

## Mentoring Preachers and Quran Teachers to Strengthen Religious Moderation in the Border Region of Gorontalo–North Sulawesi

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### Abstract

*Border areas are often associated with the complexity of identities, vulnerability to conflicts, and low security levels. This study aims to assist residents in border areas with diverse social, cultural, and religious differences. The selected areas are Gorontalo, which has a strong Islamic identity, and North Sulawesi, which is predominantly Christian. The study focuses on preachers and Quran teachers, as they hold a central role in conveying religious messages. The research method used is the Community Based Research (CBR) model with a descriptive approach. The research results show that mentoring through the internalization of moderate Islamic values such as tolerance, rejection of violence, national commitment, and respect for local traditions can improve participants' understanding of religious moderation. Specifically, the proportion of participants with a very good understanding increased by 10% after the program. Understanding of moderation will be more optimal if mentoring activities are carried out continuously through formal and non-formal activities. This study recommends that religious moderation activities in formal settings need to receive non-formal mentoring in the form of implementing moderation values in everyday life so that they have a relatively large potential in forming moderate attitudes in society's religion.*

**Keywords:** *Mentoring; Preachers; Quran Teachers; Religious Moderation.*

### Introduction

Border areas are regions with a fairly high level of complexity. Borders are often associated with conflicts due to cultural and religious differences (Falah, 2004) ownership of unclear territories (Pretto & Battello, 2016) as well as dual population identities or the difficulty of finding the true identity of

border dwellers due to inter-community mixing (Kambo & Yani, 2024). Studies on the importance of developing border areas are not new. In India, such studies have been promoted since 1986-1987 with the aim of maintaining and security stability in border areas (Manoharan et al., 2020) Meanwhile, in Indonesia, with its large area as an archipelagic country, the study of borders is often associated with borders between islands or provinces (Dewi et al., 2012; Purwanto & Mangku, 2016; Teturan et al., 2019)

Among the many studies on borders, one thing that lacks enthusiasm is the potential for religious tolerance and moderation that can be developed in the midst of the complexity of existing borders. One of the regions in Indonesia that has the potential for diversity and harmony is the Gorontalo and North Sulawesi regions. The two regions were initially one province, but later Gorontalo became an administratively independent region as a separate province. The two regions also have religious, ethnic, and cultural differences that are quite varied.

When viewed topographically, Gorontalo is one of the 34 provinces in Indonesia that has a large Muslim population, with the number reaching 96.87% of the total population (BPS, 2018) In addition to having a large Muslim population, religious vibrancy is also present in the area. One of these conditions can be seen from a well-known cultural philosophy, namely "Syara' and Syara' Kitabullah Jointed Customs" (Amir, 2016; Baruadi, 2012) This slogan seems to affirm that religion is in line with the customs that apply to the local population.

Far different from Gorontalo, North Sulawesi is an area with a majority Protestant population, reaching number reaches 60.20% of the total population. Meanwhile, the Muslim population amounts to 34.41% of the total population, which is about half of the Protestant population. In addition, other religions such as Catholicism also grow in this area, with adherents comprising 4.72% of the population, Hinduism 0.52%, Buddhism 0.13%, and Confucianism 0.01% of the population (Utara, 2018)

Based on the above statistical data, it is clear that Gorontalo and North Sulawesi are two regions with very different religious characteristics. The first area is conditioned by Islamic tradition, while the second is synonymous with the spirit of Christianity, specifically Protestantism. Thus, it is important to cultivate religious understanding with a moderate and Indonesian perspective

in both regions. This is intended to maintain tolerance and egalitarian attitudes among adherents of different religions.

