



Religious Moderation as a Negotiation Process: Implementation of the Policy on the Right to Learn Islamic Religious Education for Muslim Students

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation and negotiation process of the Islamic Religious Education (ISE) right-to-learn policy in Christian-based schools with a majority of Muslim students, through a case study of SMK Kristen Nusantara Kudus. Religious moderation is understood as a dynamic social process, shaped through the interaction of daily practices, symbolic constructions, and power relations within the school environment. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study design through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis with the principal, Islamic Religious Education (ISE) teachers, and Muslim students. The results show that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (ISE) not only represents administrative compliance with regulations but also serves as an institutional strategy for managing diversity while maintaining institutional identity. Interview data revealed that formally the school has fulfilled institutional justice by providing Muslim teachers, worship facilities, and learning arrangements. However, at the practical level, all participants revealed that at the beginning of each lesson, and in every formal activity such as prayer ceremonies, there are two prayers, one in Islamic and one in Christian, indicating the existence of symbolic and emotional boundaries in social interactions. Islamic Religious Education (ISE) teachers also negotiate pedagogical practices of caution in delivering material, by avoiding sensitive and potentially conflict-inducing material. This includes students' self-discipline during Christian prayer, as well as their feelings of gradually becoming accustomed to the presence of symbols of Christian identity.

Introduction

In an increasingly connected and complex global context, issues of diversity and inclusivity are faced with complexities that are not simple (Kan, 2019), including in the field of education, which has always been a significant concern for many countries, including Indonesia. The phenomenon of increasing social tensions due to differences in religion and cultural identity requires an educational approach that emphasizes the values of moderation, tolerance, and justice (Aziz et al., 2024). In many countries, a multicultural education approach has long been used to build social cohesion and respect equality in the diversity of student identities (James A. Banks, 2015). In the national context, religious moderation has become a government strategy, program, and policy to maintain and nurture diversity in national and state life (Munif, 2023). As a government policy (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia) establishes the mainstreaming of religious moderation as a priority program in the form of Regulation of the Minister of Religion (PMA) Number 18 of 2020 which contains the Strategic Plan (Sanusi, 2022) or as the RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan) for 2020-2024 (Salim et al., 2023), including in the context of education policy that places religious moderation as an

effort to internalize the values of tolerance, justice, and togetherness through the formal education system.

However, in practice, the fulfillment of the right to learn through Islamic religious subjects in religious schools, especially non-Islamic religious schools, still faces a dilemma between institutional ideology and students' constitutional rights to receive religious instruction according to their beliefs. As a result, the implementation process in the field shows diverse dynamics in the context of implementing Islamic religious education policies for Muslim students. For example, research conducted by Indah Wahyuni successfully identified two typologies or models of non-Islamic schools, categorized as schools that are open and those that are closed to the religious practices of Muslim students (Wahyuni, 2014). Furthermore, in a number of non-Islamic religious schools, Muslim students are often the majority group in the social context, but a minority in the institutional structure. The gap that arises in educational practices in religious schools is often related to the implementation of policies regarding the right to learn through religious lessons that are in accordance with students' beliefs. Other studies show that in its implementation there are still several practical problems and obstacles (Franken, 2017) so that for some schools in fulfilling the right to learn for students with certain religions still experience obstacles, both due to limited resources (Sakban et al., 2025) and due to ideological considerations of the institution (King, 2010). This condition raises fundamental issues related to how religious educational institutions can implement the values of religious moderation in their institutional policies and practices.

Most previous research on religious moderation in education has emphasized normative aspects, such as advocating the need to build tolerance, maintain harmony, and respect differences. In many of these studies, religious moderation is viewed as an idealistic state that can be achieved through the implementation of well-defined policies and specific targets. However, such a view tends to ignore the complexities of the real world. Indeed, religious moderation rarely achieves perfect and lasting harmony. Instead, it has been characterized as the result of a dynamic and ongoing negotiation process, involving a certain degree of power, symbolic constructions, and complex and multi-layered social relations.

There remains a significant gap in research on religious moderation as practiced in schools for interfaith students. This study aims to contribute to filling this gap by analyzing the implementation of the religious rights policy for Muslim students at the Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus. This school has a unique social configuration because the Christian-based institution has a larger Muslim student population. This situation creates a contact space that embraces religious diversity and places the institution actively navigating the tension between inclusivity and identity bias. Thus, the central question of this study is not simply whether the right to religious learning has been granted, but how the policy is interpreted, implemented, and negotiated by the actors within it.

