

## Dynamics of Religious Thought in Pesantrens in Indonesia: Between Radicalism, Moderation, and Liberalism

Siti Khoiriyah<sup>1</sup>, Aditia Muhammad Noor<sup>2</sup>, Abdullah Malik Ibrahim<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Sunan Giri, Bojonegoro, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Universitas Fatoni, Pattani, Thailand

[khoi@unugiri.ac.id](mailto:khoi@unugiri.ac.id), [maditia608@gmail.com](mailto:maditia608@gmail.com), [malik.ibrahim1996@gmail.com](mailto:malik.ibrahim1996@gmail.com)

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Corresponding author:

Email : [maditia608@gmail.com](mailto:maditia608@gmail.com)

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melacak evolusi pemikiran dan gerakan keagamaan di pondok pesantren dalam era globalisasi. Pendekatan yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah tinjauan pustaka. Temuan dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa radikalisme dan liberalisme di dalam pesantren sangat dipengaruhi oleh para pemimpinnya, baik pemilik, kyai (pemimpin agama), atau santri senior. Jika para pemimpin pesantren condong ke pandangan radikal, maka pesantren dan para santrinya pun cenderung memiliki perspektif radikal. Sebaliknya, jika para pemimpin bersikap moderat, maka pesantren dan para santrinya cenderung moderat, dan bahkan dalam situasi dan waktu tertentu bisa condong ke liberalisme. Dalam konteks globalisasi, pesantren di Indonesia tidak lagi sepenuhnya didominasi oleh kelompok tradisional atau fundamentalis-radikal. Pesantren baru yang didirikan oleh kelompok Islam lainnya telah mengubah lanskap pesantren, masing-masing dengan identitasnya sendiri. Ini menggambarkan perubahan wajah dan pola pikir pesantren yang semakin beragam dari waktu ke waktu akibat pengaruh globalisasi.

**Kata Kunci:** *Liberalisme, Moderasi, Pesantren, Radikalisme*

### Abstrack

This research aims to track the evolution of thought and religious movements in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) within the era of globalization. The approach employed in this study is literature review. The findings from this research indicate that radicalism and liberalism within a pesantren are greatly influenced by its leaders, whether they are the owners, kyai (religious leaders), or senior students (santri). If the leaders of a pesantren tend towards radical views, then the pesantren and its students are likely to also hold radical perspectives. Conversely, if the leaders maintain moderate attitudes, the pesantren and its students are inclined towards moderation, and in certain situations and times, may even lean towards liberalism. In the context of globalization, pesantren in Indonesia are no longer entirely dominated by traditional or fundamental-radical groups. New pesantrens established by other Islamic groups have altered the landscape of pesantren, each with its unique identity. This illustrates changes in the face and mindset of pesantren, which have become increasingly diverse over time due to the influence of globalization.

**Keyword:** *Liberalism, Moderation, Pesantren, Radicalism*

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding school education, generally known as a form of traditional education, focuses on teaching the core principles of Islam such as monotheism (tauhid/aqidah) (Asror Yusuf & Taufiq, 2020; Hidayah, 2021; Zarkasyi, 2020), the Quran, Hadiths, jurisprudence (fiqh), principles of jurisprudence (ushul fiqh), and the rituals of worship according to the guidance found in the Quran and Hadiths (Baidowi et al., 2021; Falikul Isbah, 2020). Islamic boarding school education has evolved since the first arrival of Islam in the archipelago of Nusantara (the Indonesian archipelago). Its lengthy history has made pesantren an inseparable part of Indonesia's native culture (Anam et al., 2019). Pesantren have flourished within Indonesia's open and tolerant culture, forming their identity and tradition rooted in local wisdom, where values of simplicity, openness, and communal living are esteemed (Assa'idi, 2021).

This tradition has been substantiated through the extensive historical journey of pesantren within the social, national, and state life (Roqib, 2021; Yahya & Sahidin, 2022). Several factors contribute to the tolerant and open nature of the pesantren tradition. Firstly, pesantren have grown and developed alongside communities, establishing strong social ties with their surroundings. Secondly, pesantren reflect local cultures, and their values and teachings can adapt to the community environment (Pohl, 2006). The religious understanding within pesantren adheres to the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah perspective, referencing selected authoritative books (al-kutub al-mu'tabarah) by classical scholars from the medieval ages, which tend to be flexible.

