Understanding the Teaching of Religious Moderation from a Sufistic Perspective and Its Implications for Student Performance

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Abstract

This study set out with the aim of understanding the teaching of religious moderation from a Sufistic perspective and its implications for increasing student competencies. The participants for the study comprised 100 students and 40 lecturers involved in Al-Quran and Tafsir science at the Ushuluddin Faculty at IAIN Pontianak, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The research adopted a qualitative approach, with data being collected through observation, interviews, and documentary studies that focused on the research themes of religious moderation, the Sufistic perspective, and student competencies. The findings revealed that according to some Sufistic commentators, religious moderation comprises the moderate values of 1) maintaining brotherly relations with other people, 2) appreciating people's differences, 3) showing tolerance and dismissing fanaticism, and 4) thinking ahead. This has implications for students' competencies, because teaching religious moderation encourages them to gain a better-quality interpretation of the Quran, so they can develop better reasoning, understanding, and professional skills. Students are therefore guided to become superior Muslim scholars who are professional and qualified to respond to the challenges of the times. These findings are expected to reinforce the importance of the Quranic values in moderate Islamic education, especially those related to the role of religious moderation in increasing student competence in terms their morality and religious spirituality. Islamic universities therefore need to consider various studies of interpretative science as a reference for transforming Islamic religious education in an era of technological disruption and radicalism.

Keywords: religious moderation, Sufism, student competencies

Introduction

The current era of technological disruption means that higher education institutions (e.g., colleges and universities) need to transform and innovate, so they will be able to produce graduates with the ability to adapt, endure, and integrate in this new era with relevant competencies (Suntana & Tresnawaty, 2021). In addition, university graduates must be highly motivated, have foresight, be able to adapt to changes in the industrial environment, and be generally resilient (Winiasri et al., 2020). On the other hand, colleges also face serious problems in terms of the radicalism that has infiltrated a number of academic campuses around the world (Kriviņš et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2020). Universities must therefore not only adapt their teaching methods but also promote religious

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moderation in the form of moderate Islamic education, so that in addition to developing the skills needed in the world of work, graduates will also be tolerant of human diversity and live a serene life in harmony and peace. It is undoubted that diversity in terms of tribes, nations, customs, religions, and cultures often leads to radicalism, especially in the higher education environment (Budiharso & Tarman, 2020). According to some studies, the occurrence of radical movements can be minimized by teaching religious moderation (Ishaq, 2021; Jamilah, 2021; Syatar et al., 2020); Arifinsyah et al., 2020; Arifianto, 2019). In response, Islamic colleges have begun to adopt moderate Islamic education, which teaches religious moderation. Indeed, moderate religious values emphasize aspects of morality and religious spirituality, and they are not radical (*tatharuff*) (Ali, 2018), so they can improve the competencies of students, both academically and in their social environments.

One study posits that college environments have become a space for the development of exclusivism, which in turn often leads to radicalism (Marbun & Pin, 2017). It is therefore hoped that religious moderation can become the glue that holds all people of various religions together. Indeed, this perspective can give birth to balanced religious attitudes and respect for different religious practices and beliefs (Roqib, 2021). The findings of previous studies suggest that religious moderation, when instilled in students, can help to foster and strengthen harmonious relationships between teachers, students, society, and the environment (Haryani & Lufaefi, 2021). Religious education therefore needs to integrate an awareness of different religious and cultural contexts and respond to the challenges of the times (Abidin et al., 2020; Sutrisno, 2019). In this case, religious education needs to teach critical knowledge about religion in society. Such religious insight can help students to open up their horizons and embrace ethics and tolerance toward followers of other religions. The teaching of religious moderation implicitly acts as a spiritual renewal and positions faith as the bridge between religious communities in social life (Janarbekovna, 2021).

At Islamic universities, the teaching of religious moderation must accord with the teachings of the Holy Quran, whose contents apply throughout the ages (Abdullah & Nento, 2021; Mahrus et al., 2020). The Quran requires careful and deep interpretation, however, in order to glean the meaning implied in its holy verses, and without a proper understanding, it can be misleading for the reader and used to misguide others (Anshori et al., 2021). In addition, presenting the thoughts of Sufistic commentators on religious moderation aims to convey the value of the holy verses of the Quran

as a strengthening of a nation. Therefore, a study of Sufistic interpretation (*tafsir isyari'*) conducted by *isyari'i* experts is very important as a science to support the understandings and meanings implied in each verse of the Quran. According to Asfar (2020), to understand the contents of a verse in the Quran, it is not enough to just grasp its contextual meaning—there must be a deeper understanding of its implicit meaning by applying a Sufistic approach.