Theoretically, this research is based on the concepts of religious moderation and multicultural education. Kamali's concept of religious moderation emphasizes the importance of balance and justice, or a middle ground between extremes (Kamali, 2015), particularly in understanding religious teachings and encouraging interfaith dialogue. Banks, on the other hand, considers multicultural education to have many dimensions, focusing on equality and empowerment in relation to school culture and structure (James A. Banks, 2015). From this perspective, multicultural education theory applies to the study of Christian educational institutions' policies that accommodate the learning rights of Muslim students. The complementarity of the two theories provides a basis for analyzing religious moderation as part of inclusive education policies.

This research starts from the main question: How is religious moderation carried out and negotiated? through the Policy on the Right to Learn Islamic Religious Education for Muslim Students in Christian Schools? The aim is to explore and analyze the moderation of religion implemented through the institutional negotiation process for Muslim students through the policy of the right to learn Islamic religious education in Christian schools, including strategies and forms of institutional support, as well as the challenges faced. This research uses a qualitative methodology, with a case study approach at SMK Kristen Nusantara Kudus, involving decision-makers such as the principal and vice-principal as key informants. To obtain an empirical picture of the policy's practices, data collection methods include interviews, observation, and documentation.

The main contribution of this study is to deepen insight into the negotiation process of implementing religious moderation policy practices in interfaith reciprocal relations in interfaith educational environments in Indonesia. Academically, this study enriches the literature on the relationship between the policy of fulfilling the right to learn religious education and the practice of religious moderation, especially in interfaith schools, which has so far focused more on several partial aspects such as the policy aspect (Munif, 2023) , (Sutrisno, 2019) , (Rofiqi, Mohammad Firdaus, Mohamad Salik, 2023) , and its implementation aspect (Salim et al., 2023) , (Sakban et al., 2025) , (Munasir et al., 2024) , (Albana, 2023) , (Abidin, 2021) , and the value aspect (Mufi et al., 2023) . Another study related to the fulfillment of students' rights to receive religious education according to their beliefs is research that examines various models and practices of religious education services for students from minority religious groups in Indonesia. (Hayadin, 2017) , Previous studies have also examined policies to fulfill the learning rights of Muslim students in non-Islamic schools using various analytical perspectives. (Faojin & Chasanah, 2023) , and studies that examine how Islamic religious education is implemented in educational institutions that are not based on Islam are still an important concern in religious education research. (Wahyuni, 2014) . However, there are not many studies that highlight the context in which religious moderation is implemented as a result of the negotiation process, especially in Christian educational institutions that accommodate Muslim students.

Practically, the results of this study are expected to provide additional contributions as reference material for policy makers, school administrators, and educators in formulating inclusive policies without ignoring the institution's religious identity. Therefore, this article offers novelty in the study of religious moderation carried out through a negotiation process in the implementation of the policy on the right to religious learning for Muslim students in Christian-based schools. This discourse is highly relevant amidst efforts to strengthen tolerance and harmony education in Indonesia.

Methods

This research applies a qualitative approach with a case study design to comprehensively explore how the values of religious moderation are implemented in the policy of fulfilling the right to learn, specifically through the provision of Islamic Religious subjects for Muslim students in Christian schools. The qualitative approach provides space for researchers to understand and interpret social phenomena as they occur in real situations, by considering the surrounding social and cultural context based on the meanings constructed by participants in the field (Creswell, J., & Poth, 2018) . The case study approach is used in this research because the study is directed at an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon in the context of educational policy in a unique and multicultural educational institution (Yin, 2023) .

Researchers seek to understand how Christian school policies can implement the right to learn Islam with the principle of religious moderation without causing social and ideological friction.

