



Constructing moderate attitude through religious education

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ABSTRACT

The social phenomenon of the last decade, often characterized by extreme-radical behavior, demonstrates the significance of moderation. Moderate attitudes are essential to ensure harmony in a multi-religious society, such as Indonesia. This study aims to examine the role of religious education in fostering students' moderate attitudes. It is a qualitative study based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data were obtained through questionnaires and interviews with high school students from six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism across Jakarta, Tangerang, Depok, and Labuan Bajo. The secondary data were collected from online news sources and previous studies. The study was conducted from May to July 2022. The findings suggested that from the perspective of students, religious education promotes moderate attitudes by enabling them to respect differences and live in harmony. This can be achieved through three essential pillars of religious education: quality textbooks, moderate teachers, and conducive school atmosphere. Therefore, religious education is a determining element in cultivating moderate behavior that helps sustain harmony within a pluralistic society.

Keywords: moderate behavior, religious education, textbooks, book assessment.

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INTRODUCTION

Social dynamics in the last decade have increasingly been marked by extreme-radical actions (Smith et al., 2020; Олег Олегович, 2024), which prioritize the interests, ideologies, and agendas of specific groups and reject those of other groups (Fraussen et al., 2021; Halpin et al., 2018). These extreme-radical actions frequently lead to social violence that results in material losses, and, in some cases, fatalities, such as the attacks on religious sites (Bélanger et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2020). In general, these actions occur due to the lack of awareness of people's ability to accept differences, specifically regarding religion (Hestyara, 2021; Mahmudi & Anam, 2021).

Every religion has a unique claim to the truth of faith and is held as a guide in the social life of its adherents, including social interaction with those of other religions in a pluralistic society. However, such pluralism often leads to social friction, particularly when fueled by extreme-radical actions, which are triggered by claims of truth. As noted by scholars, religious diversity and respective claims of truth are sources of tensions that can lead to extreme behaviors (Hestyara, 2021; Hutabarat, 2017). In this situation, the government is expected to play a proactive role in creating social harmony by promoting and cultivating moderate behavior within society. This is both a responsibility and a significant challenge for the government.

The government's seriousness in promoting moderate behavior is demonstrated by its inclusion of religious moderation as a national program in the National Medium Term Development Plan (RPJMN) for 2020-2024 (Kementerian Agama RI (The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the RI), 2020). This step aligns with findings by Marzuki et al. (Marzuki et al., 2020), who argue that religious education, particularly in pesantren, plays a key role in preventing

radicalism through multicultural education. One of the strategies adopted by the government is the integration of religious education in schools. The government ensures that the learning process of religious education in schools promotes moderate, tolerant, accepting and respecting differences within Indonesia's plural society. This is important because religious moderation is a social bonding force and a unifier of the nations to live together in a pluralistic society. According to Franken (2017), there are great challenges in a plural state due to the complex relationships among the state, religious communities, and schools. In this context, religious education is a prominent issue of debate. In other words, religious education fills a strategic position as an effective means to promote moderate behavior (Latif, 2019).

Religious education literature has thus far examined the relationship between faith and reason, the challenges and problems of religious education in the modern world and secular society (Pring, 2020; Seljak, 2022). Other studies suggest appropriate methods for religious education, for example dialectics (Laoulach, 2021), phenomenological-theology (Völker, 2022), dimensions and curriculum of religious education (Schlag et al., 2014) and literatures examining textbooks as the main source of religious education in the classroom (George, 2019). In contrast, this study focuses on the essential role that religious education plays in shaping individual students' moderate attitudes from the students' perspective. This issue has received little concern among the experts whereas it is a fundamental issue that can threaten the unity of the plurally-religious nation.

This study aims to demonstrate, examine and analyze the determinative role of religious education in schools on the formation and development of moderate behavior in students. Correspondingly, three questions are addressed: (a) What is the role of religious education in schools towards the manifestation of moderate behavior in the students' perspective? (b) What are the significant factors in religious education in schools that bring about moderate behavior among students? (c) What are the implications of religious education in schools as the foundation of moderate behavior within a plural society? The answers to the three questions will provide a better understanding of the fundamental role of religious education and its implications for moderate behavior.

This research lies on the grounds that religious education in schools is the foundation for building and shaping moderate behavior in society, beginning with learners. The role of religious education for moderate behavior will be more effective and optimal once supported by the availability of moderate-tolerant religious education teachers and religious textbooks containing relevant materials, and supporting the understanding, immersion, recognition, and habituation of the noble values of human life, such as tolerance, morals, inclusion, harmony, accepting and appreciating differences. In addition, the atmosphere of the school environment is conducive and supports the growth and formation of students' moderate behavior. Religious education at schools in the long term can generate individuals who behave modestly, accept, appreciate and live together in harmony around people with different religions. Thus, unity, nation integrity and life together within a plural society can successfully be achieved.