The social and intellectual cultural capital within pesantren forms the foundation for the existing educational systems and patterns. These educational systems and patterns have evolved from a matured culture with its distinct characteristics (Maxwell et al., 2022). The process of cultural formation results from continuous practices that shape a pattern (Barrio, 2021). The educational pattern constitutes a small part of the entire system, and this system is part of a broader culture. Culture, as an aspect encompassing and dominating other components within pesantren, influences the characteristics of the existing educational systems and patterns (Latif & Hafid, 2021). For instance, if the pesantren culture is based on principles of openness, tolerance, and simplicity, it will generate educational systems and patterns that embody these qualities. The educational culture of pesantren then becomes the foundation for widespread acceptance within the community (Bull, 2000; R. A. Lukens-Bull, 1970).

With the passage of time, pesantren has undergone significant changes, leading to a shift in the established and deeply rooted educational culture previously prevalent within society. Lately, pesantren has garnered negative stigma, and its role has been questioned by a portion of the population, particularly since the emergence of issues related to radicalism and terrorism within the country (Suliswiyadi et al., 2020). The stigma of radical pesantren arises due to suspicions linking the educational culture of pesantren with several cases of radicalism and terrorism (Yumitro et al., 2020), although the majority of the Islamic community doubts such connections. These changes are evident in the elements, culture, and educational patterns existing within pesantren. To comprehend the meaning behind these changes, one can view them through a phenomenological study framework, which aids in understanding and revealing the phenomena behind these shifts (Yumitro & Estu Kurniawati, 2020).

One of the driving factors for change within pesantren is the societal demand for diverse religious education models (Kawakip, 2020; Nurtawab & Wahyudi, 2022). However, research on the changes and development of pesantren and its influencing factors is a vast field. Therefore, this research will only touch upon related aspects, particularly the educational process and pesantren culture contributing to the rise of radical Islam as one of the changes experienced by pesantren. Ahmed (2011, pp. 11-14) concluded that Islamic education faces issues in the sense of being too narrow and promoting religious chauvinism. Pesantren have become one of the focal points of religious education after several radical actions were carried out in the name of religion (Suprajitno & Kurniawan, 2022). The revelation that some perpetrators of the bombings in Bali had connections to alumni of Pondok Pesantren al-Islam in Lamongan has often associated religious education in pesantren with radicalism.

The phenomenon of radicalism within pesantren is actually something new and unusual (Tolchah & Mu'ammam, 2019; Warnk, 2009). This research shares similarities with other studies, especially in the connection between pesantren education and the recent emergence of radicalism. Fundamentalism becomes radical or revolutionary when the desire to reform society is articulated in a political sense (Blühdorn, 2007; Miliopoulos, 2013). Historically, the term 'fundamentalism' was initially used to describe Protestant sects that regarded the Gospel as something absolute and perfect in a literal sense (Peels, 2023), thereby opposing any changes in the interpretation of the Gospel.

Based on relevant research, further investigation is required to comprehend the development and changes in the educational culture of pesantren at present. This is a response to the transformation of thoughts, perspectives, and the community's educational needs

regarding various diverse models within pesantren education, as seen in parts of the Bima community's establishment of pesantren. Given this background, the focus of this research is on educational culture and religious radicalism within pesantren. Several formulated questions include: (a) what is the relationship between educational culture and existing radicalism within pesantren, and (b) how can we understand the educational culture of allegedly radical pesantren? These questions will be examined through a phenomenological study approach.

Further research in this realm is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics within pesantren educational culture concerning radicalism, moderation, and liberalism within religion. Phenomenological studies will aid in uncovering the meanings behind these phenomena and offer a more comprehensive insight into the educational culture of allegedly radical pesantren.

## **METHOD**

This research adopts a qualitative approach and a literature review method to explore more profoundly. In the data collection process, the researcher utilizes various literary sources, including books, journals, seminar outcomes, and discussions with experts directly relevant to the research theme (Marlow, 2023). Additionally, interactions with experts and participation in discussions play a significant role in the holistic data collection.

After summarizing data from diverse sources, the researcher conducts meticulous analysis by employing data interpretation techniques (Rocco et al., 2023). Through this approach, the researcher not only identifies patterns and key findings but also provides comprehensive explanations based on relevant theories pertaining to the issues under study. Furthermore, in data interpretation, the researcher adds dimensions that might not have been represented in previous manuscripts, referring to relevant theoretical frameworks to deepen the understanding of the context and implications of the research findings (Hatch, 2023).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Originating from the understanding of Globalization Globalization is an era in which the world feels like a global village. Interactions between countries, civilizations, and cultures become more accessible. The process of mutual influence among cultures becomes more intensive and rapid, enriching with positive elements while also bringing about negative

impacts. Eventually, globalization becomes a tool that facilitates the exchange of influences among civilizations, cultures, ideologies, and even religions.