The novelty of this research lies in understanding the teaching of religious moderation in Islamic education from the perspective of Sufistic commentators and its implications for developing Muslim students in Indonesia. Sufistic commentators reflect the spiritual seriousness of people who are clean, sincere, and pure in their hearts, so they can interpret and reflect on the meaning of the words of Allah SWT (Roqib, 2021). Their thoughts can subsequently be used as a means for teaching the values of religious moderation, which are beneficial for developing students' competencies. The literature posits that a moderate Muslim millennial identity can be formed through moderation in Islam (Farisi et al., 2021). The paradigm of religious moderation in a campus environment can help raise students' academic competencies, and moderate religious thoughts and practices can help moderate the relations between the increasingly diverse range of movements in Indonesia (Roqib, 2021). In practice, it uses values as both a form of understanding and an approach for contextualization (Bustomi, 2020). Thus, it is hoped that a study of these Sufistic commentators can open up new knowledge and interpretations, thus providing another perspective for deeply understanding the verses of the Quran through the teaching of religious moderation. In this way, colleges, especially in Islamic religious education study programs, will be able to maximally support the adoption of religious moderation in Indonesia.

Research Questions

Based on the background described above, this research focused on two themes, namely religious moderation from the perspective of Sufistic commentators and its implications for student competencies. The researcher therefore formulated the following two research questions:

1) How is religious moderation taught from the perspective of Sufistic commentators?

2) What are the implications of teaching religious moderation for enhancing student competencies?

Literature Review

Religious Moderation

According to Fahri & Zainuri (2019), religious moderation can manifest through the attitudes of *tawazun* and *i'tidal*, tolerance (*tasamuh*), egalitarianism (*musawah*), deliberation (*syura*), and dynamism and innovativeness (*tathawwur wa ibtikar*). Moderation reflects attitudes and views that are not excessive, extreme, or radical (*tatharurruf*), so it offers a synergy between justice and kindness. Following a religion generally implies spreading peace and love to everyone at all times with wisdom. The literature explains that religious moderation refers to holding moderate attitudes and perspectives in religion, so religious teachings are not practiced in an extreme manner. In other words, religious moderation is needed to prevent people's interpretations going beyond acceptable limits (Mahrus et al., 2020). This study posits that the moderating principles of Islam are justice, balance, tolerance, diversity, and exemplariness, and religious moderation discourse is an important part of creating religious cohesion (Kawangung, 2019) and fighting violent extremism and radicalism (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Mandaville & Nozell, 2017). There are three benchmarks for religious moderation: First, how strong is the commitment of religious adherents to the core teachings, namely human values? Second, how much mutual agreement and cooperation is shown among various peoples? Third, does the public order encourage the following of a moderate religion (Haidar, 2009)?

Sufistic Interpretation

Sufistic interpretation (*tafsir isyari'* — إشارة – يشير – أشار) is a way of interpreting *nash* Al Quran, a sort of interpretative science that is used to understand and explore the meanings implied in the holy verses of the Quran. In Sufistic interpretation, the interpretations of verses of the Quran differ from the literal meaning of the *zahir* verse, because there are implied instructions (*ta'wil*). Behind the meaning of the *zahir* text, commentators (e.g., *ulama/ulu al-'ilm* or people who are *al-'arif billah*) perceive symbols that according to their beliefs, can be considered as complimenting the meaning of the *zahir* text, so the *isyarah* meaning is elevated. According to their language and terms (Amir, 2021), Sufism scholars follow a ascetic but practical way of life in acting in obedience to Allah SWT (Anwar, 2000). The requirements for a Sufistic interpretation that must serve as the guidelines for a *mufassir* (Sufistic commentator) are as follows: 1) It must not deny the meaning of the *zahir* text. 2) There must be another verse or text to confirm it. 3) It must not conflict with

reason or *sharia*. 4) It must begin by interpreting of the meaning of the text and allow for meaning other than the *zahir* meaning to arise (Rakhmat, 1999).

This interpretative science is included within the category of *ladunni* science, which means it is a direct gift from Allah SWT as a result of piety, *istiqamah*, and good morals of the people who study the Quran, as explained by Al Surah al Kahf (18) in verse 65: "Then they met a slave of Our slaves and bestowed upon him mercy from Our side, and We taught him knowledge from Our side." Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi revealed in the book *al-Luma* that the Sufis argue that the science of interpretation is the knowledge contained in the Quran in secret, which can be realized through the deeds of charity in it. Sufistic interpretation from a historical perspective manifests through the spiritual seriousness of people who are clean, sincere, and pure in their hearts, so they are able to interpret and reflect on the meaning of the words of Allah SWT (Razak et al., 2019).