In order to foster the spirit of religious moderation among religious believers, an important step is to promote an understanding of religious moderation from an Indonesian perspective among preachers (Islam) and Quran teachers in areas that intersect with multi-religious communities. Preachers play a vital role due to their duties and responsibilities that are directly related to the community (*ummat*) (Hammad & Saddique, 2022). Moreover, preachers and Quran teachers are the bearers of religious messages, and when these messages are conveyed, they should still respect followers of other religions of different (Arifianto, 2019)

The focus on fostering a moderate religious attitude among khatibs and preachers is due to the fact that this coaching is being carried out in the Gorontalo area, which is a Muslim-majority region. This perspective does not imply that preachers and Quran teachers are intolerant bearers of religious doctrines. However, the real challenge is how preachers and Quran teachers in the border area of Gorontalo–North Sulawesi can internalize and implement the values of religious moderation while coexisting with communities of different faiths. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the question: how can mentoring activities for preachers and Quran teachers strengthen the understanding and practice of religious moderation in border regions characterized by cultural and religious diversity.

## **Method**

This study uses the CBR (Community Based Research) method. Using the CBR model, this study emphasizes the active involvement of the community during the activity process (Leeuw et al., 2012; Strand et al., 2003). There are several steps that can be taken in CBR research, including: 1) understanding the social conditions of a society, 2) involvement in the research process, 3) data collection process, 4) data analysis process, 5) considering existing ethics and norms, and 6) spreading social impacts. The six steps in this study can be seen in the chart as follows:

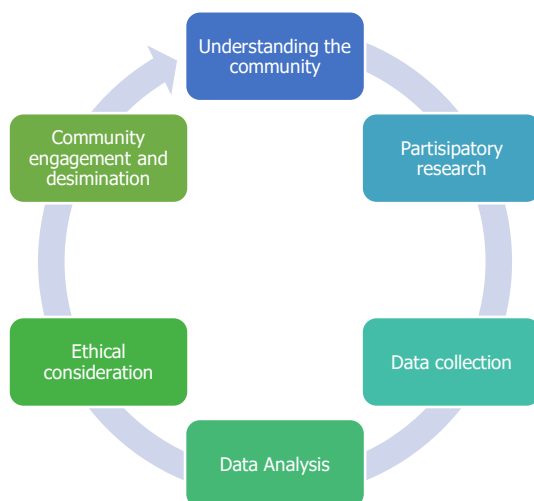


Chart 1.  
Methods and Approaches in Community Based Research (CBR)

The participants in this study consisted of 30 individuals, including preachers (khatib) and Quran teachers (ustadz/ustadzah) who live and serve in the Gorontalo–North Sulawesi border area. The participants were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) actively involved in religious teaching or preaching activities, (2) residing in villages directly adjacent to interfaith communities, and (3) willing to participate in mentoring and evaluation activities.

The participants' backgrounds were diverse in terms of age (ranging from 25–55 years old) and educational attainment, from Islamic boarding school graduates to those holding higher education degrees in Islamic studies. This diversity was important to capture various perspectives on religious moderation.

## Result and Discussion

### Religious Moderation

Religious moderation, in practice is not new, this term has a close meaning to moderate Islam (Akmaliah et al., 2022; Ni'am, 2015) Islam *wasathiyah* (Fauzi & Wahid, 2022; Sutomo & Syukur, 2023) and inclusive Islam (Maftuhin & Muflihati, 2022) and the like. The term became familiar in Indonesia because it became a national project of the Minister of Religious

Affairs Lukman Hakim Saefudin (Muhajarah & Soebahar, 2024) when he was the Minister of Religious Affairs. Since then, various activities have used the term religious moderation as the *main tagline*.

The need for religious moderation is not just a national project, in that era, with the rapid flow of media, Muslims in Indonesia were faced with the rise of religious conservatism (Butt, 2018; Kirana & Garadian, 2020) the growth of normative Islamic groups such as salafism (Jamhari & Testriono, 2021; Wahid, 1970) and the rise of political factions (Akmaliah & Nadzir, 2024) based on religion. With the emergence of conservatism in this way of religion, conflicts and divisions can occur, especially when the conflict carries a sacred religious symbol. In the view of Atran and Ginges, such conflicts can last longer or even centuries (Zulkifli, 2024)

The formalization of religious moderation activities that are widely echoed by state institutions—in this case, the Ministry of Religious Affairs—is also not without criticism. The activity in question is considered to narrow the meaning and implementation of the value of tolerance because the institutional approach so far has been project-based (Mukhibat et al., 2024) Sirry also argues that relying too much on moderation (deradicalization) programs carried out by the state ignores the potential of individuals to act moderately with their potential (Sirry, 2020) However, the right step that state institutions can take in intervening in counter-radicalism is by strengthening religious moderation.

