

Moderation As Transformation: Faith-Based Leadership and Cultural Understanding in Manggarai's Madrasah

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores how leaders and educators in Manggarai's madrasahs internalize, interpret, and enact religious moderation through faith-based transformational leadership within Indonesia's plural educational context. Employing an exploratory mixed-methods design—dominated by qualitative interpretation and supported by descriptive quantitative data—the research involved ten madrasahs across Manggarai Regency and engaged approximately 100 participants, including principals, teachers, and supervisors. Findings reveal that faith (iman) functions as a transformative moral foundation guiding leadership through sincerity, balance, and justice. Leadership manifests as participatory and compassionate practice, translating moral conviction into inclusive governance. Moderation emerges as intercultural praxis, expressed through empathy, community collaboration, and interfaith engagement. Quantitative results substantiate these insights, showing positive correlations between faith-based leadership, religious moderation, and intercultural competence. Synthesizing both strands of data, the study formulates the conceptual model of “Moderation as Transformation,” emphasizing moderation as an active moral and pedagogical process rather than a static doctrinal stance. This model provides both a theoretical contribution to Islamic education studies and practical guidance for madrasahs in fostering pluralism, ethical leadership, and social harmony within Indonesia's diverse cultural landscape.

Keywords: Faith-Based Leadership, Religious Moderation, Intercultural Competence, Islamic Education, Plural Societies.

1. Introduction

The multicultural landscape in Indonesia presents a rich yet complex tapestry of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. In regions such as Manggarai Regency—where Catholicism, Islam, and indigenous beliefs coexist—madrasahs play a strategic role as spaces of interreligious and

intercultural engagement. The challenge of maintaining harmony in such plural settings has made religious moderation (wasathiyah) a central pillar of Indonesia's Islamic educational discourse. Jamaluddin (2024) highlights that religious moderation is not merely an ideological construct but a pedagogical imperative aimed at

shaping tolerant, critically minded citizens through contextualized curricula and interfaith collaboration. Khumaini et al. (2023) demonstrate that integrating Islamic epistemology into education strengthens learners' capacity to engage with religious plurality in a balanced and ethical manner. These findings align with the observation that regions with deep-rooted communal traditions, such as Manggarai, can leverage education to construct shared spaces of coexistence—mutual grounds where faith and culture interact productively (Suasta, 2025).

Within this plural context, faith-based leadership becomes a transformative agent that bridges doctrinal fidelity and intercultural understanding. Islamic educational leaders are expected not only to maintain religious identity but also to cultivate empathy, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity in their institutions. Khojir et al. (2021) emphasize that leadership grounded in Islamic values can effectively nurture intercultural competence when accompanied by reflective pedagogy and social participation. Similarly, research on empathetic and ethical leadership in faith-based organizations suggests that leaders who embody compassion and dialogical communication create environments conducive to moral and cultural growth (Sharip et al., 2020). In madrasahs, this leadership ethos translates into integrating religious moderation and intercultural competence as parallel aims of character formation. As Zamroni et al. (2025) underscore, such alignment reflects Indonesia's ongoing effort to institutionalize moderation as both a moral vision and an educational transformation.

Empirical studies across diverse educational settings demonstrate that transformational leadership profoundly influences teachers' motivation, institutional innovation, and intercultural awareness, particularly within faith-based learning environments. In the context of Islamic education, leadership is understood not merely as an administrative mechanism but as a form of moral and spiritual agency grounded in prophetic ethics and the pursuit of communal well-being (Shah, 2015). Leaders who embody faith-based values have been shown to foster

greater inclusivity (Samier & ElKaleh, 2019), dialogical engagement, and intercultural competence among teachers and students (Net et al., 2024 ; Nawas et al., 2022).