Student Competencies

Student competencies reflect the ability of students to fulfill necessary obligations at the university level based on their knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Cassidy, 2009). Student competencies can take three forms: First there is academic competence, which is the ability to achieve academic success, and this reflects in the final score for a course of study. Second, there are soft skills that relate to a student's ability to manage relationships and interactions with other people in the community. Third, there are hard skills in the form of functional abilities that are needed to perform a particular job in accordance with educational specifications (Burke & Biklen, 2006). To gain these competencies, students must be able to maintain synergy between their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor sides in order to be able to give birth to creative and positive ideas. Indeed, graduates with such competencies are able to find creative and constructive solutions to solve problems in society. In other words, the better the competencies, the greater the chances of addressing various environmental challenges and problems based on thinking skills, both individual and organizational management skills, and communication skills (Lincoln & Kearney, 2015).

At Islamic universities, a moderate Islamic education is expected to promote good Islamic skills (Rahmah & Fadhli, 2021). One study suggested that there are ten main skills for improving student competencies through moderate Islamic education, namely the ability to: 1) synthesize ideas and solutions for each problem; 2) think critically; 3) demonstrate creative thinking; 4) show leadership skills; 5) coordinate with others; 6) employ emotional skills; 7) make decisions; 8) be service-

oriented; 9) negotiate effectively; and 10) to adapt based on cognitive processes and deal with new phenomena and social environments (Puspitasari et al., 2021).

Methods

Research Design

This study aims to explore religious moderation through the perspective of the Sufistic commentators and the implications this has for improving student competencies. To this end, this study adopted a case study research design (Yin, 2014; Patton, 1985). Qualitative research is a descriptive way to describe complex phenomena, and it tends to emphasize data collection through observations and interviews (Miles et al., 2013). The research location was the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Pontianak, which is the only state Islamic university in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The research was conducted for one semester, namely the even semester of the 2020–2021 school year.

Participants

The number of participants in this study was 140 consisting of 100 students and 40 lecturers at the Ushuluddin Faculty involved in Al-Quran and Tafsir Sciences at IAIN Pontianak. Stratified random sampling was used to pick a sample from these populations. Students in semesters 5–7 were chosen because they had picked courses according to their expertise, namely Tafsir Manuscript Studies and Thematic Tafsir I-V, and they were intensively studying the sources and foundations of Islamic knowledge, both classical and contemporary, based on applied Islamic science. The Ushuluddin Faculty lecturers, meanwhile, were chosen as participants because they had areas of expertise that were relevant to the research, including skill in interpreting and understanding moderate Islamic education. See Table 1.

Table 1
Description of participants

Semester	Students Gender		Total number of students	Age of students	Lecturer Gender		Total number of teachers	Age of teachers
	female	Male			female	male		
Semester 5	15	16	31	20-22	8	5	13	28-40
Semester 6	14	22	36	21-23	-	13	13	28-50
Semester 7	20	13	33	22-25	-	14	14	50-65
Total	49	51	100	15-18	8	32	40	28-55

Data and Sources of Data

The data for this study consisted of primary and secondary data. The primary data were obtained directly through a closed questionnaire, an open-ended questionnaire, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Secondary data were obtained indirectly from scientific articles and documents from the Faculty of Ushuluddin at IAIN Pontianak in the form of data for semester 5–7 students and faculty lecturers, as well as documents about its vision, mission, and goals. Thus, the data collection methods in this study comprised 1) questionnaire distribution, 2) FGDs, and 3) documentary analysis.

Questionnaire

The research questionnaires comprised two themes or dimensions. The first dimension related to religious moderation from the perspective of Sufistic commentators, thus representing Sufistic thinking and interpretative understandings. The second dimension related to the implications of religious moderation for developing student competencies. This second dimension looked for indicators like a strong national commitment, tolerant attitudes, peaceful principles, and respect for local cultures and traditions (see Table 2). This instrument was examined by experts in the fields of Quranic and Tafsir science to ensure it would collect in-depth knowledge about religious moderation in moderate Islamic education.

The distribution of the closed and open-ended questionnaires was done through Google Forms, which was chosen because the COVID-19 pandemic prevented physical questionnaires from being distributed. The questionnaires were therefore distributed to 100 students and 40 lecturers. All questionnaires were filled out completely, so all of them could be included in the data analysis.

Table 2
Instrument grid

Dimension	Indicator	No. items
Religious moderation from the perspective of Sufistic commentators	Sufism thoughts	1
	Understanding interpretations	2
The implications of religious moderation for student competencies	Strong national commitment	3
	Tolerant attitudes	4
	Non-violent principles	5
	Respect for local cultures and traditions	6

FGD

FGD was held to complement the data collected through the open-ended questionnaire. The FGDs were conducted online over Google Meet with two sessions per day, and these took a week to complete. The first FGD session was conducted with lecturers, while the second was conducted with students. The duration of the FGDs was around 15–20 minutes. In collecting FGD data, researchers used the recording mode on Google Meet and notebooks. Both focus on the theme as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