The research data sources include: first, the results of interviews with key informants selected because they are considered to have adequate knowledge and a deep understanding of the policies being studied, so they are able to provide substantial and relevant information to the research focus, namely the leaders as policy makers, especially the principal, vice principal as the main informant, as well as Islamic Religious Education teachers, and Muslim students; second, important documents related to the research topic and scientific literature that provide important information; and third, the results of observations. Through this multi-source approach, triangulation is possible which can increase the validity of research findings (Flick, 2018). Data collection techniques used in this study include observation, interviews, and documentation studies. Observations were carried out as an effort to obtain a direct picture of the situation and activities taking place at the research location, so that researchers can understand the social context in more depth in the practice of Muslim students' religious activities and interfaith interactions in the school environment. Research interviews used semi-structured techniques that allowed informants to describe their experiences, perspectives, and interpretations in a broader and deeper context. In addition, documentation techniques were used by collecting various documents directly related to the focus of the study. Throughout the research process, the researcher acts as the main instrument directly involved in data collection and in analyzing the dynamics of the educational policy in question. The subjects of this study include key actors at the policy-making and educational implementation levels in schools. These include institutional leaders, namely the principal and his/her deputies, as well as Islamic Religious Education educators or teachers directly responsible for teaching Islamic subjects and Muslim students. The focus of this study is directed at how schools implement policies related to fulfilling the rights of Muslim students to receive Islamic religious education. At the same time, these policies are examined as a practical space that reflects how religious moderation is implemented through a process of negotiation, particularly in fulfilling the right to learn Islamic Religious Education for Muslim students in Christian schools. Thus, religious moderation and school policies are not understood solely as administrative rules, but rather as a process of negotiation involving many aspects.

Results and Discussion

Policy Interpretation: Moderation as Institutional Compromise

The results of this study demonstrate that the policy of accepting interfaith students at Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus cannot be reduced to mere procedural compliance with state regulations, but rather represents a complex institutional strategy for managing pluralism amidst established religious identities. The principal's statement:

"Since its inception, this school has had Muslim students, so it is open to anyone, even last year there were Hindu and Buddhist students, but now their children have graduated... In 2017, there was a PAI teacher, at the beginning there was a polemic, especially from the church congregation, basically the voice was not pleasant... I don't want to break the rules, that's how it is..." participant 1 (interview with the Principal, 2026).

The statement above reflects a normative commitment to inclusivity and compliance with the National Education System law regarding the right of every child to receive religious education according to their beliefs. However, the statement *"at the beginning there was a polemic with the church congregation"* shows that this openness was implemented through symbolic and

structural compromise mechanisms and a process of negotiation. This phenomenon is in line with the concept of *negotiated pluralism* as put forward by Modood, (2013) in *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*, which emphasizes that pluralism in identity-based institutions is never neutral, but is always negotiated through power relations, history, and entrenched dominant values.

In the context of the Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus, Christian symbols such as the cross and other symbols of Christian identity are maintained as markers of the institution's collective identity. Observations show:

"In certain rooms, cross symbols are installed, such as in the principal's office, the UKS room and the Christian worship room" (observation, 2026)

Based on the observations above, it shows that the symbol not only functions religiously but also serves as a symbolic device that affirms the foundation's cultural authority in the educational space. However, this symbolic dominance does not necessarily close off space for other religious expressions. The school consciously accommodates Islamic practices through the provision of Islamic Religious Education, the presence of Muslim teachers, and separate but institutionally recognized Islamic religious activities. This pattern demonstrates that religious moderation operates through the logic of *bounded inclusion* that is, inclusivity that is recognized and facilitated, but remains within the boundaries of the institution's identity (Jackson, 2014).

In international multicultural education studies, this practice is understood as a form of *institutional religious identity management*, namely the way educational institutions manage diversity without losing their normative identity (Gearon, 2013). Gearon states that religious education centers do not need to change their beliefs to compete secularly. Instead, these institutions are expected to develop and implement an ethical mechanism capable of ensuring justice for all parties involved. In this context, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education in Christian schools may not be seen as a conflict of identity, but rather as a sign of the institution's ethical commitment to upholding the principle of justice and rights.

Furthermore, the practice of moderation at the Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus demonstrates that pluralism is not always manifested in entirely harmonious relationships, but also involves dynamics and potential friction. Instead, it grows through a continuous negotiation process between the religious ideals of the foundation, the church congregation, and the realities of the students' needs. This aligns with Berglund's (2016) view that religious education in multicultural schools often becomes an arena of *"silent negotiation"*, where tolerance is built not through ideological consensus, but through a willingness to coexist within differences that are not fully resolved. These findings emphasize that religious moderation in institutionally managed educational environments should not be understood as a completely conflict-free and harmonious state. Rather, moderation is offered as a dynamic and evolving social process, as well as a system of adaptive action that is highly dependent on the context in which it is practiced.

