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Religious Moderation Education for Inmates in Palopo City Penitentiary as a Deradicalization Strategy

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Abstract

Purpose : This study examines the integration of religious moderation education within the correctional coaching system at Class IIA Palopo Penitentiary as a strategic deradicalization instrument.

Method : Employing a descriptive-qualitative design with a Community-Based Research (CBR) framework, this research explores how educational interventions rooted in moderate Islamic values contribute to reshaping the worldview of inmates convicted of or exposed to radical ideologies. Data were collected through immersive observation, semi-structured interviews, participatory counseling, and documentary review involving penitentiary administrators, correctional officers, religious mentors, and incarcerated individuals.

Results : The findings reveal three major thematic outcomes: (1) the educational program is structured around a value-based curriculum that integrates theological balance *(tawassuth)*, civic commitment *(muwathanah)*, and non-violent ethics *(la 'unf)*; (2) the delivery mechanism emphasizes dialogical pedagogy, peer-group reflection, and experiential learning activities that align with the inmates' socio-cultural context; and (3) the program demonstrates measurable effectiveness in reducing radical inclinations, as indicated by enhanced religious literacy, diminished hostility toward out-groups, and growing receptivity to national pluralism.

Conclusion : This study contends that religious moderation education, when implemented through participatory and context-sensitive approaches, serves not merely as cognitive instruction but as a transformative vehicle for ideological reorientation. The implications affirm the necessity of mainstreaming moderation-based curricula in penitentiary systems as a preventive and rehabilitative response to extremism.

Keywords: Religious moderation education; deradicalization; correctional inmates; participatory learning; Palopo.

1. Introduction

The escalation of religiously motivated violence in Indonesia over the past two decades has prompted urgent scholarly and policy attention to the roots of radicalism and the mechanisms for its mitigation. The bombing incident in Makassar in early 2021 served as a stark reminder that terrorist networks continue to operate and recruit adherents, often targeting individuals with limited religious literacy and fragile socio-economic conditions (Wikipedia, 2026). Radicalism, as (Destler, 2025) contends, is not an innate disposition but a cultivated ideology that thrives in

environments where religious narratives are monopolized, decontextualized, and weaponized to justify aggression. Hence, the eradication of terrorism necessitates a paradigm shift from punitive measures toward educational and ideological interventions that dismantle extremist epistemologies at their core.

Within the Indonesian legal framework, Law Number 5 of 2018 concerning the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Terrorism explicitly mandates deradicalization as a systematic and continuous process involving multiple stakeholders. The National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) has been tasked with orchestrating this endeavor through cross-sectoral coordination, yet the operationalization of deradicalization at the grassroots level particularly within correctional institutions remains uneven and fraught with challenges (Alkhuseri et al., 2025; Hariri & Arifin, 2025). Correctional facilities, as the primary sites where convicted terrorists and radical sympathizers are concentrated, represent both a vulnerability and an opportunity. They are spaces where radical ideologies can proliferate through clandestine networks, but they are also arenas where structured educational interventions can effectively rewire cognitive frameworks and emotional attachments to extremist worldviews.

The concept of religious moderation has emerged as a compelling counter-narrative to radicalism in contemporary Indonesian discourse. Religious moderation, as operationalized in this study, encompasses a cluster of attitudes and practices characterized by balanced religious observance *(tawassuth)*, active tolerance toward diversity *(tasamuh)*, unequivocal rejection of violence (la 'unf), and steadfast commitment to national identity *(muwathanah)* (Abdain et al., 2023). Far from being a mere slogan, religious moderation offers a pedagogical framework through which inmates can be guided toward a more nuanced and humane understanding of their faith. This is particularly salient given that many radicalized individuals exhibit what scholars describe as "fragmented religiosity" a selective and literalist reading of sacred texts that disregards contextual hermeneutics and the ethical imperatives of compassion and coexistence.

The urgency of embedding religious moderation education within correctional systems is further accentuated by the unique demographic and psychological profile of inmates. The Class IIA Palopo Penitentiary, the locus of this study, has previously accommodated individuals affiliated with the Santoso-led terrorist network from Poso, Central Sulawesi. Although their tenure was relatively brief, their presence introduced a palpable risk of ideological contagion, given their hardened attitudes and resistance to conventional rehabilitation programs. This situation compelled the penitentiary administration to devise proactive measures that transcend routine spiritual counseling, necessitating a more systematic, pedagogically sound, and collaboratively designed educational initiative.