FGD Guidelines by Online Meeting

Themes	Observation Guideline	Interview Guidelines	Documentation Guidelines
Religious moderation from the perspective of Sufistic commentators	Teaching about religious moderation	1. What do you know about religious moderation? 2. What do you know about religious moderation according to Sufistic commentators?	Documented teaching activities and preliminary studies that are in accordance with the teaching of religious moderation from the perspective of Sufistic commentators
The implications of religious moderation for student competencies	Observation of the competencies of participants (students)	1. What impact did you feel/receive while receiving education in the science of the Quranic interpretation? (student) 2. What are the advantages for the Ushuluddin Faculty in improving student competencies?	Documents in the form of notes related to Sufistic interpretation and lesson plans for the semester of Al-Quran and Tafsir study

Documentary Analysis

Documentary data were collected through literature review. This involved reviewing documents and literature that were relevant to the research theme, with them being sourced from campus documents, classical Islamic books or manuscripts (*turas*), contemporary Islamic books (*mu'asirah*), or articles and related scientific works. When collecting data related to the perspectives of Sufistic commentators and scholars of religious moderation, the researchers referred to the book of *Sufism Al-Muntakhabat* by KH. Ahmad Asrori Al-Ishaqi, the interpretation book *Al-muharrat Al-Wajiz* by Ibn 'Athiyyah, and the book *Kulliyyat Rasail Al-nur* by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. The researchers also used the tool *al-Maktabah al-Syamilah* on a computer device. The researchers also used Arabic to Latin transliteration letters that were adapted to the mention of vowels and diphthongs. Interpretation techniques were also used to understand

the study of Sufistic interpretation as it relates to what is contained in the book of interpretation methodology.

Data Analysis

Data analysis attempts to organize and sort data to identify patterns and synthesize them into meaningful units (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013; Patton, 1985). ***First***, the quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed, thus yielding results in the form of means, frequencies, and percentages. In addition, a picture of the perceptions of students and lecturers was obtained from the questionnaire. ***Second***, the qualitative data from the open-ended questionnaires and FGDs were analyzed. This took place over four stages: First, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentary methods. The collected data were then adjusted to the research theme, namely religious moderation, the thoughts of Sufistic commentators, and student competencies. Second, the data that had been collected was then reduced, summarized, sorted, and then examined based on the main research problem. This was expected to paint a clearer picture and make it easier for the researchers to interpret the data. Third, the reduced data were arranged into a relationship pattern, so that it could be better described and understood. Fourth, the data was verified and some conclusions drawn. When drawing conclusions, the researchers provided detailed explanations, so they would be relevant to the research objectives. Checking the validity of the data was done by triangulating the data by comparing and checking the degree of confidence for the information that had been obtained from each informant to ensure its validity. The researchers also compared the findings with a review of the existing literature, so that the degree of confidence in the data's validity could be established.

Results and Discussion

Respondents' Perceptions of Religious Moderation

Presented below are the averages, frequencies, and percentages, as well as a summary of the perceptions of students and lecturers that were revealed by the questionnaire, with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Table 4.
Students' perceptions of religious moderation

Dimension	Indicator	No. of item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Religious moderation from the perspective of Sufistic commentators	Sufism thoughts	1	69	21	8	2	100
	Understanding interpretation	2	72	13	10	5	100
The implications of religious moderation for student competencies	Strong national commitment	3	78	20	2	0	100
	Tolerant attitudes	4	65	25	7	3	100
	Non-violent principles	5	69	24	5	2	100
	Respect for local cultures and traditions	6	78	12	9	1	100

Source: The results of the closed questionnaire

Table 4 above shows that for questionnaire item number 1, which related to students' perceptions of *tasawuh* thinking, 69 students strongly agreed with it, 21 agreed, 8 disagreed, and only 2 disagreed. Thus, an overwhelming majority of the students agreed about the importance of Sufistic thinking for dealing with life in society.

Questionnaire item number 2 related to the students' perceptions of the need to understand interpretations. Some 72 students said they strongly agreed, 13 agreed, 10 disagreed, and 5 strongly disagreed. Again, a strong majority of students agreed with the need to understand interpretations of the Quran and Hadith.

Questionnaire item number 3 related to students' opinions about whether they had a strong national commitment. Some 78 students said they strongly agreed, 20 agreed, 2 disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. Thus, almost all the students thought they were strongly committed to Indonesia.

Questionnaire item number 4 related to students' views about tolerant attitudes. Some 65 students said they strongly agreed, 25 agreed, 7 disagreed, and 3 people strongly disagreed. Most students therefore said they uphold tolerant attitudes toward the followers of other religions.

Questionnaire item number 5 related to students' perceptions of having non-violent attitudes. Some 69 students strongly agreed, 24 agreed, 5 disagreed, and 2 strongly disagreed. Thus, the majority of students agreed with rejecting violence in society.

