# Islamic Moderation in Context: Ulama and Religious Communication in East Aceh

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## Abstract

This article examines the religious communication strategies of *ulama* (Islamic scholars) in East Aceh; analyzing their role in promoting religious moderation. Using Lessl's theory that argues religious communication is inherently metaphorical and involves metaphysical referents, this article highlights the important role of *da'wa* in encouraging the acceptance of the idea of moderation within the community. This article was based on qualitative research and two months field observations of Abati Aramia and Abah Zein's *pengajian (recitation)*, two young and influential *ulama* in East Aceh. The data validation process used data triangulation by connecting field data, observation and theory to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon. This paper argues that the influence of *ulama* in introducing religious moderation, particularly state-promoted ideas, into local contexts is crucial. Abah Zein employs a dialogical approach, making his da'wah interactive and responsive to societal needs, while Abati Aramia emphasizes collective dialogue and consensus for maintaining societal harmony. From this study it is concluded that the *ulama*'s communication strategies are integral to promoting Islamic moderation, bridging the gap between religious teachings and the everyday challenges faced by the community.

**Keywords:** Islamic Moderation, *Ulama*, Communication, Aceh

## Abstract

*Artikel ini mengkaji strategi komunikasi keagamaan ulama di Aceh Timur, dengan menganalisis peran mereka dalam mempromosikan moderasi keagamaan. Menggunakan teori Lessl yang menyatakan bahwa komunikasi keagamaan secara inheren bersifat metaforis dan melibatkan hal-hal metafisik, artikel ini menyoroti peran penting da'wa dalam mainstreaming moderasi di dalam komunitas. Artikel ini didasarkan pada penelitian kualitatif dan pengamatan lapangan selama dua bulan, dengan fokus mengamati pengajian Abati Aramia dan Abah Zein, dua ulama muda dan berpengaruh di Aceh Timur. Proses validasi data dilakukan dengan menggunakan triangulasi data, di mana peneliti menghubungkan data lapangan, pengamatan, dan teori untuk mendapatkan pemahaman yang lengkap tentang fenomena. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa pengaruh ulama dalam memperkenalkan moderasi agama, khususnya ide-ide yang dipromosikan oleh negara, ke dalam konteks lokal sangatlah krusial. Abah Zein menggunakan pendekatan dialogis, menjadikan dakwahnya interaktif dan responsif terhadap kebutuhan masyarakat, sementara Abati Aramia menekankan dialog kolektif dan konsensus untuk menjaga harmoni sosial. Dari penelitian ini dapat disimpulkan bahwa strategi komunikasi ulama merupakan bagian integral dalam mempromosikan moderasi Islam, menjembatani kesenjangan antara ajaran agama dan tantangan sehari-hari yang dihadapi komunitas.*

**Keywords:** *Moderasi Islam Ulama, Komunikasi, Aceh*

## Background

Religious radicalism has emerged as a significant issue in global discourse, particularly due to the frequent reports of terrorism driven by religious ideologies. Scholars in the field of radicalism often use various terms such as "terrorism"[1] or "fundamentalism" to describe this

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[1] Arman Marwing, "Developing A Model Of Cognitive Psychotherapy Based On Indonesia Islamic Values On Terrorist," *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 86–103, https://doi.org/DOI : 10.30983/islam_realitas.v4i1.739.

group[2]. These terms typically refer to groups within Islam that reject the current social order and strive to establish a new one based on religious values. Oliver Roy identifies movements that focus on implementing Sharia law as the examples of Islamic fundamentalism.[3] Such movements include the Muslim Brotherhood[4], Hizbut-Tahrir[5], and Front Pembela Islam (FPI)[6]. However, John Esposito offers a critique of the term "fundamentalism" for three main reasons: first, it is often associated with a call to return to the pure, foundational teachings of religion; second, its interpretation is heavily influenced by the American Protestant movement of the 20th century, which emphasised a literal understanding of the Bible; and third, it is frequently linked to anti-American sentiments.[7] Instead, Esposito suggests using "religious movements" to analyse contemporary Islamic groups that challenge Western dominance through Islamic revivalism.[8]

In addition, Marty offered a fresh perspective on the emergence of radicalism in the Muslim world by examining how Islamic groups interpreted religious texts.[9] He categorized these movements based on their interpretation of texts like the Quran. However, many scholars indicated that religious radicalism did not ariseby chance.[10]On the contrary, there were underlying causes and specific triggers that led to it. These factors were varied and depend on the context, shaped by the surrounding events. In Indonesia, the discourse on religious radicalism gained prominence after the 1998 political reforms,[11] which allowed for greater freedom of association and organization.[12] This shift led to the proliferation of new political and religious groups, including transnational organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizbut-Tahrir, as well as local groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI).[13] These organizations often referred to as "radical Islam" and seen as challenges to a democracy. The transformation of radical organizations into terrorist networks highlighted the close relationship between radicalism and terrorism.[14] Regions that were the sites of terrorist arrested often became fertile ground for the emergence of new radical cells.[15] Therefore, religious radicalism is not just an ideological issue but a significant challenge to Indonesia's social and political stability.[16]

Furthermore, Liddle points out that the post-New Order political climate of openness and freedom had paradoxically facilitated the evolution of terrorism.[17] He identified three key factors contributing to this phenomenon: (1) widespread acceptance of scripturalist teachings among Indonesian Muslims; (2) the potential for political alliances between scripturalists and

[2] Matthews A. Ojo, "Pentecostal Movements, Islam and the Contest for Public Space in Northern Nigeria," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 18, no. 2 (2007): 175–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410701214043.