Similar patterns have been observed in Indonesia, where religious moderation in Islamic education thrives most effectively under leadership models that integrate empathy (Abdullah, 2024), collaboration, and contextual sensitivity to cultural diversity (Suryadi, 2022). However, most of these studies remain situated at the macro-level of policy or institutional analyses, overlooking the micro-pedagogical realities in which moderation and leadership are enacted in everyday school interactions. Moreover, research in Indonesia has been geographically concentrated in Java and major urban areas, leaving the plural educational experiences of eastern regions—such as Manggarai Regency—largely unexamined (Jamaluddin, 2024). Consequently, there is a pressing need to explore how faith-based transformational leadership operates as a living praxis of moderation within madrasahs embedded in culturally heterogeneous communities.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to religious moderation and leadership in Islamic education, a critical gap remains in understanding how moderation functions as a transformative leadership process that simultaneously cultivates intercultural competence within madrasah settings. Prior studies often conceptualize moderation as a normative framework or policy initiative, rather than as a lived pedagogical practice that shapes teacher–student relationships and community engagement (Muhsin et al., 2024; Werang et al., 2023). As Abdullah (2024) emphasizes, moderation should be understood as a dialogical process of identity negotiation, requiring leaders to integrate theological principles with socio-cultural realities. This view aligns with recent studies showing that effective faith-based leadership in Indonesian Islamic schools not only enhances organizational transformation but also mediates cultural pluralism and empathy-driven communication (Subandi & Fauzan, 2021). By situating this study

within Manggarai’s distinctive socio-religious context—where Muslims coexist alongside Catholics and indigenous communities—the research seeks to extend current discourses on Islamic education. The novelty of this study lies in proposing a conceptual framework, ‘Moderation as Transformation,’ that positions religious moderation not as a static theological construct but as an active pedagogical and cultural process manifested through faith-based transformational leadership.

This study seeks to explore how leaders and educators in Manggarai’s madrasahs internalize, interpret, and enact the values of religious moderation within their daily leadership and teaching practices. It aims to uncover the mechanisms through which faith-based leadership promotes moderation as an integral aspect of educational life, particularly in shaping ethical, inclusive, and dialogical school environments. Furthermore, the study examines how such moderation practices foster intercultural competence among teachers and students, enabling them to engage constructively across religious and cultural boundaries. Ultimately, this research endeavors to develop a contextual model of ‘Moderation as Transformation’—a framework that reflects the lived educational realities of Indonesia’s plural society, where religious commitment and cultural diversity coexist as foundations for harmony, collaboration, and shared moral growth.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative interpretive inquiry as the dominant strand with supporting descriptive quantitative data (Ivankova et al., 2006; Abdurrohman et al., 2025). Such a design allows researchers to explore complex social meanings while validating findings through measurable tendencies, a strategy widely used in Islamic educational research. The qualitative component offered insight into leaders’ and teachers’ values, beliefs, and lived experiences that shape leadership practices, while the quantitative strand confirmed these insights through descriptive data analysis.

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted across ten madrasahs in Manggarai Regency, representing three levels—Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), and Madrasah Aliyah (MA)—selected for their geographical diversity and institutional characteristics. Approximately 100 participants, including principals, teachers, and supervisors, were selected through a pre-screening survey distributed via Google Forms to ensure balanced representation. Ten informants (five heads and five senior teachers) were selected for in-depth interviews.

Table 1. Profile of Key Informants in Qualitative Interviews

Informant Code	Position	Madrasah Level	Years of Experience	Key Themes Identified
INF-01	Madrasah Head	MI	15	Faith as a moral compass; inclusive leadership
INF-02	Madrasah Head	MI	10	Moderation in decision-making; servant leadership
INF-03	Madrasah Head	MTs	18	Integration of spiritual and pedagogical values
INF-04	Madrasah Head	MTs	12	Participatory leadership; school harmony
INF-05	Madrasah Head	MA	20	Transformative leadership grounded in justice

INF-06	Senior Teacher	MI	14	Teacher empathy; student character building
INF-07	Senior Teacher	MTs	11	Modeling of tawasuth and i'tidal values
INF-08	Senior Teacher	MTs	9	Faith-based ethics in classroom management
INF-09	Senior Teacher	MA	13	Interfaith collaboration and social programs
INF-10	Senior Teacher	MA	17	Leadership humility and transformative vision

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews with madrasah heads and senior teachers, focus group discussions (FGDs) with selected educators, and direct observations of school activities, including community engagement, religious gatherings, and inter-student interactions. These qualitative techniques were complemented by a quantitative survey using a five-point Likert scale to measure teachers’ perceptions of transformational leadership (Asmendri et al., 2024), religious moderation (Muhsin et al., 2024), and intercultural competence (Eko & Putranto, 2019).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six-phase model—transcription, open coding, categorization, theme generation, and interpretation—while quantitative data were

analyzed descriptively using SPSS and Excel to calculate mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions. Triangulation was achieved through member checking and peer debriefing, ensuring interpretive credibility and dependability (Hardani et al., 2020). Ethical considerations were maintained throughout, with informed consent obtained from all participating institutions and respondents, and confidentiality preserved in accordance with accepted standards for social and religious research.