Existing literature has extensively documented the theoretical contours of religious moderation and its application in formal educational settings (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024; Mala & Hunaida, 2023; Rahmadi & Hamdan, 2023). Likewise, several studies have examined deradicalization policies from legal, security, and psychological angles (Campelo et al., 2022; Saputro et al., 2026; Supandi & Syauqillah, 2025). However, there remains a conspicuous lacuna in empirical research that systematically investigates the actual implementation, pedagogical methods, and evaluative outcomes of religious moderation education within correctional environments using a participatory research framework. This study aims to fill that gap by

addressing three interrelated research questions: (1) How is religious moderation education implemented as a deradicalization strategy among inmates at Class IIA Palopo Penitentiary? (2) What pedagogical methods and curricular materials are employed in this educational program? and (3) To what extent does this program demonstrate effectiveness in transforming inmates' attitudes and reducing radical tendencies?.

2. Method

Research Design and Philosophical Underpinnings

This investigation employs a descriptive-qualitative research design grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which prioritizes subjective meaning-making, contextual understanding, and the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and participants. The choice of qualitative methodology is deliberate, given that the phenomena under scrutiny religious beliefs, ideological transformation, and educational processes are deeply embedded in social, cultural, and psychological dimensions that resist quantification. The study is further underpinned by the principles of participatory action research, specifically the Community-Based Research (CBR) framework, which emphasizes equitable collaboration, mutual learning, and the translation of research findings into tangible community benefits.

The CBR model adopted in this study comprises four iterative phases that are non-linear and adaptive to emerging realities: (1) co-establishing foundational research principles and shared ethical commitments; (2) collaboratively planning research activities, including the identification of objectives, roles, and timelines; (3) jointly gathering and interpreting information through multiple data sources; and (4) translating findings into actionable programmatic improvements that directly benefit inmates and the institutional community. This cyclical and reflective process ensures that research remains relevant, responsive, and empowering.

Research Setting and Participant Selection

The study was conducted at the Class IIA Penitentiary in Palopo City, South Sulawesi, a facility that houses a heterogeneous population of inmates, including a number of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses. The selection of this site was purposive, informed by its prior history of accommodating high-risk terrorist inmates and its ongoing efforts to implement religious moderation programs in collaboration with local universities and religious authorities.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure diversity of perspectives and experiential richness. The final participant cohort comprised:

- The head of the penitentiary, who provides strategic oversight and policy direction;
- Two correctional officers directly involved in coaching and supervision;
- Three religious mentors affiliated with IAIN Palopo and the Ministry of Religious Affairs;
- Twelve inmates, including both terrorism convicts and general prisoners, representing varying durations of incarceration and levels of program engagement.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected over a four-month period using a triangulated array of techniques:

- Participant Observation: The research team immersed themselves in daily correctional activities, attending religious classes, group discussions, and recreational sessions to observe behavioral dynamics and educational interactions.

- Semi-Structured Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended interview guides tailored to each informant category. Topics explored included perceptions of religious moderation, experiences with the educational program, and observed changes in attitudes and relationships.
- Participatory Counseling Sessions: As part of the CBR approach, the researchers facilitated counseling workshops on religious moderation, which also served as data-gathering forums where inmates articulated their questions, doubts, and evolving understandings.
- Documentary Review: Institutional records, lesson plans, attendance logs, and evaluation reports were reviewed to triangulate self-reported data and contextualize program implementation.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), encompassing three concurrent streams: data condentation (coding and categorizing textual data), data display (organizing themes into matrices and narratives), and conclusion drawing (interpreting patterns and deriving meanings). To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed methodological triangulation, investigator triangulation, and member checking, wherein preliminary findings were shared with participants for validation and refinement.

3. Result

The Architecture of Religious Moderation Education: Curricular Design and Value Orientation

The religious moderation education program at Class IIA Palopo Penitentiary is not an ad hoc or perfunctory activity but a systematically designed curriculum that permeates various dimensions of inmate life. The curriculum is anchored in four interrelated value clusters, each of which is deliberately cultivated through formal instruction, guided practice, and institutional culture.