[3] Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[4] Noha Mellor, *Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood, Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood*, 2017, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315114552.

[5] Claudia Seise, "Muslimah Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia : An Introduction to Its Thoughts and Activities," No. 44 (2011).

[6] Gabriel Facal, "Islamic Defenders Front Militia (Front Pembela Islam) and Its Impact on Growing Religious Intolerance in Indonesia.," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 2019, 1–22.

[7] J. L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics., Islam and Politics.*, 1984, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315494456-45.

[8] Esposito.

[9] Martin E. Marty, *Fundamentalisms Comprehended: The Fundamentalism Project* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[10] Suhadi Cholil, "Freedom of Religion amid Polarization and Religious Moderation Policy," *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 6, no. 2 (March 30, 2023): 196–204, https://doi.org/10.1558/isit.24603; Syamsul Arifin, "Islamic Religious Education and Radicalism in Indonesia: Strategy of de-Radicalization through Strengthening the Living Values

Education," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 6, no. 1 (June 1, 2016): 93, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v6i1.93-126.

[11] Tim Lindsey, Jamhari Makruf, and Helen Pausacker, *Islam, Education and Radicalism in Indonesia: Instructing Piety* (London: Routledge, 2023).

[12] Vedi R. Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2018.1433225.

[13] By Peter Mandaville et al., "Transnational Islam in South and Southeast Asia," no. april (2009).

[14] Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Salafi Movement in Indonesia : Transnational Dynamics And" 27, no. 1 (2014): 83–94.

[15] Tal Samuel-azran and Amit Lavie-dinur, "Narratives Used to Portray In-Group Terrorists : A Comparative Analysis of the Israeli and Norwegian Press," 2015, https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635214531106.

[16] Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia."

[17] R William Liddle and William Liddle, "Indonesia ' s Democratic Transition : Playing by the Rules," no. August (1999).

emerging social groups; and (3) the ambitions of opportunistic politicians looking to build mass support. According to Liddle, these groups generally avoided intellectual engagement aimed at contextualizing the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and Islam within the socio-political conditions of the late 20th century.[18] They believed that the messages and meanings of Islam were entirely encapsulated in the Quran and Hadith, requiring only their application in daily life. Figures affiliated with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) such as Noordin M. Top and Dr. Azhari demonstrated this emphasis on Sharia law. JI believes that laws enacted by Indonesia's parliament constitute acts of shirk (idolatry) because they challenge God's authority in governing human affairs.[19] Governments that do not fully implement the Quran and Hadith are considered secular and labelled as *taghut* (illegitimate rulers), thus justifying opposition. Based on these beliefs, JI views its acts of terrorism in Indonesia as jihad. Established in 1993, JI declared Indonesia its central leadership's headquarters in 1999.

Neil J. Smelser emphasizes that while economic, political, and religious factors may create opportunities for organized movements, these elements are insufficient to provoke violence.[20] Violence typically emerges when these conditions are coupled with other factors, such as ideologies propagated by charismatic leaders or effective recruitment systems. This underscores the importance of religious leaders in promoting anti-violence and fostering tolerance toward other faiths. This study then looks at the role of the *ulama* in Aceh in introducing the idea of religious moderation.

Using qualitative research with a descriptive-analytical approach, the researchers interviewed two *ulama* figures in East Aceh. Qualitative methods are chosen to explore the figures' thoughts and their societal influence, requiring in-

depth data and a clear depiction of the social context. Two influential young scholars, Abah Zein and Abati Aramia, play vital roles in promoting religious moderation. Both are active in the Aceh *Ulama* Consultative Assembly (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama*, MPU) and lead Islamic boarding schools (*dayah*) in East Aceh. In Aceh, the *ulama* holds significant authority in disseminating and teaching Islam. The researchers observed the preaching sessions organised by these two figures in East Aceh by choosing th preaching themes related to religious moderation, such as interfaith relations and religious holidays. Then, the messages of the lectures were analysed and linked to the religious communication theory.[21] During the two months observation of the *pengajian*, the researchers talked about the content of *pengajian* to the people who attended the activity. Some important information related to the experiences and perceptions conveyed by the people who attended the recitation were used as data. The data validation process used data triangulation, where the researchers connected the field data, observation and theory to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon discussed.