Therefore, the research conducted contributes to the existing international literature by showing that religious moderation in faith-based schools is realistically practiced in the presence of negotiated pluralism. In other words, moderation is not achieved by eliminating the religious identity of the majority, but rather through efforts to manage differences fairly, systematically, and through gaining recognition within institutional structures. This finding confirms that the success of moderation lies in the ability of institutions to manage tensions productively, rather than denying them.

Institutional Strategy: Justice and Equity as Social Mechanisms

Research findings indicate that the policy of fulfilling the right to religious education at Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus is consistently implemented by the principal and the foundation as a form of compliance with state regulations. The principle of justice is institutionalized through equitable and structured administrative arrangements. The results of the documentation study indicate that:

"Religious lessons are taught in accordance with the religion adhered to by students and are taught by teachers of the same religion, in this case it is a constitutional right guaranteed by Law No. 20 of 2003 Article 12" (documentation study, 2026)

Based on the documentation study above, it is clear that this regulation is normatively designed to guarantee the constitutional right to receive religious education in accordance with one's religious beliefs. From a policy perspective, this step demonstrates the principle of procedural justice, where institutionally, there is no discriminatory treatment for any student in obtaining their right to religious education.

However, if we examine further the dimensions of daily practice in the school environment, what appears to be fair is not completely free from social and symbolic consequences. At the implementation level, daily practices, both in learning and formal activities, unconsciously reinforce the boundaries of identity. The principal's statement that:

"We pray twice: the Christian religious teacher leads the prayer, and then the Muslim religious teacher leads the prayer. So, there are two prayers. Sometimes, the Christian opens the prayer, and the Muslim closes it," said Participant 1 (interview, Principal, 2026).

The principal's statement above was reinforced by the statement of the Islamic Education teacher, who stated that:

"Here, every time there is an event, there are two prayers," said participant 2 (interview, Islamic Education Teacher, 2026).

This statement demonstrates that religious practices in schools are designed to accommodate diversity through mechanisms that appear formally equal. The alternating use of two prayer methods demonstrates institutional recognition of the existence of two primary religious identities within the school. In this context, this practice has symbolic meaning as a form of affirmation of the existence of different groups within the same social space. However, the religious practice of alternating two prayers within each school activity, while intended as a form of fair treatment, indirectly creates identity boundaries that reinforce differences in position within the institutional space. This phenomenon, in studies of multicultural education, is often described as the *"paradox of inclusion,"* where inclusive efforts can simultaneously produce more subtle social differentiation (Keddie, 2012).

Furthermore, this practice demonstrates that religious moderation at the institutional level does not always take the form of total harmony, but rather often occurs as a balancing process between formal justice and the stability of institutional identity. From Jackson's (2014) perspective, this situation is a common characteristic of negotiated pluralism, where institutions strive for justice without losing their normative foundations. Thus, striking identity differentiation is an inherent part of how moderation is implemented in faith-based educational spaces. Within this framework, moderation is not realized through the elimination of identity boundaries, but through the controlled management of differences.

Within the framework outlined above, the practices implemented at SMK Kristen Nusantara Kudus can serve as a representation of moderation, formed as a result of various forms of compromise between legal demands to comply with government regulations, the real needs of students, and the desire to maintain institutional identity. In this context, moderation is the result of a continuous process of negotiation involving several types of adjustments, specific limitations, and the repurposing of religious values to make them relevant to diverse institutions.

Thus, this finding confirms that justice in multireligious education cannot be sufficiently understood as formal equality, but needs to be analyzed as a social construction that is continuously shaped through the interaction between policies, power structures, and the lived experiences of the actors within it.

Pedagogical Practice: Negotiating Teacher Authority in a Moderated Space

The research findings indicate that pedagogical practices at the Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus cannot be understood simply as the direct implementation of inclusive policies, but rather as an arena where various rationalities moral, bureaucratic, and cultural interact and are negotiated by teachers. In this context, teachers function not only as curriculum implementers but also as social actors who actively interpret, and carry out the practice of religious moderation through daily teaching. One teacher's statement states that:

"Before the lesson started, there was a learning contract, I told all the non-Muslim students, if they wanted to join my lesson, it was okay, if they didn't, it was okay. Those who didn't join could stay in the library and read, but if they did, it was okay here, they could listen, and if they watched on their phones, they could watch. In the end, they stayed in class, and some even enthusiastically asked questions," said participant 2 (interview, Islamic Religious Education Teacher, 2026).