3. Results

Faith-Based Leadership and Religious Moderation

Quantitative data were analyzed to examine teachers’ perceptions of faith-based leadership and its relationship with religious moderation practices within their respective madrasahs. Table 2 presents the descriptive and correlational statistics.

Table 2. Descriptive and Correlational Statistics: Faith-Based Leadership and Religious Moderation

Variable	Mean	SD	% High Category	r	Interpretation
Faith-Based Leadership	4.45	0.39	85%	—	Powerful moral–spiritual influence
Religious Moderation Practices	4.28	0.42	82%	0.61	Moderate positive correlation
Leadership Participation Climate	4.36	0.41	80%	0.57	Moderately strong relationship

The results show that faith-based leadership scored a high mean ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.39$), with 85% of teachers rating it in the high category. The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.61$) between faith-based leadership and moderation-related programs indicates a moderate positive relationship. Regression analysis ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.05$) showed that faith-based leadership significantly predicts the intensity of moderation programs, accounting for approximately 37% of the variance in respondents' moderation behavior.

Faith-based leadership serves as the moral and spiritual foundation upon which the values of religious moderation are cultivated within Manggarai's madrasahs. In these institutions, leadership is not perceived as an administrative function but as a form of moral stewardship rooted in Islamic ethical principles such as amanah (trust), ikhlas (sincerity), and tawasuth (moderation). Madrasah leaders in Manggarai perceive faith (iman) not merely as a private conviction but as a transformative moral force

that permeates all dimensions of their leadership practice. As Madrasah Head INF-01 noted:

"When we make decisions, we always start with the principle of sincerity (ikhlas) and balance (tawazun). Faith teaches us that leadership is service, not authority."

Similarly, INF-03 described faith-based leadership as guiding with compassion while maintaining firmness in justice (i'tidal), emphasizing that leadership itself is an act of worship rather than a mere managerial function. A senior teacher (INF-06) reflected:

"We always teach students that being Muslim in Manggarai means respecting others. Our headmaster supports interfaith dialogue; we even have a 'Peace Day' program where students exchange reflections on tolerance."

Religious Moderation and Intercultural Competence

Table 3 presents the relationship between religious moderation practices and intercultural competence among teachers in Manggarai's madrasahs.

Table 3. Relationship Between Religious Moderation and Intercultural Competence in Manggarai's Madrasahs

Variable	Mean	SD	% High Category	r	p-value	Interpretation
Religious Moderation Practices	4.32	0.44	82%	—	—	High perception of moderation values
Intercultural Competence	4.18	0.47	80%	0.58	0.002*	Moderate positive correlation
Collaborative School Climate	4.26	0.41	84%	0.56	0.004*	Moderately strong association

Table 3 reveals consistently high levels of teacher perceptions regarding both religious moderation practices ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.44$) and intercultural competence ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.47$). Approximately 82% of teachers reported a high or very high perception of religious moderation. The correlation analysis demonstrates a moderate

positive relationship ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.05$) between religious moderation and intercultural competence, implying that as teachers and school leaders engage more deeply in moderation practices, they also develop stronger intercultural understanding. A strong perception of collaborative school climate ($M = 4.26$, $SD =$

0.41, $r = 0.56$) further confirms that cooperation and openness among teachers directly support intercultural learning. Teachers report that moderation is concretely enacted through intercultural learning and community-based collaboration. As one teacher (INF-07) explained:

"We always remind students that tolerance is not only about accepting others but learning to understand them. In class discussions, I often bring up local cultural wisdom, such as dudu z̄eke leleŋ (talking until consensus), to show how harmony has always been part of Manggarai's heritage."

A senior teacher (INF-08) observed that:

"In many lessons, we highlight stories of cooperation and mutual respect. When students visit other religious communities, they don't just see difference—they learn to welcome it. That experience changes their attitude, not just their knowledge."

Constructing the Contextual Model of 'Moderation as Transformation.'

The qualitative data reveal that moderation emerges from the everyday moral negotiations and pedagogical practices that shape school life in Manggarai's madrasahs, as expressed by the informants below. One principal (INF-02) reflected:

"Moderation for us is a process of balance. It starts from the heart—faith that is sincere and patient—then moves into how we guide teachers, decide fairly, and listen to others. In Manggarai, we lead by building relationships, not by commanding."