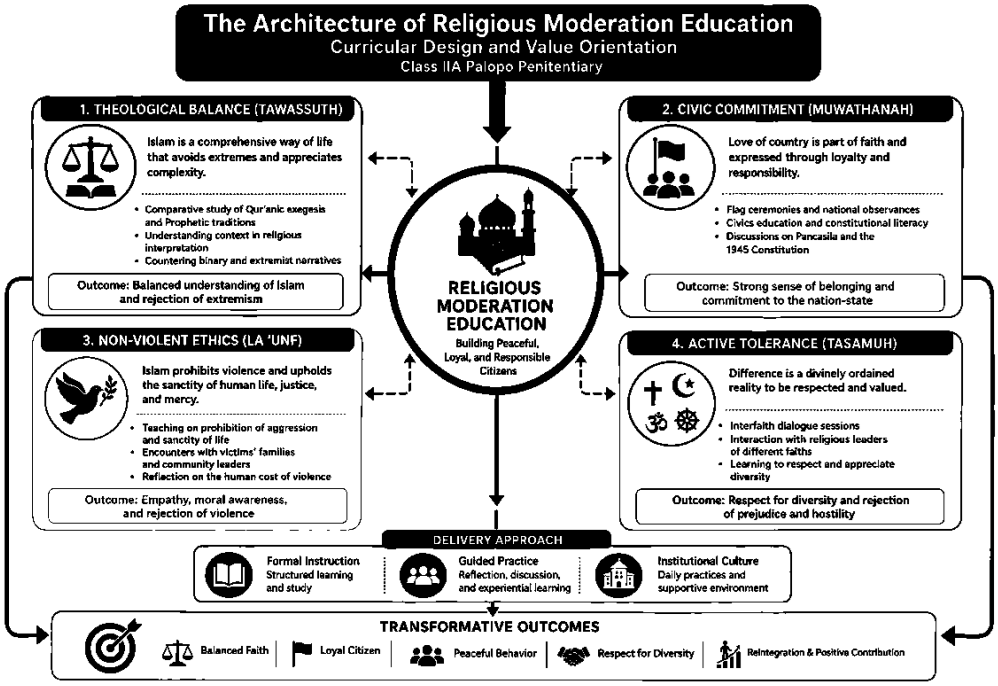

Figure 1. Framework The Architecture of Religious Moderation Education: Curricular Design and Value Orientation.

First, theological balance *(tawassuth)* is foregrounded as the central intellectual virtue. Inmates are guided to appreciate that Islam, as a comprehensive way of life, resists binary oppositions between sacred and profane, tradition and modernity, or faith and reason. Through comparative study of Qur'anic exegesis and Prophetic traditions, inmates are encouraged to recognize that extremism arises from disregarding the textual and contextual complexities inherent in religious interpretation. This is particularly critical for those previously exposed to simplistic jihadist narratives that conflate defensive warfare with unprovoked aggression.

Second, civic commitment *(muwathanah)* is consistently reinforced as an inseparable component of religious identity. Inmates are taught that love of country is not contradictory to religious devotion but is, in fact, an expression of faith. This is operationalized through mandatory attendance at flag ceremonies, civics education sessions, and discussions on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. Such activities are designed to cultivate a sense of belonging and responsibility toward the nation-state, thereby attenuating the transnational, anti-state orientations that often characterize terrorist ideologies.

Third, non-violent ethics *(la 'unf)* are inculcated through direct instruction on the prohibition of aggression, the sanctity of human life, and the Islamic principles of justice and mercy. Inmates are confronted with the human costs of violence not only in abstract terms but through testimonial encounters with victims' families and community leaders. These encounters evoke emotional responses that complement cognitive learning, fostering empathy and moral revulsion toward acts of brutality committed in the name of religion.

Fourth, active tolerance *(tasamuh)* is developed through deliberate exposure to religious diversity. Inmates participate in interfaith dialogue sessions, where they interact with representatives of Christianity, Hinduism, and other faiths, learning to appreciate difference as a divinely ordained reality. This experience is particularly transformative for those who had previously regarded non-Muslims as irrevocably other and inherently hostile.

