as intersecting with core theological doctrines or as external to Aceh’s established religious authority. These perspectives influence levels of engagement among faculty and students and affect the consistency of program uptake. Nonetheless, PTKINs have made efforts to adapt the moderation agenda to local realities through curricular activities, community outreach, and collaboration with local religious and cultural institutions.

Overall, the study confirms that institutional support, regulatory clarity, and cultural relevance are key to enabling effective implementation. When religious moderation programs are grounded in local contexts, supported by formal policy instruments, and managed within the existing academic framework, they are more likely to function consistently and contribute to the educational mission of PTKINs. These conclusions highlight the importance of aligning national strategies with local institutional capacities and cultural settings to ensure meaningful integration of religious moderation in higher education.

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