METHOD

The current topic, moderation in behavior, is selected for its urgency and relevance to the Indonesian social context characterized by religious diversity. In addition, recent social dynamics have been marked by extreme redical measures with religious nuances. Such extreme behavior is counter-productive to the character of Indonesian people who are known to be religiously tolerant. On the other hand, school is a social setting to educate the younger generation to accept and appreciate religious diversity in a pluralistic society (Hannam et al., 2020; Wijaya et al., 2021). It is the fundamental reason for conducting the study by focusing on the position of religious education in schools in the development of moderate behavior from the perspective of students. It involves high school students as informants, assuming that they have been able to view, observe, think critically and responsibly. The participants come from diverse religious backgrounds, representing six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, all of which gain legal services from the government, are taught at schools,

and receive book facilities with respective teaching staff. They are distributed across DKI Jakarta, West Java, Banten, and East Nusa Tenggara Province. Those backgrounds can provide a fundamental contribution to a comprehensive understanding and insight for solving the problem of religious education with moderate behavior. A total of 41 students responded to the Google Form: 9 Confucians, 6 Buddhists, 10 Hindus, 6 Muslims, 5 Catholics, and 5 Christians. However, only 36 answers were selected as 5 were excluded due to incompleteness or lack of clarity, specifically, responses from informants No. 13, 23, 26, 32 and 38.

This research employs a qualitative method based on primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected from the students' answers to the open-ended questions distributed via Google Forms. The questions were: (a) What is the role of religious education in the development of students' moderate behavior? (b) What are the key factors of religious education to the moderate behavior of students (e.g. textbooks or teachers)?

The research was conducted from May to July 2022, beginning with a desk review. The ongoing COVID-19 disruption has made it difficult for the author to conduct direct interviews with the informants specifically those around Jakarta. Therefore, the author took the strategy of distributing open-ended Interview questions via Google forms. However, to explore, validate, and enrich the primary data obtained from the form, the author conducted in-depth interviews with informants in other areas, namely NTT with 19 high school students, consisting of 12 Catholics, 3 Muslims, 3 Christians, and 1 Hindu. The interviews were held in the school environment. The school environment was selected because the situation and condition were relatively safer to conduct in-person interviews. Before the field research, various secondary materials were collected to map the issue of religious education relationship with moderate behavior at the level of text.

Data analysis was carried out in two models. The first was a data processing model based on Huberman et al. (2014). The stages included the reduction of interview data, data display through summaries and synopses organized by emerging e themes from the field, and data verification for inference process. The second was interpretation technique, which started from restatement of the data from both Google forms and interviews, followed by a description to find patterns or trends in the data, and ended with interpretation to reveal the meaning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The current study on religious education and moderate behavior from the perspective of high school students reveals that they all realize and recognize religious education and moderate behavior are two interrelated, inseparable, and mutually reinforcing. Moderate behavior would grow or be exhibited if humans cognitively know the concepts and perspectives of their religious teachings related to respect for social diversity and effectively practice them in a pluralistic society as they have been trained and accustomed to at school. Specifically, the authors show the students' answers and opinions in the following Table 1 & 2.

Table 1. Students' perspectives on religious education at schools

Informant	Religious education for moderate behavior	Code
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35, 37	It plays a significant role in building moderate individuals, loving a harmonious life, peace, harmony, behaving in religious teachings.	Elements of attitude, character, moderate behavior builder
7, 25, 36	It prevents radicalism, violence and crime, hate speech and hoaxes.	Preventing extreme measures
11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 27, 28, 34, 39, 40, 41	We can understand what is good and bad, appreciate differences in beliefs.	Moral guide

The data collected from Google Form are consistent with those generated from the in-depth, live interviews. All informants acknowledged that religious education is a prominent tool and

plays a significant role in building moderate behavior. Through religious education, students are introduced, trained, and accustomed to living moral values, being fair and tolerant, holding faith, respecting each other, and adhering to differences.