Questionnaire item number 6 related to students' opinions about having respect for local traditions and cultures. Some 78 students said they strongly agreed, 12 agreed, 9 disagreed, and 1 strongly

disagreed. Thus, most students agreed with always respecting local traditions and cultures despite living in modern times.

Table 5
Results of the descriptive analysis of student perceptions

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
No1	100	1.00	4.00	3.5700	.72829
No2	100	1.00	4.00	3.5200	.87016
No3	100	2.00	4.00	3.7600	.47397
No4	100	1.00	4.00	3.5200	.75852
No5	100	1.00	4.00	3.6000	.68165
No6	100	1.00	4.00	3.6700	.68246
Valid N (listwise)	100				

Source: The results of the closed questionnaire

Based on the results of the descriptive analysis, we found that questionnaire item number 1 had an average score of 3.55 out of 4, so the students' regard for *tasawuh* thinking was very high. Item number 2 has an average score 3.52 out of 4, so the students' understanding of interpretation was also very good. Item number 3 had an average score of 3.76 out of 4, so the students' overall commitment to the Indonesian nation was at a very high level indeed. Item number 4 averaged a score of 3.52 out of 4, so students' understood very well the importance of tolerant attitudes. Item number 5 averaged a score of 3.60 out of 4, so the students' appreciation of non-violent attitudes was at a very high level. Questionnaire number 6 had an average score of 3.67 out of 4, so students' generally showed strong respect for local traditions and cultures.

The results of the questionnaires that were distributed to the 40 lecturers can be seen in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6
Lecturer's perceptions of religious moderation

Dimension	Indicator	No item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Religious moderation from the perspective of Sufistic commentators	Sufism thoughts	1	29	8	2	1	40
	Understanding interpretation	2	30	6	3	1	40
The implications of religious moderation for student competencies	Strong national commitment	3	27	9	3	1	40
	Attitudes of tolerance	4	33	5	2	0	40
	Non-violent principles	5	29	7	4	0	40
	Respect for local culture and traditions	6	29	6	4	1	40

Source: The results of the closed questionnaire

Table 6 above shows the results of the questionnaire for lecturers. Item number 1 related to lecturers' views about *tasawuh* thinking, with 29 lecturers strongly agreeing with it, 8 agreeing, 2 disagreeing, and 1 strongly disagreeing. Like with the students, the majority of lecturers agreed in some way about the importance of Sufistic thinking for dealing with life in society.

Item number 2 related to the lecturers' perceptions of understanding interpretations, with 30 lecturers strongly agreeing with this, 6 agreeing, 3 disagreeing, and 1 strongly disagreeing. Thus, most lecturers agreed about the need to understand interpretations of the Quran and Hadith.

Item number 3 related to the lecturers' beliefs about their strong national commitment, and 27 lecturers said they strongly agree, 9 agreed, 3 disagree, and 1 strongly disagreed. Thus, most lecturers agreed in some way about their continued commitment to the Indonesian nation.

Item number 4 related to lecturers' views about tolerance in attitudes, with 33 lecturers stating they strongly agreed, 5 agreed, 2 disagreed, and strongly disagree. Again, the vast majority of lecturers agreed about always upholding tolerant attitudes toward followers of other religions.

Item number 5 related to lecturers' perceptions of non-violent attitudes, with 29 lecturers strongly agreeing, 7 agreeing, 4 disagreeing, and none strongly disagreeing. Thus, most lecturers agree about the need to reject violence in society.

Item number 6 related to lecturers' views about their respect for local traditions and culture, with 29 lecturers saying they strongly agreed, 6 agreed, 4 disagreed, and 1 person strongly disagreed. Most of the lecturers therefore agreed about always respecting local traditions and cultures, even though they were living in a modern era.

Table 7
Results of the descriptive analysis of lecturers' perceptions

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
No1	40	1.00	4.00	3.6250	.70484
No2	40	1.00	4.00	3.6250	.74032
No3	40	1.00	4.00	3.5500	.74936
No4	40	2.00	4.00	3.7750	.53048
No5	40	2.00	4.00	3.6250	.66747
No6	40	1.00	4.00	3.5750	.78078
Valid N (listwise)	40				

Source: The results of the closed questionnaire

Based on the results of the descriptive analysis, item number 1 had an average score of 3.62 out of 4, so the opinions of the lecturers about *tasawuh* thinking were generally very good. Item number 2 averaged a score of 3.62 out of 4, so the lecturers' understanding of interpretation was also very

good. Item number 3 averaged a score of 3.55 out of 4, so the lecturers' sense of having a strong national commitment was also at a high level. Item number 4 averaged a score of 3.77 out of 4, so the lecturers' understanding of the importance of tolerance was very good. Item number 5 averaged a score of 3.62 out of 4, so the lecturers' appreciation of non-violent attitudes was also very good. Finally, item number 6 averaged a score of 3.57 out of 4, so the lecturers' respect for local traditions and cultures was again very good.