The above statement can be understood as a concrete manifestation of the negotiation process within educational practices within a multireligious school environment. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is not positioned as a completely normative and rigid learning space, but rather, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers position it as an arena for interaction that is continuously negotiated between curriculum interests, the realities of diversity and religiousness, and student dynamics. Through a "learning contract" at the beginning of the lesson, teachers explicitly open up an open space for non-Muslim students to choose their involvement in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process. This step demonstrates the teacher's role in anticipating potential tensions through a preventative, initial negotiation process.

Interestingly, the negotiation process extends beyond formal choices to interactive learning. The non-Muslim students' choice to remain in the classroom and even express interest demonstrates a shift from structural to interactional negotiation. This means that identity boundaries, previously managed through "opt-in" options, are becoming more fluid through voluntary engagement. In this context, teacher authority is exercised not through coercion, but through persuasive strategies and approaches within a non-pressured dialogue space.

Broadly speaking, these findings indicate that religious moderation in the classroom is not always rooted in deep ideological reflection. Instead, it is more often formed through pragmatic everyday practices, in response to concrete situations encountered in the learning process. In this context, teachers often demonstrate strategic attitudes and reinterpretations of policies as a way to bridge institutional demands with their pedagogical beliefs (Wu & Zhu, 2025). This is reinforced by the finding that the pressures of accountability systems and compliance-based

policies often limit teachers' agency, resulting in teaching practices evolving within a framework of continuous negotiation (Leo et al., 2020) . Thus, the relationship between *moral agency* and *institutional compliance* cannot be understood as two opposing poles, but rather as a spectrum of dynamically evolving pedagogical practices that are strongly influenced by the context. (Essabari & Mhamed, 2025) ; (Rousseau et al., 2024) .

In this context, the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in these schools presents a unique complexity. They are in a challenging position, as they must bridge the gap between the religious authority inherent in their profession and the demands of adapting to a Christian-based institutional environment. Muslim teachers are not only obligated to present educational content in accordance with the national curriculum framework, but they are also required to modify their pedagogical approaches to accommodate the culturally diverse religious environment within the educational institution.

However, the adaptive strategies implemented by Islamic Religious Education teachers are carefully considered, such as the choice to refrain from discussing topics that could trigger theological disputes. This is demonstrated by the statement by the Islamic Religious Education teacher:

"I remain careful in delivering material, avoiding sensitive material that has the potential to trigger conflict," said participant 2 (interview, Islamic Education Teacher, 2026).

The above statement should not be interpreted as a simplification or reduction of core teachings, but rather as an initiative to maintain an inclusive and dialogical learning environment. In religious education studies, this practice is known as *context-sensitive pedagogy* , a learning approach that adapts strategies, materials, and classroom interaction patterns to the social realities and cultural backgrounds of students. In the context of multicultural education, this approach is seen as important to maintain the relevance of learning while avoiding potential value conflicts in diverse classrooms (Schweisfurth, 2013) ; (Gay, 2010) .

This strategy reflects a form of *pedagogical accommodation* , namely the teacher's adaptive efforts to maintain a balance between professional identity, personal beliefs, and institutional sensitivity. In the international literature, this kind of practice is understood as a form of *teacher agency under constraint* , where teachers still have space for autonomy, but this autonomy is exercised within the boundaries of the institution's power structure (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015) . In this context, pedagogical practice not only functions as an indicator of educators' professional competence in carrying out their responsibilities, but also illustrates the existence of an ongoing process of identity negotiation between held personal values and institutional imperatives that require fulfillment.

Furthermore, these findings support the notion that educator authority in the context of moderation is neither static nor absolute; rather, it is constantly influenced and negotiated through the dynamics of interactions with students, policies instituted by educational institutions, and social norms emerging in the surrounding environment. Muslim teachers, for example, must balance maintaining their authority as representatives of Islamic teachings and adapting to institutional expectations that emphasize interfaith harmony. On the other hand, non-Muslim teachers are also indirectly involved in this process, as their attitudes and responses to interfaith policies contribute to shaping the overall pedagogical climate. From this perspective, teacher authority in the context of contemporary education is no longer understood as a static and structurally embedded entity, but rather as a social construct formed through

pedagogical relationships, interactions with students, and the negotiation of meaning within specific institutional contexts (Harjatanaya, 2025) .

Thus, the educational practices at the Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus illustrate that religious moderation cannot be conceptualized as the result of a single, linear form of rational thought. Rather, it is cultivated through the interaction of diverse logics that exert a reciprocal influence in everyday practice.