Table 2. The position of teachers and textbooks in religious education

Informant	The position of teachers and textbooks in religious education	Code
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 13, 18, 25, 36, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35, 37	Providing direction, guidance, and information, complementing learning, shaping behavior, adding Religious Knowledge, elaborating material, and increasing insight.	book
27, 28, 34, 39, 40, 41	The right and proper teacher can help to lead to a good path, being tolerant towards friends of different races, tribes and religions. Trained teachers can provide religious teachings; religious teachers teach and grow moderate behavior within students.	teacher

Students also recognize two fundamental elements that contribute to the success of religious education at schools, which are: books and teachers. However, most of them choose the role of books as more dominant as their contents are accessible repeatedly, providing a lot of information, increasing and changing behavior and attitude. The role of the teacher is also significant in directing and explaining the materials, and through the example of the teacher, students can directly witness how moderate attitudes and behaviors are manifested, as pointed out in the following interview excerpts:

Religious education is one of the factors that brings about a great influence in growing a tolerant attitude in our association with other students of different religions. Our heart is shaped to accept friends without judgment for different religion and is strengthened by religious lessons, and the school atmosphere maintains harmony and Unity (student interview, June 17, 2022; June 20, 2022).

Religious books are important, and they help us learn the material, contain a lot of knowledge information, explanation of the value of religious teachings. The contents of the religious textbooks contribute to forming an attitude of religious tolerance in the association of students at school. However, teachers' role is also crucial; especially when we encounter difficult material to understand, teachers help to clarify and provide additional information that we do not find in the book. In addition, the teachers' example of showing moderate behavior towards other students is a concrete example for us (student interview, June 17, 2022; June 20, 2022).

Teachers play a significant role in helping students understand the contents of religious textbooks, building a wider understanding about religious teachings and their application in daily life, especially in association or friendship with the adherents of other religions. They create a learning atmosphere that helps students experience how to respect the followers of other religions in making friends. They show how to respect differences through equal treatment without discrimination on the basis of religion (interview with students, June 17, 2022; June 20, 2022).

Discussion

This study shows, from high school students' perspective, that religious education is a constitutive element constructing and shaping moderate behavior. They reasoned that religious education helps them cognitively recognize and understand religious teachings and moral values within. Compare with Latuapo & Farid (2024), who emphasized character strengthening through Islamic education in multicultural contexts. In addition, it supports the affective development of individuals by enabling them to internalize and practice morally upright, faithful, tolerant, harmonious behaviors, and respect for differences. All the values are preconditions for the

manifestation of moderate behavior. In line with previous research, this study also reveals that, from the students' perspective, religion is not merely a set of beliefs but also a means of education, forming students' attitudes and personal character, helping them understand the essence of religion correctly (Cheng & Beigi, 2012; Ho-Maarif Institute, 2024; Muhtifah et al., 2021), included in the effort to form moderate behavior in the appreciation of religious life in the context of a pluralistic society. Moderate behavior in this case refers to an act or way of life, an attitude of being always in the middle, acting fairly, non-extremism in religious practice (Kementerian Agama RI (The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the RI), 2019; Marzuki et al., 2020; Nasir & Rijal, 2021).

Moderate behavior is both significant and necessary, given that Indonesia is a multi-religious country. Moderate behavior serves as a unifying force in pluralistic society. With the moderate attitude, diversity can be addressed wisely; tolerance and harmony become real as moderate behavior seeks and strives for solidarity and harmony in the life of religious beings (Sihombing et al., 2020). It goes in line with the purpose of religious education, which is to provide knowledge, form personalities, attitudes, skills in the implementation of religious teachings and realization of inter-religious harmony (Gurlesin et al., 2020; Peraturan Menteri Agama Nomor 16 Tahun 2010 Tentang Pengelolaan Pendidikan Agama Pada Sekolah (Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. 16 of 2010 Concerning the Management of Religious Education in Schools), 2010; Walker et al., 2021).

Essentially, all religions teach the noble values of life: goodness, peace, harmony among individuals (Gross, 2018). The values taught in religious education will generate a massive impact if they can be realized in daily experience. As stated by the informants, through their daily experiences within the school environment, they can build good, harmonious, and fair relationships with peers, without choosing friends based on religion, upholding mutual respect and respecting differences. Also, the role of the teacher is necessary to show a living example of moderate behavior by being fair to all students. Thus, moderate behavior will be achieved as religion is learned. By experiencing an active involvement in the social context, an active dialogue of the subject with a stimulus from the external environment, a learning process occurs (Schlag et al., 2014). It is a long process through shared learning experiences, intellectual and emotional experiences as personal empowering experiences (Gross, 2017; Pring, 2020). This study further explains that from the students' perspective, they can display moderate behavior in their friendship with fellow students who follow different religions and beliefs. This ability is formed in the process of religious education which is supported by the role of teachers and habituation in a school environment that gives high respect to every religious belief.