Pedagogical Strategies: Dialogical Engagement and Experiential Learning

The pedagogical approach adopted in the religious moderation education program departs significantly from conventional lecture-based instruction. Instead, it privileges dialogical engagement, where inmates are treated as active contributors to knowledge construction rather than passive recipients of doctrinal indoctrination. Religious mentors and facilitators employ Socratic questioning, case-based discussions, and role-playing exercises to stimulate critical thinking and self-reflection. This method is informed by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which posits that genuine education is a practice of freedom that liberates individuals from oppressive ideologies.

In addition to cognitive-linguistic methods, the program incorporates experiential learning activities that engage inmates physically, emotionally, and socially. For instance, inmates participate in community service projects, such as cleaning public spaces, assisting in disaster relief efforts, and visiting orphanages. These activities serve dual purposes: they provide inmates with a sense of purpose and self-worth, and they reconnect them with the broader community, challenging the isolationist tendencies of extremist groups. The experience of being helpful and valued by others contradicts the nihilistic and adversarial worldview that radicalism propagates.

Another notable pedagogical innovation is the use of peer-facilitated reflection groups, where inmates discuss their personal journeys, share doubts, and offer mutual encouragement. These groups operate under the guidance of trained facilitators but are largely inmate-driven, fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. The peer dynamics are particularly effective because inmates often respond more openly to individuals who share similar backgrounds and struggles. This approach aligns with Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes that behavioral change is significantly influenced by observational learning and social reinforcement.

Program Effectiveness: Evidence from Behavioral and Attitudinal Shifts

The effectiveness of religious moderation education is not merely asserted but empirically demonstrated through multiple indicators observed and reported during the research period.

Cognitive Gains: Enhanced Religious Literacy

Inmates exhibited a marked improvement in religious literacy, defined as the ability to interpret religious texts with attention to historical context, linguistic nuance, and ethical implications. Interviews with inmates revealed a transition from literalist readings, where texts are divorced from context, to hermeneutically informed interpretations that recognize the layered meanings and conditional applicability of scriptural injunctions. One inmate reflected:

Previously, I believed that every verse had one fixed meaning, and whoever interpreted it differently was astray. Now I see that the Qur'an speaks to different situations, and our understanding must evolve. Moderation is not a compromise; it is a deeper understanding.(Interview, Inmate #07, March 2025)

Affective Transformations: Reduced Out-Group Hostility

Inmates demonstrated reduced hostility toward religious and cultural out-groups. This was observable in their interactions with facilitators of different faiths, as well as in their willingness to engage in cooperative activities with inmates from diverse backgrounds. Correctional officers corroborated this shift, noting that inter-group conflicts, which were once frequent, have significantly diminished. The reduction in aggressive rhetoric and the emergence of expressions of mutual respect indicate a tangible change in the emotional and relational landscape of the correctional facility.

Conative Changes: Increased Reintegration Readiness

Perhaps the most consequential outcome is the growing willingness of inmates to envision and prepare for a post-incarceration life that is productive and socially integrated. Many inmates expressed interest in continuing their education, acquiring vocational skills, and re-establishing family relationships. This forward-looking orientation contrasts sharply with the fatalistic and adversarial outlook that characterized their earlier worldview. It suggests that religious moderation education has not only altered their beliefs but has also restored their sense of agency and hope.

Institutional Impact: Strengthened Collaborative Networks

Beyond inmate-level changes, the program has also strengthened institutional capacity and collaborative networks. The penitentiary administration has developed more systematic partnerships with IAIN Palopo, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and local community organizations. These partnerships have expanded the pool of facilitators, enriched the curriculum with diverse perspectives, and provided inmates with pathways for post-release support. The CBR

approach has been instrumental in this regard, as it has fostered a culture of shared responsibility and mutual accountability.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that religious moderation education at Class IIA Palopo Penitentiary extends beyond conventional religious instruction and functions as a comprehensive educational intervention aimed at facilitating cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social transformation among inmates. Rather than emphasizing the transmission of religious knowledge alone, the program integrates theological balance *(tawassuth)*, civic commitment *(muwathanah)*, non-violent ethics *(la 'unf)*, and active tolerance *(tasamuh)* into a coherent curriculum supported by dialogical pedagogy, experiential learning, and institutional collaboration. Collectively, these findings indicate that religious moderation education can become an effective vehicle for promoting deradicalization and preparing inmates for successful social reintegration.