Views of Sufistic Commentators about Religious Moderation

This study sought to identify what Sufistic commentators thought about religious moderation through observations and interviews with the participants. It was revealed that religious moderation assumes a moderate religious perspective, so it is not radical, and it avoids hate speech that could cause fractures in inter-faith relations. It was further explained that religious moderation embraces the values of justice and kindness, such that justice is balanced and impartial in managing society based on law and certainty (Fahri & Zainuri, 2019). However, according to the participants, in its implementation, the existence of justice as a black-and-white series of formal laws is not enough because it needs to be accompanied by kindness to underlie the principle of justice. Indeed, justice is a legal dimension, while kindness is an ethical dimension, so the two must be balanced and mutually supportive of each other. QS Al Baqarah (2) verse 143 says the following:

> *And so [also] We have made you [Muslims], a just and chosen people so that you become witnesses of human [deeds] and that the Apostle (Muhammad) be witnesses of [deeds] you. And We have not set the qibla to be your qibla [now] but so that you may know so that it may be evident who follows the Messenger and who disobeys. And indeed [the change of Qibla] is very heavy, except for those who have been guided by Allah; and Allah will not waste your faith. Verily, Allah is Most Gracious, Most Merciful to mankind.*

As explained by Asfar (2020), for the content of a verse in the Quran, it is not enough to just translate it or take the prima facie *zahir* meaning—a deeper knowledge of the implicit meaning of the verse must be derived through a Sufistic approach. In this way, the Prophet's thoughts can be used as an exemplary source for teaching about the values of religious moderation.

According to the participating lecturers, when interpreting the *Ummatan wasathan* verse, it refers to *udulan* (just people) and *khiyar* (choice), or simply *al-khiyar wa al-ajwad*. Thus, the chosen people in question are people who act justly:

> *The ideas of Kiai Asrori and Ibn 'Athiyah contributed to strengthening religious moderation. It is explained that Ummatan wasatan in QS Al Baqarah (2) verse 143 is a moderate people ['adl] who have moderate attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors [al-tawassut] and are fair and proportional [al-i'tidal] between material interests and spirituality, divinity and humanity, past and future, reason and revelation, realism and idealism, as well as worldly and hereafter orientations. Meanwhile, exaggeration [al-mubalaghah], embellishment [al-tazayyud], carelessness [al-ifrat], and excessiveness [al-tafrit] are not part of the moderate attitude.*

The commentator Ibn 'Athiyaah examined four verses of the Quran that are relevant to religious moderation ('Athiyyah, n.d.). According to the lecturers, in addition to Al-Quran Surah Al Baqarah (2) verse 143, there are other verses related to religious moderation, namely Surah Al Baqarah (2) verse 256, Surah Hud (11) verses 118–119, and Surah An -Nisa (4) verse 135:

> *Q.S Al Baqarah verse 256 explains that with the guidance and the presence of the Apostle, it has become a light that Allah SWT shows to his servants. With that, there really is no compulsion in entering the religion [Islam]. Then Q.S Hud verses 118-119 explain that Allah SWT created his creatures for happiness, but on the other hand there is also evil. Disputes are evidence of ugliness, so Allah has the right to punish those who disagree. QS An Nisa verse 135 explains that whoever does justice and upholds justice and is a good witness, namely who gives someone's statement with honest words and does not do wrong by following his lust, then Allah SWT will give him the reward of the world and whatever he deserves and wants in the hereafter.*

If you look at this explanation given by Ibn 'Athiyyah, it is clear that he thinks that freedom for humans is allowed by Allah SWT. His interpretation explains that a person must be fair and honest, however, as was explained by the participating lecturers:

> *The attitude of religious moderation is evidence of the ability to believe in God,*
> *which is basically human conscience in understanding religious texts.*

In the book *Sufism Al-Muntakhabat*, the teaching of religious moderation includes moderate values, namely 1) maintaining brotherly human relations, 2) appreciating differences, 3) showing tolerance and shunning fanaticism, and 4) thinking ahead (Al-Ishaqi, 2009). The participating lecturers mentioned what the *ulama* said about the recommendation to establish brotherhood:

> *The scholars said: It is recommended to strengthen brotherhood between people, even to non-Muslims in the hope of growing faith, guidance, and goodness for them. Therefore, the Sunnah prayer is to ask for guidance for him, namely by prioritizing actions that can bring love and doing something that gives birth to love in the heart of your brother, because the nature of love has no measure, so we can only work on it.*

This recommendation not only aims to encourage good relations between humans but also emphasize etiquette (*adab*) and good inter-faith behavior because of the nature of all humans as creations of Allah SWT. It is stated in *Al-Muntakhabat* that customs are the key to opening the door to Allah SWT. The lecturers mentioned that the idea of the essence of *adab* can be seen through expressions of the scholars for this essence (*al-muhaqqiqun*):