Muslim Students' Experiences: Moderation as Everyday Negotiation

The findings of this study on the experiences of Muslim students at the Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus show that religious moderation is not only present in the form of formal policies, but is experienced as a continuous process of social negotiation in the daily life of the school. Students' narratives demonstrate a distinctive ambivalence: on the one hand, they appreciate the institutional recognition of their religious identity through the provision of Islamic Religious Education lessons and prayer spaces; on the other hand, they are aware of the existence of symbolic boundaries that are not always expressed explicitly, but are felt emotionally and socially. Students' statements that:

"I feel like even though the students at this school are of mixed religions, we can still live side by side, be friends as usual, and not discriminate against each other based on religion. That's the essence of tolerance," said participant 3 (interview with Muslim student, 2026).

The statement above represents what is known in international literature as *inclusion through distinction* , a form of inclusivity that acknowledges the existence of other groups (Modood, 2013) . In this context, togetherness does not mean a fusion of identities, but rather a legitimate presence. This creates an open space where every student of different faiths can participate in school life, but with an awareness of their position.

Muslim students' daily practices during joint school activities demonstrate a subtle form of *symbolic negotiation* . Learning activities begin with a prayer in accordance with their religion, including formal activities such as ceremonies or other formal events that alternately combine Christian and Islamic symbols, such as a prayer recited twice, one in the Islamic version and the other in the Christian version. Students' expressions demonstrate a unique experience in learning and formal activities, which always begin with a prayer that varies according to their beliefs. In their statement:

"When we start studying, we pray according to our religion. We also pray twice during the ceremony: an Islamic prayer and a Christian prayer. But when we're praying for Christians, we just stay silent," said participant 4 (interview with Muslim students, 2026).

In such conditions, the actions of Muslim students to choose to remain silent without following the Christian prayers cannot be understood as a passive attitude, but rather as a conscious social strategy in maintaining a balance between respect for institutional traditions and maintaining the integrity of personal beliefs. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, this kind of practice is related to the concept of *everyday boundary work* , namely the way individuals actively manage the boundaries of religious identity in a social space dominated by certain religious structures, symbols and norms (Ammerman, 2014) . This process shows that religious expression in a plural context is not static, but is negotiated situationally through reflective and adaptive daily practices (McGuire, 2008) .

Moderation, in the experiences of Muslim students, does not exist as an institutional slogan, but as a social skill learned and practiced situationally. However, the data also revealed moments that marked Muslim students' experiences of adapting to a symbolic culture with Christian overtones. One Muslim student stated:

"When we first came here, we felt a bit... like that!, when we saw Christian symbols like the cross, but after a while we got used to it," said participant 5 (interview with Muslim students, 2026).

The student's statement indicates that Muslim students' religious experiences in a Christian school environment do not occur instantly, but rather through a process of adaptation. The phrase *"when we first arrived here, we felt so... like that!"* indicates an initial awkward response when confronted with different religious symbols, such as the cross. This condition reflects a sense of identity and cultural boundaries that naturally arise in interfaith contexts. However, the follow-up statement, *"but over time, we got used to it,"* indicates the occurrence of a daily, adaptive negotiation process. This process does not mean the loss of Muslim students' religious identity, but rather indicates their ability to navigate a religiously diverse school environment. The habits developed are not the result of coercion, but rather the result of repeated interactions that unconsciously build new understandings of difference.

These findings confirm that religious moderation for Muslim students in Christian schools does not exist as an abstract concept, but rather as a lived practice experienced through direct individual experience. They learn firsthand how to manage their feelings, negotiate identity boundaries, and develop an attitude of acceptance without sacrificing their personal beliefs. Thus, these experiences confirm that religious moderation is a social process that occurs continuously in everyday life, through self-adjustment.

Interfaith Interaction as a Social Space

Interfaith interactions at the Nusantara Christian Vocational School in Kudus demonstrate that the school's social space is not merely an academic space, but also a social space that serves as an arena for the formation of religious moderation practices. Relationships between teachers, students, and students across faiths are built through intense and repeated interactions, resulting in a relatively fluid and adaptive form of coexistence. In this context, moderation is not merely present in the form of formal policies but is manifested through living social practices directly experienced by teachers and students. One concrete form of this interaction is evident in the overlapping use of religious language in everyday conversation. The principal stated that:

"For us, it is commonplace to say the words Alhamdulillah, God willing, when interacting or communicating. I usually continue with the words Praise God," said Participant 1 (Interview, Principal, 2026).