This mutual influencing process causes a civilization, culture, or religion to blend with elements from other cultures. This can lead to tension for ideologies and cultures that may not align with their own social and cultural characteristics. Islamic educational institutions, such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), also experience the impacts of this contamination.

The three paradigms emerging within the Islamic community in facing globalization are:

1. **Conservative Paradigm:** This paradigm places Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as religious institutions that firmly uphold doctrines and ancient traditions. They tend to reject interactions with scholarly discourse outside of Islam. They view non-Islamic social aspects as threats and contradictions. Their holistic perspective positions Islam as a complete rule governing all aspects of human life, leaving no room for non-Islamic scholarly thoughts, including perceiving globalization as a threat to Islamic values.
2. **Liberal Paradigm:** Pesantren following this paradigm regard Islam as a catalyst for social change. They accept and integrate non-Islamic social elements as crucial parts in finding solutions to current issues faced by the community. They emphasize rationalism in the theological dimension, aspiring for freedom from state power paradigms, and advocate social transformation by highlighting humanitarian values. This paradigm suggests deconstruction of old doctrinal understandings, even reformulating interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith.
3. **Moderate Paradigm:** This paradigm strives to reconcile the two preceding paradigms. They endeavor to integrate views that are antagonistic in the relationship between Islam and societal issues. This paradigm attempts to mediate between conservative views, which often generalize the relationship between Islam and social issues, and the aspiration to reform discourse while maintaining Islamic values.

The moderate paradigm, in observing the relationship between Islam and the state, rejects the view that Islam is a religion providing a complete system for state affairs. They also dismiss the notion that religion, in the Western concept, only regulates the relationship between humans and God. Instead, they believe that within Islam, there exists a set of ethical values for national and state life, rather than a specific state system.

The moderate paradigm adhered to by Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) doesn't solely emphasize the issue of an "Islamic state" or the implementation of Sharia alone but rather focuses more on the substance of religious values and teachings themselves (ZAMZAMI et al.,

n.d.). They perceive religion as a collection of moral teachings and social ethics, as well as a tool for state governance. However, the moderate paradigm believes that the involvement of religion in state practices should not lead to deviations from the noble values inherent in that religion. They are concerned that excessive involvement of religion in state affairs could be exploited for political interests and power struggles (Saada, 2023).

On the other hand, the moderate Islamic paradigm supports a more flexible, courteous, and refined dimension. They deem it crucial to reduce the rigid and aggressive religious views sometimes systematically used by certain segments of Muslims. This is done to cultivate a more moderate, friendly, and open-minded religious perspective.

Aspect	Conservative Paradigm	Liberal Paradigm	Moderate Paradigm
<b>View of Islam</b>	Sees as complete rules	Agent of social change	Seeks to integrate antagonistic views
<b>Scholarly Approach</b>	Closed to non-Islamic scholarship	Accepts and integrates other thoughts	Compromises between conservative and liberal views
<b>Attitude towards globalization</b>	Views as a threat to Islamic values	Opportunity to adopt new humanitarian values	Integrates Islamic values with evolving global reality

### The Emergence of Radical Islamic Movements in Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren)

Islamic boarding schools that exhibit a conservative stance towards the phenomenon of globalization often lead to fundamentalism and radicalism (Sirry, 2020). Globalization is perceived as an effort to subject all countries to the dominance of a major power, namely the United States (ARAKE, 2023). Therefore, globalization is often referred to as Americanization, signifying the universal spread of American ideas and values (Tröhler, 2023). Consequently, globalization can pose a threat to the existence of Islamic values. In reality, throughout the history of Islamic boarding schools since the 15th century (Pohl, 2006), starting with Walisongo and continued by subsequent generations through famous scholars such as Sheikh Mutamakkin, Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani, Sheikh Mahfud al-Tarmasi, KH. Hasyim Asyari, KH. Wahab Hasbullah, and many others, there has never been a visible face of radicalism. However, since

the reform era, the face of radicalism in Islamic boarding schools has begun to emerge distinctly.