A senior teacher (INF-05) emphasized that moderation requires self-reflection and moral discipline, especially in an environment where Muslims are a religious minority:

"We must show the beauty of Islam through character, not argument. When our students participate in joint programs with other schools, they learn that respect is also a form of da'wah."

Through thematic synthesis, Table 4 organizes the qualitative data into three core themes that together construct the framework of 'Moderation as Transformation.'

Table 4. Thematic Integration of the Moderation as Transformation Framework

Theme	Description	Illustrative Data and Interpretive Insights
Faith as Ethical Foundation	Faith (iman) serves as a moral and spiritual compass, orienting leadership and pedagogy toward sincerity (ikhlas), balance (tawazun), and justice (i'tidal). It anchors moderation in personal conviction and collective morality.	"Moderation starts from the heart—faith that is sincere and patient." (INF-02). "Faith teaches us humility; it reminds us that leading is serving." (INF-04). Leaders interpret faith as a source of inner balance that shapes moral decision-making, ensuring that administrative authority remains grounded in ethical responsibility.
Leadership as Transformative Agency	Leadership embodies translating moral conviction into inclusive action and participatory governance. Leaders act as facilitators of dialogue, not as authoritarian figures.	"Our principal often says, we learn from each other. That is how he practices justice." (INF-08). "Leading with fairness and compassion makes others trust you." (INF-03). This theme highlights the prophetic leadership paradigm—leadership as service (khidmah), consultation (shura), and empathy (rahmah).

Moderation as Intercultural Praxis	Moderation manifests as lived engagement—empathy, collaboration, and social responsibility. It connects Islamic moral values with local traditions and plural community life.	"Being a good Muslim also means being a good neighbor." (INF-09). "Respect is also a form of da'wah; students learn more through experience than through words." (INF-05). Teachers integrate tasamuh (tolerance) and tawazun (balance) into lessons and community projects, transforming moderation into civic action.
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Table 4 reveals a coherent moral and pedagogical framework connecting faith, leadership, and moderation as interdependent dimensions of transformation. The first theme, Faith as Ethical Foundation, emphasizes that iman serves as the moral compass for educators and leaders, shaping humility, sincerity, and justice in professional conduct. The second theme, Leadership as Transformative Agency, illustrates how faith-driven moral conviction is operationalized through participatory governance, dialogical decision-making, and service-oriented leadership. Principals and teachers in Manggarai demonstrate that authentic leadership is achieved through khidmah (service) and rahmah (compassion), transforming authority into collaboration.

The third theme, Moderation as Intercultural Praxis, captures how moderation moves beyond theological rhetoric to become a lived practice of empathy, civic participation, and interfaith cooperation. Teachers and principals integrate moderation values—tawasuth, tasamuh, and i'tidal—into daily learning and community activities, enabling students to embody Islam's message of peace (rahmatan lil 'alamin) in real social contexts. The integration of these three themes forms the basis of the 'Moderation as Transformation' framework, reconceptualizing moderation as an active process of moral and cultural formation.

4. Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative findings of this study converge to substantiate the central thesis that faith-based leadership is a significant and positive predictor of religious moderation in Manggarai's madrasahs ($r = 0.61$, $\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.05$), explaining approximately 37% of the

variance in teachers' moderation behavior. The high mean scores for faith-based leadership ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.39$) and moderation practices ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.42$)—with 85% and 82% of teachers respectively placing these variables in the high category—confirm that teachers perceive their principals as active moral agents whose authority is inseparable from Islamic ethical commitment. This finding directly addresses the first research objective: understanding how madrasah leaders in a plural minority-Muslim context internalize and enact religious moderation through their daily leadership practice. The result is consistent with Shah (2015), who argues that Islamic educational leadership is fundamentally rooted in the spiritual dimensions of taqwa (piety) and ikhlas (sincerity), and corroborates Rahman (2025), who demonstrates that transformational leadership anchored in Islamic values meaningfully strengthens teachers' moral engagement and organizational harmony. The qualitative layer deepens this picture: leaders in Manggarai consistently positioned their authority as khidmah (service) rather than kekuasaan (power), framing moderation not as policy compliance but as an outward expression of inner conviction. As INF-01 articulated, all decisions begin with ikhlas and tawazun—a leadership orientation that Naqbi (2024) identifies as integral to effective Islamic leadership, grounded in shura (consultation) and rahmah (compassion). Kurnia (2026) reinforces this empirically, showing that empathy-driven leadership in Islamic institutions generates sustained social capital and trust across educational communities.