This statement is reinforced by the statement of the Islamic Education teacher, who stated that:

"Sometimes someone says hello. If it's someone other than us, I answer with 'alaika'," said participant 2 (Interview, Islamic Religious Education teacher, 2026).

The statement above demonstrates a naturally occurring process of symbolic adaptation, where religious expressions are not maintained exclusively but instead negotiated into more inclusive and contextual forms. Such practices reflect the formation of a social space that allows for interfaith symbolic exchange without diminishing individual identities. This practice illustrates that religious experience transcends strict doctrinal dimensions and instead manifests itself through routine social exchanges, ultimately fostering more inclusive and open cross-identity relationships. (Ammerman, 2016) . Thus, religious moderation in this context does not exist as

an abstract concept, but as a social experience learned through direct involvement in interfaith practices.

Furthermore, interfaith interactions not only create a harmonious atmosphere but also serve as a fairly effective medium for social learning. Through simple habits, such as responding to religious expressions in a multireligious environment, the values of empathy, respect, and openness to differences are indirectly internalized. These findings indicate that religious moderation is not always explicitly taught in the curriculum structure or teaching materials, but rather is practiced as part of the ongoing social experience of daily life. Thus, schools serve not only as academic spaces but also as social spaces and laboratories for interfaith interactions, where religious moderation is carried out through symbolic negotiation processes and natural, everyday engagement.

Such interactional modalities create a social environment where differences are not eradicated but rather constructively navigated through positive collective experiences (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Within an educational framework, this dynamic is crucial because it facilitates the development of a more inclusive social identity. However, such interfaith practices are not entirely free from symbolic dimensions and potential ambiguity. Shared activities can simultaneously function as spaces of inclusion and as mechanisms for the performative reproduction of harmony. This means that interfaith participation in religious activities can be understood as a form of genuine social engagement, but also has the potential to become part of institutional norms that require students to display tolerant attitudes in the public space of the school. From this perspective, religious moderation is not only a result of social interaction but is also shaped by social expectations that influence how individuals display their religious identities in the public sphere. Religious identity does not exist as a fixed entity, but rather as a practice that is contextually negotiated through everyday interactions and the surrounding social relations (Ammerman, 2016); (Perez-Vela, 2023).

Empirical evidence suggests that moderation is not simply a product of formal policy frameworks or curricular arrangements; rather, it is fostered through social encounters that provide opportunities for school members (teachers and students) to engage, integrate, and build relationships among individuals from diverse religious traditions. Thus, values such as tolerance, empathy, and solidarity are not only normatively transmitted, but they are developed and reinforced through direct participation in communal practices that occur regularly and continuously in everyday life. These findings support the assertion that the promotion of religious moderation within a multicultural educational framework is significantly more efficacious when it emerges from authentic social interactions, rather than solely from normative policy formulations.

Implementation Challenges: Moderation as a Process

Research findings indicate that the implementation of religious moderation does not occur automatically, but rather is a social process that undergoes ongoing negotiation amidst competing ideological, cultural, and institutional interests. The principal stated that:

"We accept Muslim students, but they still have to be able to adapt to the rules and culture that already exist here," said participant 1 (principal, Interview, 2026).

This statement shows that acceptance of diversity goes hand in hand with the expectation of adaptation to prevailing institutional identity norms.

One crucial issue that arises is the thin line between efforts to create inclusivity and tendencies toward assimilation. Muslim teachers and students are indeed accepted as part of the school community, but at the same time they are also faced with expectations to adapt to the

institutional culture as an identity that has been rooted in the institution. This is evident, for example, in the implementation of activities that include two alternating prayers that indirectly shape certain behavioral patterns. Such situations reflect what Modood (2013) calls *conditional inclusion*, namely a form of acceptance that depends on the extent to which individuals are able to adapt to dominant norms.

On the other hand, ideological tensions are evident in the responses of external parties, such as the Christian community (church congregations), who tend to disagree with the school's policy of bringing in Islamic Religious Education teachers. This situation illustrates that on the one hand, it is considered a wise action in realizing the law regarding students' right to religious education according to their religion, while on the other hand, it is believed that the policy has the capacity to change the institution's fundamental identity. In this context, it implies that identity is not presented rigidly, but rather is continuously constructed and maintained through daily policy decisions.