> *Scholars of nature explain that the essence of adab is to despise oneself and see others as nobler.*

The understanding taught by Kiai Asrori is to create a harmonious relationship between social life and spiritual–religious life, and this is represented in the teaching of religious moderation. Lebi explained that if you encounter someone who is older, then you should honor and respect that person because he or she has more experience, obedience, and participation in carrying out the Sunnah of the Prophet SAW. Previous findings have stated that religious moderation has a direct relationship with religiosity and spirituality. Such attitudes reflect a relationship with more adaptive psychological functioning (Ghorbani et al., 2019). Meanwhile, if you see people who are younger, then you should love and cherish them by assuming that any mistakes they have made are less than your own. Likewise, if you meet people of different religions, you should be gentle with them and acknowledge that their faith is the will of Allah SWT and that it remains unclear

whether you will die with a good ending (*husn al-khatimah*) or a bad one (*su al-khatimah*). Appreciating differences is part of accepting that human life has different levels. Kiai Asrori revealed the following:

> *Human understanding of this [religion] varies. Their position with Allah SWT is in accordance with their level of understanding. The perfection of their understanding shows the superiority of their understanding of Allah SWT. People who know and understand more about Allah SWT as their Lord are the most perfect people in their understanding of life. Thus, this is the most exalted person, high and great in rank with Him, and closer to Him. Also the opposite is true. If his understanding is lacking, then his share is lacking, His closeness, little charity and His wisdom is weak.*

Tolerance is the decision of each individual and not a necessity, even though it has a beneficial impact. Kiai Asrori reflects tolerance in his attitudes about someone who has studied more than one *mursyid*. He quotes the statement of al-Haddad (1132 H) in the *Risalah al-Murid*:

> *So Habib Abdullah replied: Yes, you can, on the condition that there is no dispute or difference between one tarekat and another. Also the disciples are people who have pure sincerity and purpose. However, studying at one mursyid can be used as a guide that applies in general.*

One lecturer explained that forward-thinking in Islamic Sufism is interpreted as a basic principle for realizing concrete progress in the development of Islamic society. For example, consistent introspection can be an asset for improving human quality and perfecting the soul. This is also reflected in the forming of self-development toward a balanced life between this world and the hereafter. Sufism is not a goal but rather a means of living life (Suntana & Tresnawaty, 2021). According to Abu al-Wafia 'al-Taftazani's views about the substantive elements of Sufism, "The goal of developing the morality of the human soul is a philosophical view that can be realized by doing practical exercises, so that it can produce feelings that dissolve in transcendental nature" (Bancin, 2017). It is clear that Islamic Sufism also has benefits for the development of human morality and spirituality, as shown by the benefits of teaching religious moderation. Kiai Asrori collected statements from scholars to describe Sufism in *Madkhal ila al-Tasawuf al-Islami*:

> *Sufism is not an escape from the reality of life as the haters have accused it, but Sufism is an effort to arm oneself with new spiritual values to face an essential and eternal life by realizing mental stability as a means of dealing with objections and mental difficulties.*

The notion of religious moderation in the thoughts of some Sufistic commentators can be seen in the values of human brotherhood, respect for differences, tolerance, not being fanatical, and thinking ahead. This book contains Sufistic and religious beliefs that accord with moderate principles of the time. Previous research has posited that any introduction of moderate religious teaching into the realm of education must be in accordance with the guidelines of the Holy Quran (Abdullah & Nento, 2021; Mahrus et al., 2020). The Quran requires careful interpretation and a deeper understanding of the meaning implied in its verses (Anshori et al., 2021). In this case, Islamic universities needs to provide knowledge and critical learning about religious moderation from the perspective of the commentators of the Quran. The goal is to achieve religious insight that is able to open up to new horizons and ethics and improve the acceptance of followers of other religions (Budiharso & Tarman, 2020; Roqib, 2021). This study posits that the teaching of religious moderation is a form of spiritual renewal, and it uses faith as a bridge in encounters between religious communities in social life (Janarbekovna, 2021). The study of interpretation is part of the wealth of Islamic knowledge, which holds the wisdom that needs to be studied and practiced, especially in social aspects.

Implications of Religious Moderation for Student Competencies

A second finding relates to the implications of moderate religious values for improving student competencies. In this study, an improvement in the competencies of students majoring in Al Quran and Tafsir Sciences at the Ushuluddin Faculty was revealed as a result of the teaching that had been carried out by the lecturers and the thoughts and attitudes expressed by students during the research. The participating lecturers explained that they had academically implemented a moderate Islamic education curriculum in an effort to improve student competencies. They further explained the vision, mission, and goals of PT Islam, especially at the Ushuluddin Faculty:

> *In an academic context, the Ushuluddin Faculty examines the sources and basics of religion related to belief, worship, muamalah, and so on. Ushuluddin is also*

a forum for studying the basis of religion, one that is oriented towards activities like research, teaching, and service for the development of Islamic scholarship in order to build society.