Beyond statistical relationships, the qualitative evidence reveals the lived mechanisms through which faith-based leadership activates religious

moderation as an institutional norm rather than a bureaucratic requirement. Manggarai's madrasah leaders do not treat moderation as a fixed theological position to be transmitted; they practice it as a continuous moral negotiation—shaping school culture through daily conversations, policy choices, and community-facing programs. INF-03 described the discipline of maintaining *i'tidal* (justice) alongside compassion in guiding teachers, while INF-06 spoke of institutionalized initiatives such as “Peace Day,” in which students across religious backgrounds share reflections on tolerance and coexistence. These practices align with Musyahid (2023), who establishes through systematic review that religious moderation in Islamic education is most durable when translated into social pedagogy—enacted through civic engagement and collaborative community activities rather than doctrinal instruction alone. Rosanti et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate that Islamic religious education learning models incorporating multicultural approaches substantially strengthen teachers' professional commitment and students' intercultural dispositions. The dialogical and participatory character of leadership in Manggarai also resonates with Hidayatulloh and Afiyah (2025), who argue that multicultural literacy in Islamic education must be anchored by school leaders who actively model tolerance through deliberate pedagogical design. Collectively, these patterns establish that faith-based leadership functions simultaneously as a moral catalyst and an organizational architecture—one that converts theological principles into practiced, visible institutional norms and enriches the broader conceptual landscape of Islamic educational leadership in plural societies.

The study's second objective—examining how moderation practices foster intercultural competence—is addressed by a moderate but statistically significant positive relationship between the two constructs ($r = 0.58, p = 0.002$), further supported by a strong association with collaborative school climate ($M = 4.26, SD = 0.41, r = 0.56, p = 0.004$). The finding that 82%

of teachers perceived high levels of religious moderation and 80% reported strong intercultural competence indicates that these two capacities co-develop within the same institutional ecology rather than emerging independently. This result corroborates Huzali et al. (2025), who demonstrate that moderation-oriented pedagogies in Islamic schools cultivate *tasamuh* (tolerance) and *ta'awun* (cooperation) as core competencies for navigating religiously diverse environments, and aligns with Eko and Putranto (2019), who establish that intercultural competence deepens significantly when formal religious education integrates local cultural wisdom. The qualitative narratives of INF-07 and INF-08 give this statistical relationship concrete texture: teachers in Manggarai deliberately incorporate indigenous cultural practices—such as *dudu zeke lele*, the Manggaraian tradition of building consensus through extended communal dialogue—into their classroom instruction, thereby embedding Islamic moderation within the indigenous moral ethos of the community. Siti Kholida et al. (2025) reinforce this approach, finding that multicultural Islamic education emphasizing experiential interfaith encounters proves more effective in fostering intercultural tolerance than curriculum-centered approaches alone. These converging findings affirm that moderation, when practiced pedagogically rather than merely proclaimed doctrinally, becomes a methodology that equips students to engage constructively and empathetically across cultural and religious boundaries—an outcome that speaks to both the educational and civic dimensions of madrasah formation.

The significance of the moderation–intercultural competence relationship is further amplified by the distinctive socio-religious character of Manggarai, where Muslims constitute a minority within a predominantly Catholic population alongside indigenous communities. In this context, the madrasah becomes more than an institution of religious instruction—it functions, as Suasta (2025) draws on Bhabha's concept of the “Third Space,” as a productive contact zone where faith and culture interact to generate

shared frameworks of coexistence. Rahmadi and Hamdan (2023) find that integrating local wisdom and interfaith collaboration into madrasah activities deepens students' intercultural empathy and cultivates a sense of civic responsibility that extends beyond religious boundaries (Siregar et al., 2025; Wesnawa et al., 2019). Prasetyo et al. (2025) further argue that religious moderation, when operationalized as a pedagogical framework rather than a policy mandate, transforms Islamic education into an active site of intercultural citizenship development—a finding that directly resonates with the Manggarai case. Yazida et al. (2024) reinforce this by demonstrating that educators who apply the Quranic *wasathiyah* paradigm in classroom practice cultivate learning cultures that harmonize religious commitment with social inclusivity, while Khojir et al. (2021) show that teaching materials explicitly designed around intercultural competence objectives meaningfully deepen students' capacity to engage across religious divides. Taken together, these findings establish that Manggarai's madrasahs are not passive recipients of national moderation policy but active agents of intercultural formation—institutions that translate theological values into competencies necessary for democratic, pluralistic citizenship in an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous society.