Based on the findings, most informants recognize that religious textbooks play a central role and provide a major influence on their behavioral changes. This study shows that, from the students' perspective, the content of religious textbooks used in schools has a very strong effect for them to understand and live moderate behavior in their association with friends with different religious beliefs. It reflects the significance of preventive measures, and ensuring the quality and the right content of the book supports the formation of a moderate attitude see also Purwadi et al., (2022), who evaluated textbooks' alignment with moderation principles. Textbooks held by students can become silent influences if left unchecked. A book containing ideologies contrary to Pancasila or elements of radicalism and extremism can be counter-productive to the essence of religious education at schools. De facto, in the last decade there have been cases of radical content of religious textbooks (CNN Indonesia, 2020; Miftahuddin et al., 2024; Rochmat, 2018) that successfully creates a social anxiety. Therefore, it is ideal for the government to issue Law No. 3 of 2017 regarding books, that religious education books used at schools must receive a proper mark that the book has passed the assessment by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It is intended to maintain plurality, respect differences, create tolerance that a culture of peace and moderate behavior can be realized (Latif, 2019).

A well-managed religious education system reflects the presence of the state in creating social harmony and harmony to ensure the social welfare of the community. In Indonesia, the policy of quality assurance of religious textbooks to ensure that their contents are free from non-aligned teachings has become one of the strategic points of the state's presence and responsibility.

This study shows that the policy is very important in supporting the development of moderate behavior and respect for religious differences in the social environment of students at school.

This study shows that teachers can have a significant role in providing a broader understanding and an example of appreciating differences among followers of different religions (Paiva et al., 2022; Yuen & Leung, 2022). All religions essentially teach the noble values of life: kindness, peace, harmony with one another (Gross, 2018). The values provided in religious education will have a significant effect if they can be realized in daily basis. As the informant stated, in their daily experiences around the school environment, good friendships, harmony, fairness, no discrimination, mutual respect, and respect for differences are created. In this case, teachers' role is needed to show a life example of moderate behavior, such as treating students equally. Thus, students perform moderate behavior because they learn religion through active involvement in social contexts, active dialogue from the subject with stimuli from the external parties (Schlag et al., 2014; Wijaya Mulya et al., 2022; Yuen & Leung, 2022). Compared with Latuapo & Farid (2024), who advocate dialogical approaches for inclusive pedagogy in religious education.

It is a long process administered through shared learning, intellectual, and emotional experiences that are empowered (Gross, 2017; Pring, 2020) set intentionally by religious teachers. School is a very strategic context of social life to introduce and familiarize students with accepting and appreciating differences, especially through religious education (Wijaya Mulya et al., 2022; Yuen & Leung, 2022). In line with Marzuki et al. (2020), who argue for the importance of multicultural values reinforcement through Islamic education. The atmosphere of the school environment is the third pillar besides textbooks and teachers who are important so that religious education can successfully construct students' moderate attitudes. As long ago the great philosophers of ancient Greece, Aristotle had stated that people who understand the meaning and meaning of good, honest does not automatically make that person good and honest. Likewise, students who understand the meaning and meaning of tolerant and moderate do not automatically make students tolerant and moderate. This reflects that being a tolerant and moderate person requires practice, habituation, and continuous repetition. At this point, the school environment becomes important and vital for students to train themselves and practice the moral, religious values they learn in religious education. In other words, it occupies a strategic position as an effective means to promote moderate behavior (Latif, 2019; Sham et al., 2020; von Brömssen et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Moderate behavior of the students' perspective is formulated through religious education, especially a learning process that provides understanding and capability to apply religious teachings and moral values and at the same time to accept and appreciate differences in life with the adherents of other religions which is realized through friendship regardless of religion. In addition, religious textbooks give extensive information on religious knowledge to grow scientific insights to realize moderate behavior. Therefore, the content of religious textbooks must always be assessed before being employed at schools. Religious education, supported with quality religious books, requires teachers, who play a vital role in explaining and providing the practical act of moderate behavior. Therefore, religious education, supported with quality religious books and teachers, poses a significant implication for the realization of moderate behavior among society. In other words, it can develop mutual respect, dialogue, and deep coexistence among different beliefs. In short, it is a constitutive element of moderate behavior.

Despite the disclosed findings, this study has methodological limitations. This qualitative study is limited in the number of informants and coverage of study area. It requires further research with quantitative methods by involving more respondents and a wider area of study. Thus, students' perspectives regarding the topic of this study can be completely generalized.

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