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of the program lies not merely in increasing inmates' religious knowledge but in reconstructing the way they interpret religion and relate to society. The educational process encourages participants to move away from rigid, literalist understandings of Islamic teachings toward contextual and ethical interpretations that acknowledge diversity and complexity. This transformation is reflected not only in enhanced religious literacy but also in greater willingness to interact peacefully with individuals from different religious and social backgrounds. Such changes indicate that successful deradicalization involves cognitive restructuring accompanied by affective and behavioral transformation rather than doctrinal correction alone.

The mechanisms underlying these transformations can be understood through several complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy explains how dialogical learning enables individuals to become active participants in constructing knowledge rather than passive recipients of ideological narratives (Leonard & McLaren, 2002). Through questioning, reflection, and discussion, inmates critically examine previously accepted extremist beliefs and gradually develop alternative interpretations grounded in compassion, justice, and contextual reasoning (Budnyk et al., 2023; Mclaren, 2020; Nugraha et al., 2024). This educational process transforms learning into an emancipatory experience that empowers participants to reconsider deeply embedded assumptions.

Second, the findings align with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that behavioral change is strongly influenced by observation, modeling, and social reinforcement (Bandura, 1971). Peer-facilitated reflection groups provide opportunities for inmates to observe positive behavioral models among fellow participants who have undergone similar experiences (Abdullah, 2019). Mutual encouragement, shared narratives, and collective reflection create a supportive learning environment in which moderate attitudes become socially reinforced. Consequently, behavioral change emerges not only from formal instruction but also from continuous interaction within positive peer networks.

Furthermore, the experiential components of the program strengthen learning outcomes by connecting religious values with practical social experiences. Participation in community service, humanitarian activities, and interactions with diverse community members enables inmates to

experience the social relevance of Islamic ethical teachings directly (Ali et al., 2024; Hajar et al., 2026; Thalgi, 2024). These experiences encourage empathy, responsibility, and social connectedness while simultaneously challenging the isolationist worldview commonly associated with violent extremism. In this regard, experiential learning transforms abstract moral concepts into lived experiences that are more likely to produce lasting behavioral change.

The development of active tolerance through interfaith dialogue also illustrates the importance of meaningful social contact in reducing prejudice. Direct interaction with people from different religious traditions provides opportunities for inmates to question stereotypes and replace hostility with understanding (Bergmann et al., 2025; Rizal et al., 2022). Rather than viewing religious diversity as a threat, participants gradually recognize diversity as an integral element of social life that can coexist with strong religious commitment. This finding suggests that tolerance is cultivated not through theoretical instruction alone but through sustained interpersonal engagement supported by mutual respect and constructive dialogue.

Another important finding concerns the integration of civic commitment into religious education. The incorporation of Pancasila, constitutional values, and national identity within religious learning demonstrates that religious devotion and citizenship are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. By emphasizing responsibility toward the Indonesian nation-state, the program challenges anti-state narratives frequently promoted by extremist movements. This integration contributes to the development of a more inclusive religious identity in which commitment to faith is expressed alongside commitment to social harmony, constitutional values, and national unity.

The institutional dimension of the program further strengthens its effectiveness. The collaboration established among the penitentiary, UIN Palopo, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and community organizations creates a multidimensional support system that extends beyond the prison environment. Such partnerships diversify educational resources, broaden facilitator expertise, and provide continuity for inmates after release. The Community-Based Research (CBR) approach adopted in this study therefore functions not only as a research methodology but also as a collaborative framework that promotes shared responsibility among educational institutions, government agencies, and local communities in supporting deradicalization.

These findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on religious moderation by demonstrating that effective deradicalization requires an integrated educational model rather than isolated interventions. Previous discussions on countering violent extremism have frequently emphasized theological correction or security-based approaches. The present study extends this perspective by illustrating that sustainable transformation emerges when theological education is integrated with civic education, character formation, experiential learning, peer interaction, and institutional collaboration. Accordingly, religious moderation should be understood as a multidimensional educational ecosystem rather than a collection of isolated instructional activities.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide valuable implications for correctional institutions and policymakers. First, religious moderation education should be institutionalized as a structured curriculum rather than implemented as occasional religious activities. Second, correctional institutions should invest in developing qualified facilitators who possess both theological competence and pedagogical expertise. Third, experiential learning and peer mentoring

should become integral components of rehabilitation programs because they facilitate deeper personal transformation than lecture-based instruction alone. Finally, sustainable partnerships among correctional institutions, universities, religious organizations, and local communities are essential for ensuring continuity of rehabilitation and successful post-release reintegration.

Despite these encouraging findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in a single correctional institution, which may limit the transferability of findings to other penitentiary contexts with different organizational cultures or inmate characteristics. Second, the qualitative design prioritizes depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. Third, much of the evidence relies on interviews and observations that may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly when participants discuss sensitive issues related to radical beliefs. Fourth, the study primarily examines short-term educational outcomes and does not evaluate whether attitudinal changes are sustained following inmates' release into society. Finally, variations in participants' ideological backgrounds, educational experiences, and personal histories may influence individual responses to the intervention, yet these differences were not explored systematically.

Future research should therefore investigate the long-term effectiveness of religious moderation education by following former inmates after reintegration into society. Comparative studies across multiple correctional institutions would also provide greater insight into contextual factors that influence program implementation and outcomes. Mixed-methods designs combining qualitative inquiry with validated quantitative measures of religious moderation, civic identity, empathy, and reintegration readiness could strengthen empirical evidence regarding program effectiveness. Future studies may also examine the specific contribution of individual program components, such as interfaith dialogue, peer mentoring, or community service, to determine which educational strategies generate the most sustainable transformations.

Overall, this study demonstrates that religious moderation education represents a promising educational approach for supporting deradicalization within correctional institutions. By integrating balanced religious understanding, civic responsibility, non-violent ethics, active tolerance, dialogical pedagogy, experiential learning, and institutional collaboration, the program facilitates meaningful transformation across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions. These findings reinforce the argument that successful deradicalization is fundamentally an educational process that requires sustained learning, reflective engagement, and collaborative institutional support. Consequently, this study contributes to the advancement of religious moderation scholarship while offering an evidence-informed framework that may guide the development of more comprehensive rehabilitation policies and practices in correctional settings.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of religious moderation education as a deradicalization strategy at Class IIA Palopo Penitentiary, with the aim of understanding its curricular architecture, pedagogical approaches, and educational outcomes. By employing a Community-Based Research (CBR) approach, the study provides a contextual understanding of

how religious moderation can facilitate ideological transformation and social rehabilitation within a correctional setting.

The findings reveal four major conclusions. First, religious moderation education is implemented through a structured curriculum that integrates theological balance (*tawassuth*), civic commitment (*muwathanah*), non-violent ethics (*la 'unf*), and active tolerance (*tasamuh*) into formal learning, institutional culture, and community engagement. Second, the program adopts participatory pedagogical strategies—including dialogical learning, experiential activities, and peer-facilitated reflection—that promote critical thinking, empathy, and personal responsibility. Third, the program contributes to positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes, reflected in improved religious literacy, reduced hostility toward out-groups, greater readiness for social reintegration, and stronger institutional collaboration. Finally, the findings demonstrate that religious moderation education constitutes a comprehensive educational process capable of supporting sustainable deradicalization rather than merely correcting religious misconceptions.

This study contributes to the advancement of religious moderation and deradicalization scholarship by presenting an integrated educational framework that combines curriculum design, participatory pedagogy, and collaborative institutional engagement. Practically, the findings suggest that correctional institutions should institutionalize moderation-based education as a core component of inmate rehabilitation, while policymakers should strengthen facilitator capacity, inter-agency partnerships, and resource allocation to ensure program sustainability and broader implementation.

Future research is recommended to investigate the long-term impact of religious moderation education on post-release reintegration, conduct comparative studies across correctional institutions, and employ mixed-methods approaches to further validate the effectiveness and transferability of the proposed educational framework.

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