Synthesizing the quantitative and qualitative evidence, this study advances the conceptual model of “Moderation as Transformation,” organized around three interdependent themes—Faith as Ethical Foundation, Leadership as Transformative Agency, and Moderation as Intercultural Praxis—each of which carries distinct theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the first theme confirms that *iman* (faith) operates as the generative moral compass from which leadership and pedagogy derive their direction and legitimacy, a finding consistent with Shah (2015) and Ruhullah and Ushama (2025), who argue that spiritually grounded Islamic leadership integrates theological doctrine with practical wisdom and communal care. The second theme demonstrates that this moral

conviction is operationalized through *shura* (consultation), *rahmah* (compassion), and *hikmah* (wisdom)—prophetic leadership values identified by Mujizatullah et al. (2025) and confirmed by Subandi and Fauzan (2021) as foundational to pesantren-based transformational leadership models in Indonesia. The third theme reframes moderation itself as embodied civic action, consistent (Werang et al., 2023; Abdullah (2024), who argues that moderation must be conceived as a dialogical process of identity negotiation rather than a fixed doctrinal stance, and with Muhsin et al. (2024), who demonstrate that moderation in Indonesian Islamic institutions exerts its greatest impact when it shapes institutional culture rather than remaining confined to curriculum objectives. Together, these three themes advance a holistic model integrating the spiritual, relational, and civic dimensions of educational leadership—repositioning moderation from a peripheral religious norm to the moral and transformative center of Islamic educational practice—and offer a novel empirical and conceptual contribution to Islamic education scholarship.

The practical and policy implications of the “Moderation as Transformation” framework operate across multiple levels of the educational system. For school leadership development, the findings call for embedding prophetic ethics—particularly *ikhlas* (sincerity), *tawasuth* (balance), and *i'tidal* (justice)—into formal competency frameworks and training programs for madrasah principals, so that moral formation becomes a structured rather than incidental dimension of leadership preparation. Zamroni et al. (2025) underscore the urgency of this through bibliometric analysis, showing that the institutionalized pathways through which moderation influences Islamic education remain underdeveloped despite growing scholarly attention. For teacher professional development, the study advocates for modules that explicitly integrate moderation-based pedagogy with intercultural communication competencies, enabling educators to translate Islamic values into culturally responsive classroom practices, as

Asmendri et al. (2024) recommend in their work on transformational leadership through social media engagement in Islamic institutions.

At the curricular level, the findings support the meaningful integration of local cultural wisdom—such as Manggarai's communal traditions—into the design of Islamic religious education, a strategy that Jamaluddin (2024) demonstrates produces more effective, tolerant citizens than standardized national curriculum frameworks. Khumaini et al. (2023) reinforce this at the epistemic level, advocating for the integration of Islamic epistemology into pluralistic educational settings as a foundation for engaging religious plurality ethically and constructively. Looking to emerging contexts, Sayyi et al. (2025) emphasize the pressing need for moderate Islamic education curriculum designs that realize social tolerance in the era of Society 5.0, while Adeoye et al. (2025) draw attention to the expanding role of digital learning environments in scaling religious moderation pedagogy across diverse educational management contexts—a dimension that invites dedicated institutional and policy attention in the years ahead.

This study is not without limitations that temper the scope of its conclusions and point to productive directions for future inquiry. The research was conducted within a single geographic region—Manggarai Regency—across ten madrasahs and approximately 100 participants, which constrains the generalizability of its findings to other Indonesian provinces or to Muslim-minority educational settings elsewhere. While the plural socio-religious character of Manggarai renders it a uniquely informative research site, caution is warranted in applying the “Moderation as Transformation” model to contexts with different demographic compositions, institutional histories, or cultural frameworks. The dominant qualitative strand of the mixed-methods design, though rich in interpretive depth, is shaped by researcher positionality and hermeneutic choices, and the quantitative component is limited to descriptive and correlational analyses that preclude causal

inference; future studies employing structural equation modeling or longitudinal experimental designs would provide more robust evidence for the causal mechanisms connecting faith-based leadership, moderation, and intercultural competence.