Firstly, the Al-Islam Islamic Boarding School in Lamongan was involved in the bombing actions in Bali carried out by some of its alumni, such as Muchlas and Amrozi. Secondly, the Al-Mukmin Islamic Boarding School in Ngruki, Sukoharjo, linked to Ustadz Abu Bakar Ba'asyir as the main figure, was allegedly involved in several violent acts in Indonesia. These two Islamic boarding schools actually predominantly manifest radicalism in the form of discourse and movements. In their discourse, they impart teachings that lean towards radical perspectives, such as the comprehensive implementation of Islamic law in the lives of individuals, society, and the state. They believe that by applying Islamic law, various national, societal, and individual issues can be resolved. However, they do not advocate the use of violence in implementing Islamic law. The process of implementing Islamic law in these boarding schools is carried out through educational means, as education is seen as a tool for socializing the values of Islamic law to the students and the general populace (Efendy et al., 2023).

Hence, it can be understood that there are at least two factors contributing to the process of radicalization in these Islamic boarding schools. Firstly, there's an intellectual network originating from the Middle East with a harsh, militant, and radical approach, especially the Wahhabi teachings applied literally in the Nusantara region. Purification is the tangible result of the Wahhabi intellectual network in the form of eradicating superstitions, innovations, and superstitions. Subsequently, this intellectual network extends beyond the Wahhabi school of thought, adopting radical ideologies from various intellectuals such as Hasan al-Bana, Al-Maududi, Sayyid Qutb, Hasan Turabi, and others. Therefore, the psychology of radicalism developed in the Middle East is truly implemented in Indonesia as a noble religious struggle. Secondly, exclusive and dogmatic religious teachings have created hostility towards groups outside the Islamic boarding schools. The term "Zionist-Infidel" has become a sort of religious consciousness to oppose these groups in any form. Coupled with the ideology of jihad understood as a war against "Zionist-Infidels," this further reinforces radical attitudes. Hence, any violent actions carried out by Muslims against the "Zionist-Infidels," whom they consider as enemies of Islam, are regarded as the most noble religious struggle (martyrdom). Essentially, teachings of this nature aren't an authentic awareness of the Nusantara Islamic society but rather an influence from the intellectual and ideological networks brought from the Middle East (Rodriguez, 2023).

Upon observation, the phenomena of fundamentalism and radicalism aren't solely caused by educational patterns in Islamic boarding schools or the increase in awareness and religious understanding of the community. These phenomena are also triggered by the surrounding realities of their lives, where the state is perceived to have failed in achieving prosperity and justice with its adopted secular system. Such facts become one of the driving factors in seeking alternative ways to establish principles and ideologies of development expected to guarantee a prosperous and just life.

### **Weighing Radicalism and Liberalism, Toward Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren)**

The phenomena of fundamentalism and radicalism within Islamic boarding schools are actually something new and surprising. Islamic boarding schools, as religious institutions, were not designed to breed radicalism (Sirry, 2020; Suyanto et al., 2022). Their primary objective is to train scholars with comprehensive knowledge. That's why these schools teach every aspect of religion, from the concept of monotheism (tauheed) to Islamic law (sharia) and ethics. All of this aims to equip students, once they leave the boarding schools, to effectively spread religious teachings within society. In fact, the true essence of Islamic boarding schools from their inception has always emphasized tolerance and peace. In remote areas like Java, Sumatra, and Kalimantan, many boarding schools have successfully engaged with local cultures. Particularly in Java, those following the Shafi'i school of thought and closely associated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) exhibit an inclusive attitude towards the local culture. Hence, these boarding schools have effectively integrated with the community. Success stories of such boarding school models serve as examples of religious tolerance for the broader Muslim community (Suyanto, 2020). It's no wonder that the image of Islam in Indonesia is often associated with Muslims who are friendly and peaceful. This is why radicalization processes among students, using religious doctrines as a rationale for violent acts, are rare (Hidayat et al., 2020; Sirry, 2020).

Amidst the diverse landscape of Islamic boarding schools across the archipelago—ranging from traditional Salafi institutions focused on classical Islamic teachings to more modernized ones integrating secular education—there's a noticeable shift in the essence of these schools. Boarding schools are no longer agents of social change adaptable to local traditions; instead, they've veered towards stringent purification. In certain cases, they've even become



breeding grounds for doctrinal radicalism, contributing to the rising trend of radicalism within these institutions (Sirry et al., 2022).