When viewed from the agenda brought forward, religious moderation or other activities that are against radicalism are a form of breaking psychological commitments and conservative ideologies (Koehler, 2017) However, religious radicalism and conservatism cannot be said to be directly related to ideology (Sirry, 2020) There are many factors that can affect this, such as social and political influence (Zaenuri & Irfan, 2023) and culture.

In order to carry out the religious moderation agenda, there are four stages that must be completed. The four stages include: 1) fostering tolerance 2) not committing violence 3) having a national commitment and 4) acceptance of tradition. Tolerance is understood as acceptance or respect for religious understanding and other religious worship practices. Non-violence is understood as rejecting everything that can divide unity and cause conflict. Meanwhile, national commitment is interpreted as providing benefits to the nation and state and accepting the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

Acceptance of tradition is understood as not discriminating between races, ethnicities, groups, and religions (Mukhibat et al., 2024) The four pillars of religious moderation are indicators in developing a moderate attitude in religion.

### **Social and Cultural Conditions of the Gorontalo Border Area**

The area that is the location of this service activity is Kwandang District, North Gorontalo Regency, Gorontalo Province. The selection of this location was carried out based on the area's status as the center of government and its proximity to the border area of North Sulawesi.

Culturally, Gorontalo is an area with strong religious traditions (read: Islam) (Amin, 2012) These religious traditions are not only historical heritage (Amin, 2017) but also loaded with Islamic values (Darwis, 2015) Politically, Islam also occupies a position of benefit (Mukrimin, 2023) In addition to the majority of the Muslim population, which serves as social capital supporting political figures, some of the banquet customs of political figures are also synonymous with Islamic values (Pateda & Muda, 2023)

On the one hand, cultural and religious acculturation is a potential social identity for the people of Gorontalo. On the other hand, it can give rise to the superiority of certain religions or cultures over others. Moreover, within Gorontalo society, there are also other religious and cultural communities such as Christianity, Catholicism, Confucianism, and other local religions.

In the northern region, Gorontalo province is directly adjacent to Bolaang Mongondow. This region has a fairly balanced population of Islamic and Christian religions. Although Islam still dominates with a total of 61.64% compared to 32.15%, in the region after that, namely Minahasa, the numbers are quite reversed, where Islam is only 6.57% while Christianity is 85.10% (BPS, 2022) The high level of religious and cultural diversity carries considerable potential for conflict. However, this diversity can also be a strong potential for unity if managed properly.

Based on the reasoning regarding this diversity, research in the form of this service is being carried out. The location selection is in Kwandang District, North Gorontalo Regency, with the following number of villages:

*Tabel 1. Village Data in Kwandang District, North Gorontalo*

| No  | Village Name         | Availability of Preachers and Quran Teacher |
|-----|----------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Alata Karya          | Available                                   |
| 2.  | Botungobungo         | Available                                   |
| 3.  | Botuwombata          | Available                                   |
| 4.  | Bualemo              | Available                                   |
| 5.  | Bulalo               | Available                                   |
| 6.  | Cisadane             | Available                                   |
| 7.  | Katialada            | Available                                   |
| 8.  | Leboto               | Available                                   |
| 9.  | Masuru               | Available                                   |
| 10. | Molingkapoto         | Available                                   |
| 11. | Molingkapoto Selatan | Available                                   |
| 12. | Moluo                | Available                                   |
| 13. | Mootinelo            | Available                                   |
| 14. | Ombulodata           | Available                                   |
| 15. | Pontolo              | Available                                   |
| 16. | Pontolo Atas         | Available                                   |
| 17. | Posso                | Available                                   |
| 18. | Titidu               | Available                                   |