The participating students more deeply explained their understanding of the Ushuluddin Faculty:

The term Ushuluddin refers to the science of monotheism, the science of Aqidah or the science of Kalam, which is relevant to the teaching of religious moderation. Because in this faculty, we are guided to become Muslim scholars who believe and have a noble character and mastery of the sources of religious teachings by thinking critically and methodologically based on the structure of applied Islamic sciences and the ability to provide answers conceptually by opening ourselves up from the times according to our abilities and expertise.

In terms of student competencies, it is clear that the abilities that students need at the university level are based on knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This study posits that to achieve competence, students must be able to maintain synergy between their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor side in order to become capable of coming up with creative and positive ideas (Lincoln & Kearney, 2015; Roqib, 2021). In this case, the participating lecturers explained the following:

To improve the competencies of students, since the beginning of the semester, they have been equipped with basic Islamic knowledge, nationalism, analytical methods, and language strengthening. When entering the second year, students get knowledge that is in accordance with their expertise, so that students can equip themselves when they return to society. Ushuluddin Faculty students are taught about the science of morals and Sufism, as well as the science of the Quran and interpretation, so that their competence in the field of Islamic studies, especially the ability to transform and empower Islamic scholarship to solve people's problems.

Observations revealed that at the Faculty of Ushuluddin, students benefitted from a good quality study and interpretation program for the Quran, so that they could develop good reasoning and professional skills. Thus, this program indirectly improves student competencies. Students are

guided and directed through religious moderation to become Muslim scholars who will be professional and qualified to respond to the challenges of the times:

> *We are provided with soft skills training and practical skills that support academic and non-academic abilities. So, hopefully we will be able to take part in society and work. One aspect is community service, where we are taught that when mingling with the community, we must be tolerant and respectful and have Islamic ethics.*

Indeed, learning religious moderation can help develop good Islamic competencies (Rahmah & Fadhli, 2021). In order to improve student competencies through moderate Islamic education, it seems that the teaching of religious moderation at the Ushuluddin Faculty emphasizes skills in aspects like critical thinking, creative thinking, leadership, and emotional prowess, as well as being able to adapt cognitive processes to deal with new phenomena and social environments (Budiharso & Tarman, 2020). The students also enthusiastically expressed what they have learned from being taught about religious moderation. Both their attitudes and behaviors when expressing their opinions showed sufficient seriousness in understanding religious moderation. Even though this alone may not be enough to significantly increase student competencies, it can encourage good attitudes and behaviors when Muslims understand the importance of moderate religious values in life. This is why previous studies have stated that it has academic potential, because moderate religious values represent a form of understanding and an approach for contextualizing, knowing, and practicing morality and spirituality (Addai-Mununkum, 2019; Bustomi, 2020; Roqib, 2021). The findings are novel in two ways, namely they reflect the views of participants about the thoughts of Sufistic commentators on religious moderation and the implications they have for developing the competencies of students studying the Quran and Tafsir. The thoughts of the Sufistic commentators represent the spiritual reflection of clean, sincere, and pure hearts considering the meaning of the words of Allah SWT. Not just anyone can become an expert on Sufistic interpretation, so in our view, these Muslim scholars are very special. This science of interpretation is included in the category of *ladunni* science, so it is a direct gift from Allah SWT as a result of piety, *istiqamah*, and good morals. It is expected that such study will improve our understanding of the deeper meaning of the verses in the Quran, and this reflects on the teaching

of religious moderation as a way for Islamic colleges to support the realization of Bhineka Tunggal Ika and Pancasila values.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research and discussions conducted as part of this study, we can conclude that Sufistic commentators understand religious moderation as embodying attitudes that maintain brotherly human relations, respect the differences of others, tolerate religious difference without being fanatical, and encourage thinking ahead. Such religious moderation can improve student competencies, because teaching about it encourages students to develop better reasoning, understanding, and professional skills. When teaching religious moderation, colleges must develop learning programs that develop and strengthen multiple aspects of literacy with the aim of broadening students' perspectives. In the context of colleges, students must be guided to accept other religions intellectually and academically. Students should be given basic knowledge about religious differences and human aspects in order to better appreciate this diversity. This research was based on observations, interviews, and documentation studies under the limited scope of understanding the thoughts of Sufistic commentators about religious moderation and its implications for student competencies. Future research is therefore highly recommended to expand upon this limited scope to include the contents of the Quran and Hadith in detail. In addition, it is very important to thoroughly examine the effect of religious moderation on student competence in higher education and quantitatively determine it.

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