This radicalism within the Islamic boarding schools should be understood as a critique of the comprehensive changes they've undergone. It involves the purification of religious teachings and practices, seen as deviating from the authentic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad during the advent of Islam. This critique emphasizes cleansing religious doctrines from perceived innovations (*bid'ah*) that are intertwined with local traditions (YAZDANI, 2020). The aim is to realign these schools to follow only the purest Islamic teachings. Consequently, this has led to radicalism in religious doctrines and practices.

Therefore, these schools need introspection to revisit their foundational teachings, ensuring their responses to contemporary changes are not rigid or restrictive. This radicalism within Islamic boarding schools might, in fact, tarnish the reputation of the Muslim community in this country (Hefner, 2009). Hence, it's essential for these institutions to re-embrace their initial principles as centers of religious education, harmonizing with local cultures without compromising their core principles. In this context, the hope is for these boarding schools to cultivate a new generation that is devoutly religious yet adaptive to the evolving times, fostering optimism towards a future characterized by tolerance and peace.

The discourse on liberalism within pesantren circles often comes as a surprise and frequently triggers debates. When liberalism is associated with the religious context, the initial reaction often tends to be rejection of the idea. Moreover, linking liberalism with pesantren as a religious institution immediately poses similar challenges (Ni'am, 2015). These challenges are closely related to the concept of Islam instilled by pesantren, which emphasizes absolute obedience, devotion, transcendence, and the scientific limitations inherited from the *kyais* (Abbas, 2021; Rinaldo, 2013). On the other hand, liberalism is associated with a deconstructive philosophy that rejects absolutes, supports freedom, and opposes the concept of transcendence.

Identifies several characteristics that signify the emergence of liberal Islam. *First*, there is a desire to break away from tradition. Though originating from tradition, they use it as a basis for transformation. They do not blindly accept or reject tradition but attempt to develop creativity to create new understanding. This involves religious and scholarly traditions. *Second*, there's an effort to free oneself from the burdens of Islamic history, shifting from sectarian and primordial aspects to a pluralistic and universal approach. The aim is to depict the Muslim community as part of a fair and democratic human history that is not limited by political

hegemony and oppression against other groups. *Third*, there is an avoidance of literal interpretations of religious texts often done by scholars in the middle ages.

The pesantren, in this context, becomes the most prepared entity to utilize tradition as part of the foundation for renewal in a new life, including in the practices conducted by liberal Islamic groups. According to KH Husein Muhammad, the roots of liberalism have already begun to grow within the pesantren environment. However, the comprehension of the epistemology of liberalism has not yet been fully mastered. Pesantren teaches pluralistic thoughts, making them inclined to appreciate diverse perspectives, being open-minded, and critical. This is evident from the intensity of study circles and training sessions in pesantrens on topics such as democracy, pluralism, justice, gender equality, and human rights (Robinson, 2020; Thoyib, 2019). Not only that, but modern thought methods, such as rationalism and empiricism, are also becoming trends among the santri (Syamsul, 2018).

Nevertheless, the moderate stance adopted by pesantren does not make it rigid in facing the phenomenon of globalization. They do not entirely accept globalization without consideration, but they also do not outright reject it. Pesantren will embrace globalization if it is deemed beneficial to humanity. Conversely, they will reject globalization if it is seen as damaging to human civilization and not in line with Islamic values. In short, pesantren anticipate and study globalization in terms of content, not merely as a form of media or tools of globalization such as information technology, communication, and transportation.

The Islamic community, including the pesantren society, should not be supporters or opponents of globalization. Instead, they should critically face globalization by examining every emerging aspect from various perspectives. This means refraining from hastily supporting or rejecting new trends without comprehensive understanding.

## CONCLUSION

The landscape of pesantren in Indonesia has evolved alongside globalization, no longer solely controlled by traditional Islamic groups or those with fundamental-radical perspectives. Now, new pesantrens have emerged, established by different Islamic groups with distinct identities. In terms of vision, objectives, educational methods, and reading materials used, it's evident that pesantrens exhibiting radical traits tend to adopt models of Islam originating from the Middle East. Conversely, older pesantrens establishing new institutions within their compounds, such as the case of Ma'had Ali Situbondo, demonstrate a more inclusive approach towards change and new ideas.

Therefore, radicalism or liberalism within a pesantren is greatly influenced by its leadership, whether it's the owner, kyai, or senior santri. If the ideas and perspectives of the pesantren's leaders lean towards radicalism, the pesantren and its environment are likely to adopt similar thinking. Conversely, if the leaders tend to have a moderate stance, the pesantren and its students will reflect a moderate character, and in certain situations, may even exhibit liberal tendencies.

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