### **Assistance of Preachers and Quran Teachers**

As explained earlier, this service uses a community base research (CBR) approach, therefore this research is carried out in the following steps:

a. Understanding the community

At this stage, the researcher collaborated with the Ministry of Religion of North Gorontalo Regency to provide an understanding of moderate Islam. At the beginning of the activity, the facilitator explained the various variants of Islam, from traditionalists and modernists to the trend of the rise of conservative Islam. Participants, consisting of preachers and Quran teachers were asked to identify the characteristics and forms of religious conservatism. Through these characteristics and forms, each participant could identify groups or individuals who are contaminated with conservative religious beliefs.

In addition to identifying religious conservatism movements, participants were also asked to identify factors that could cause a person to act radically and unmodernly. Some participants conveyed the causes of radicalism, such as economic factors, injustice, ideology, oppression, and culture. These factors were then analyzed to determine which are dominant in causing a person to commit an unmoderate act in religion.



*Figure 1. Assistance by Representatives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Regency North Gorontalo*



*Picture 2. Religious Moderation Assistance Tutor*

b. Participatory research

After identifying the problem of religious radicalization, the researcher together with the participants brainstormed ideas about what can be done to minimize the high level of actions that do not show moderation in religion.



*Picture 3. Brainstorming Ideas on Religious Moderation Insights*

The brainstorming focused on factors that can improve religious moderation, which include four indicators: 1) fostering tolerance, 2) non-violence, 3) having a national commitment, and 4) acceptance of tradition.

|   |                                |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Tolerance                      | Tolerance will grow if each individual can appreciate and respect the other individual.                                                                                           |
| 2 | Rejecting violence             | All forms of violence, especially in the name of religion, are unjustified.                                                                                                       |
| 3 | National commitment            | Every citizen must have a spirit of nationalism towards his country. This commitment can be done by doing things that are beneficial to others.                                   |
| 4 | Acceptance of local traditions | Acceptance of local traditions is not only accepting other traditions, but respecting each individual and local identity such as ethnicity, nation and religion that is attached. |

*Table 2. Results of Brainstorming Things That Can Foster Religious Moderation Attitudes*

c. Data Collection

At this stage, each participant collects data on unmoderated attitudes that can cause disharmony among residents in border areas. Some of these forms of attitude include:

| No | Types of Activities | Moderate Attitude in Religion to Others                                                                                                                                             |
|----|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | Evening Studies     | Recitations at night using loudspeakers that are loud enough can interfere with the comfort of different people. Especially in the people of Bolaang Mongondow, 36% are Christians. |
| 2. | Blocking roads      | It is a habit for some people in general to block certain events without coordinating first with the government or local apparatus, which results in several other user congestion. |

|    |                                              |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3. | Prohibition of other people from worshipping | Several times there was a ban on the worship of other people because it was carried out outside the place of worship, which was because they did not have a house of worship. |
|----|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Table 3. Collection of Unmoderate Attitudes in Border Communities  
What is common

The form of data findings in the field is summarized for analysis, and solutions are identified.

d. Data Analysis

After carrying out various activities that can foster religious moderation, the researcher conducted an analysis of these activities to observe changes in the views of *missionaries* and teachers after receiving assistance on religious moderation. This analysis was carried out to obtain an overview of the extent to which the preachers and Quran teachers had absorbed the material and assistance provided. From several points proposed in the pre and post-test, the following changes in the understanding of preachers and Quran teachers about religious moderation can be observed:

| Pre Test; Understand well and correctly Religious Moderation |       |           |         |                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|---------|--------------------|
|                                                              |       | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid                                                        | 1     | 2         | 6,667   | 7                  |
|                                                              | 2     | 20        | 66,667  | 67                 |
|                                                              | 3     | 8         | 26,667  | 27                 |
|                                                              | Total | 30        | 100     | 100                |