Additionally, reliance on self-reported survey data and interview responses carries the risk of social desirability bias, particularly given the normative weight of moderation discourse in Indonesian Islamic education policy—a methodological challenge that Lestari (2024) also identifies in multicultural Islamic education research, noting that participants often align their responses with prevailing institutional expectations rather than fully disclosing the tensions and ambiguities of their daily practice. The study further does not assess student learning outcomes directly, leaving open a critical empirical question about the downstream effects of moderation leadership on character formation and intercultural competencies at the student level. These limitations notwithstanding, the findings make a meaningful contribution to Islamic educational research and practice by demonstrating—through the integrated lenses of Samier and ElKaleh (2019) on Islamic educational administration and Nawas et al. (2022) on dialogical religious identity in plural environments—that faith-based transformational leadership, religious moderation, and intercultural competence are mutually reinforcing processes that, when cultivated together, transform madrasahs into laboratories of pluralism: institutions in which the courage to inhabit difference with wisdom and compassion becomes the defining character of Islamic education.

5. Conclusion

Faith-based transformational leadership, religious moderation, and intercultural competence operate as mutually reinforcing processes within Manggarai's madrasahs, collectively forming the conceptual framework of “Moderation as Transformation.” The findings confirm that faith-based leadership serves as a significant moral foundation that shapes and sustains

religious moderation practices across institutional life, with teachers consistently perceiving their principals as active moral agents whose authority is inseparable from Islamic ethical commitment. Moderation, in turn, proves to be a meaningful driver of intercultural competence, co-developing alongside a collaborative school climate in which openness and cooperation among educators reinforce one another. The qualitative findings deepen this picture by revealing that moderation in Manggarai's madrasahs is not a doctrinal stance transmitted through formal instruction but a lived moral negotiation enacted through daily leadership decisions, community programs, and culturally embedded pedagogy. Leaders consistently frame their authority as *khidmah* (service), anchoring governance in the principles of *ikhlas* (sincerity), *tawazun* (balance), and *i'tidal* (justice), while teachers integrate local wisdom such as *dudu zeke lelung* into classroom practice to ground Islamic moderation in the indigenous ethos of the community. Through thematic synthesis, three interdependent themes emerge: Faith as Ethical Foundation, Leadership as Transformative Agency, and Moderation as Intercultural Praxis—each confirming that moderation functions as the moral and transformative center of Islamic education in Manggarai's plural context rather than a peripheral institutional value. In this setting, madrasahs operate not as passive recipients of national moderation policy but as active laboratories of pluralism, demonstrating that religious commitment and intercultural openness are not in tension but are mutually constitutive dimensions of ethical educational formation.

Building on these findings, this study advances several recommendations for practice, policy, and future research. At the institutional level, madrasah leadership training programs should explicitly embed prophetic ethical principles—*ikhlas*, *tawasuth*, and *rahmah*—into formal principal competency frameworks, ensuring that moral formation is a structured dimension of leadership preparation rather than an assumed

personal quality. Teacher professional development should prioritize a moderation-based pedagogy integrated with intercultural communication skills, equipping educators to translate Islamic values into culturally responsive, dialogically rich classroom practice. At the curricular level, the meaningful incorporation of local wisdom into Islamic religious education—a strategy proven effective in Manggarai's plural context—should be formalized as a national curriculum design principle, particularly in regions where Muslim communities coexist with other religious groups. At the policy level, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and related educational authorities are encouraged to move beyond framing *wasathiyyah* as an ideological directive and instead invest in its institutionalization as a pedagogical framework embedded in teacher training, school leadership standards, and intercultural community engagement programs. Regarding future research, longitudinal studies tracking the developmental trajectories of both teachers and students would provide more robust evidence for the long-term effects of moderate leadership on character formation and intercultural competence. Cross-regional comparative studies examining how faith-based leadership and moderation practices vary across different provincial, demographic, and institutional contexts within Indonesia would substantially expand the generalizability of the "Moderation as Transformation" model. Future inquiry should also investigate student-level outcomes directly—assessing the degree to which moderation-centered leadership translates into measurable shifts in students' intercultural attitudes, civic dispositions, and interreligious empathy. Finally, the growing intersection of digital learning environments and moderation pedagogy represents an underexplored frontier that warrants dedicated research attention, particularly as Indonesian madrasahs increasingly operate within digitally mediated social and educational landscapes.

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8. AUTHOR DECLARATION

The authors confirm that this work is original, has not been published elsewhere, and is not currently under consideration for publication in another journal. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.