Within the framework of *institutional religious identity*, educational policy cannot be understood as a neutral instrument, but rather as an arena in which religious identity is negotiated, maintained, and under certain conditions redefined through the interaction between regulations, institutional actors, and the surrounding social context (Lomsdalen, C., & von der Lippe, 2025); (Harjatanaya, 2025). In practice, an institution's religious identity is not fixed, but is continuously reshaped through processes of social interaction and adaptation to the diversity present within it (Perez-Vela, 2023). This condition shows that religious moderation in religiously oriented educational institutions is inherently imbued with non-neutrality. In this regard, moderation should not be seen as an attempt to eliminate identity; rather, it is a mechanism for navigating differences while maintaining the symbolic foundations of the institutions involved.

These findings reinforce the argument that religious moderation in education is best understood as a dynamic process, not a final achievement. The apparent harmony that manifests externally is often maintained through emotional exertion, symbolic adjustments, and implicit negotiations among minority groups, both at the institutional level and within their composition. By elucidating this aspect, the research refrains from framing moderation as an idealistic construct; instead, it is a pragmatic social practice marked by achievements, but also constrained by prevailing power dynamics and cultural limitations that persist within institutional frameworks.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of religious moderation at SMK Kristen Nusantara Kudus cannot be understood solely as a form of administrative compliance with national education regulations, but rather as a complex and continuously negotiated social process. The fulfillment of the right to learn Islamic Religious Education for Muslim students demonstrates that the practice of religious moderation occurs within a tension between the principle of inclusivity and efforts to maintain institutional identity. On the one hand, the school is able to provide a relatively safe and open atmosphere for students from diverse religious backgrounds. However, on the other hand, this openness is realized through a series of symbolic and cultural compromises.

Furthermore, the research findings show that the values of moderation such as justice, balance, and respect for diversity do not always appear in an equal or balanced form. These values exist in contextual and layered practices, so that their implementation still demonstrates the dynamics within the social experiences of the actors involved. Institutional justice is reflected

in the provision of Muslim teachers, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum, and prayer spaces, but symbolic justice still demonstrates the subtle boundaries experienced by Muslim students structurally. Moderation, in this context, is more appropriately understood as *negotiated moderation*, a practice that emerges from the ongoing interaction between formal policies, the institution's religious identity, and individual adaptive strategies.

The results of this study indicate that actors in the world of education from principals and Islamic Religious Education teachers to students play a significant role in shaping the practice of religious moderation. Islamic Religious Education teachers and the Muslim student community demonstrate a more contextual and situational approach to the practice of moderation, continually adapting and regulating the manifestation of their religious identity in accordance with the dominant cultural norms of the educational institution. This condition suggests that the concept of religious moderation in faith-based educational institutions cannot be considered a static or inherently achieved state, but rather a dynamic process that continues to evolve and includes various forms of compromise.

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances the discourse surrounding the examination of religious moderation by expanding its analytical framework beyond the normative domain or government policy to include institutional practices and the lived experiences of educational stakeholders. The findings confirm that non-Islamic educational institutions retain a crucial role in strengthening the implementation of moderate Islam, not through the eradication of religious identity, but through the implementation of reflective and equitable diversity management. The novelty of this study lies in its analytical focus on the manifestation of religious moderation in Christian educational settings characterized by a predominantly Muslim student demographic, a social context relatively underexplored in previous scholarly investigations.

Based on the comprehensive findings and subsequent analysis, a series of recommendations can be formulated. *First*, religious educators, particularly those teaching Islamic Religious Education in non-Islamic educational institutions, are in dire need of professional and pedagogical support. This is crucial because their role extends beyond curriculum implementers to serve as cultural mediators and facilitators of moderation. Training initiatives that are sensitive to the dynamics of multireligious environments are crucial to equip educators with the strategies necessary to navigate the complexities of maintaining the integrity of religious teachings and adapting to the institutional environment. *Second*, ongoing research aimed at developing comparative methodologies encompassing interfaith educational frameworks and institutions across regions is recommended, thereby capturing the diverse manifestations of moderation practices across various social contexts. Thus, this research supports the notion that religious moderation within educational frameworks transcends merely normative objectives; rather, it embodies a reflective endeavor that requires a commitment to openness, a heightened critical awareness, and institutional fortitude to persist in the pursuit of justice in contexts characterized by diversity.

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