Table 4. Pre Test

| Post Test; Understand well and correctly Religious Moderation |       |           |          |                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
|                                                               |       | Frequency | Percent  | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid                                                         | 2     | 2         | 6,66667  | 7                  |
|                                                               | 3     | 17        | 56,66667 | 57                 |
|                                                               | 4     | 11        | 36,66667 | 37                 |
|                                                               | Total | 30        | 100      | 100                |

Table 5. Post Test

Description: 1. Not Understanding 2. Understand a little 3. Understand 4. I get it.

Based on the table above, it is known that there has been an increase in understanding of religious moderation among preachers and Quran teachers before and after the test. At the beginning of the activity, there were 20

participants who understood, but after mentoring, there were 2 participants who increased to a very good understanding. This increase is not too significant, at only 7%, but if these activities continue to be carried out, it will enhance the understanding of religious moderation.

## **Discussion**

The improvement in participants' understanding of religious moderation, as indicated by the pre-test and post-test results, can be explained through several theoretical perspectives. The increase in tolerance among participants resonates with Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis, which suggests that meaningful interaction between individuals of different religious backgrounds, under conditions of equality and shared goals, reduces prejudice and fosters mutual respect. The rejection of violence can be linked to Johan Galtung's peace theory, which emphasizes the importance of addressing conflicts through non-violent means. The rise in national commitment reflects civic nationalism theory, where loyalty to the nation-state transcends religious divisions. Finally, the acceptance of local traditions corresponds with multiculturalism theory (Parekh), which underlines the value of recognizing and respecting cultural diversity as a foundation for social cohesion.

Mukhibat in a previous study, stated that the formalism of religious moderation activities carried out by the government could narrow the meaning of moderation itself (Mukhibat et al., 2024) Meanwhile, Sirry supported this view by stating that deradicalization activities—including religious moderation—that are institutionalized by the government actually overlook the role of individuals in acting moderately. However, this does not mean that formal activities in countering radicalism are not useful (Sirry, 2020) Kohler found that the deradicalization movement carried out by the state played a role in breaking the psychological and ideological ties of the radical movement (Koehler, 2017)

Based on the results of religious moderation assistance in the field, this study found that the success rate in providing understanding of religious moderation to preachers and Quran teachers was relatively small, showing a 10% increase. Thus, the thesis of Mukhibat and Sirry is consistent with this research. Meanwhile, Koehler's view is in accordance with this research if the mentoring process is carried out continuously, systematically, and measurably. This study recommends that religious moderation attitudes are not formed

instantly through formal activities alone also through but other activities that can continuously enhance these moderate attitudes.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

Border areas are regions with high complexity, including vulnerability to interreligious conflicts, territorial disputes, fragmented social identities, and cultural diversity. The Gorontalo–North Sulawesi border reflects such complexities. This study has shown that mentoring preachers and Quran teachers is effective in fostering values of religious moderation, particularly in strengthening tolerance, reducing tendencies toward violence, increasing national commitment, and encouraging acceptance of local traditions. Although the measured improvement was around 10%, the shift in participants’ understanding demonstrates the strategic role of religious educators in border communities.

The unique contribution of this study lies in the application of the Community Based Research (CBR) model for mentoring religious actors in a border context. Unlike conventional top–down training, CBR allows preachers and Quran teachers to be directly involved in identifying problems, analyzing causes, and developing contextual solutions. This participatory mentoring model is relatively new in the field of religious moderation studies in Indonesia, especially in border areas with complex interfaith dynamics.

Therefore, this study recommends that formal mentoring activities such as seminars and coaching be complemented by continuous non-formal mentoring that internalizes moderation values in daily practices. Future initiatives can adopt and refine the CBR-based mentoring model as a replicable framework for other border regions in Indonesia or similar multi-religious contexts.

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