This article explores the religious communication strategies of *ulama* (Islamic scholars) in East Aceh, employing Lessl's theory of religious communication to analyse their efforts in promoting religious moderation.[22] According to Lessl, religious communication is inherently metaphorical, irreducible to nonfigurative forms of expression, and involves metaphysical referents that can be understood but not fully defined.[23] Based on this understanding, religious moderation does not always need to be conveyed or expressed; it can also be communicated in subtle or unexpressed. As highlighted in various studies, while the concept of "religious moderation" is open to diverse interpretations, it generally refers to efforts by

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[18] Liddle and Liddle.

[19] Barry Desker, "The Jemaah Islamiyah ( JI ) Phenomenon in Singapore" 25, no. 3 (2014): 489–507.

[20] Neil J. Smelser, *The Faces of Terrorism* (Princeton University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7rqvk.

[21] Thomas M Lessl, "Toward a Definition of Religious Communication: Scientific and. Religious Uses of Evolution," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 16, no. 1 (1993): 127–41.

[22] Lessl.

[23] Lessl.

Muslims to position Islam as a faith that upholds its doctrinal truth while simultaneously acknowledging the existence of other religions. Although *Da'wah* activism for religious moderation is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia, the context of Aceh—particularly East Aceh, where this research is conducted—offers deeper insights into the role of traditional *ulama* in advancing the ideas of moderation.

This paper argues the influence of *ulama*, with a particular focus on their *da'wah* efforts in introducing external ideas, such as state-promoted religious moderation, into local contexts. The analysis highlights how the *ulama*'s authority and communication skills are integral to mediating these concepts and fostering acceptance within their communities. Setara Institute's report, which found greater levels of intolerance in Aceh than in other areas, highlights the importance of investigating the agency of Acehnese *ulama*[24]. Moreover, studies on *ulama* in Aceh following the implementation of Sharia law reveal a lack of agency in promoting moderate Islamic thought. This article examines the dynamics of *ulama* as agents of religious moderation, focusing on the interplay between *Da'wah* approaches, efforts to prevent radicalism, and the reinforcement of social harmony in Aceh's local context. Specifically, it addresses the research questions: 1) How did the *ulama* in Aceh communicate religious moderation? and 2) How do they ensure it fits within the region's Islamic socio-religious framework?

### *Ulama* and Religious Moderation

The role of *ulama* in Islam is profoundly significant, characterized by their extensive knowledge, piety, and dedication to God.[25] Their influences extend beyond religious matters to encompass social, economic, and political spheres, enabling them to guide and shape community values effectively.[26] Despite tremendous social, political, and economic changes in Indonesia, ulama continue to be relevant. However, their religious authority has become increasingly fragmented and pluralized due to the pervasive influence of global media and information technologies. This fragmentation has transformed religious authority into a competitive arena where traditionalist, reformist, and radical groups strive for legitimacy, thus shaping Indonesia's religious and sociopolitical landscape.[27]

Historically, the *Ulama* played a critical role in mediating societal transformations. In Aceh, *Ulama* had a long standing influence on the transformation of society.[28] In South Kalimantan, *Ulama* of the Banjarese had been essential in fostering balance, harmony, and unity among diverse social groups.[29] Their knowledge, moral integrity, and tangible contributions to community development have gained them widespread trust and respect. Their views on modernization and social change are received positively due to their religiosity and exemplary character, highlighting their enduring role as mediators and guides during periods of societal transition.[30]

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[24] A report from the Setara Institute in 2024 placed three regions in Aceh as the areas with the lowest levels of tolerance. Look at: https://setara-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Siaran-Pers_Kondisi-KBB-2024_SETARA-Institute-1.pdf

[25] R. Michael Feener, "Muslim Religious Authority in Modern Asia," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, no. 5 (2014): 501–16, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-04205002.

[26] Muhammad Sahlan et al., "The Roles of Ulama in the Process of Post-Conflict Reconciliation in Aceh," *Society* 7, no. 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v7i2.106.

[27] Zulkifli Zulkifli, "THE ULAMA IN INDONESIA: Between Religious Authority and Symbolic Power," *MIQOT: Journal of Islamic Sciences* 37, no. 1 (June 2, 2013), https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v37i1.79.

[28] Yusni Saby, "The Ulama in Aceh: A Brief Historical Survey", Studia Islamika, Vol 8, No 1 (2001): 1-53, https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v8i1.694

[29] Mujiburrahman Mujiburrahman, "HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN SOUTH KALIMANTAN," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 11, no. 1 (July 9, 2017): 145, https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2017.11.1.145-174.

[30] Rahmadi Rahmadi, Zulfa Jamalie, and Husnul Yaqin, "Banjarese Scholars and the Evolution of Islamic Education in South Kalimantan Circa 1900-1950," *Journal of Islamic Education Studies* 12, no. 1 (June 30, 2024): 63–94, https://doi.org/10.15642/jpai.2024.12.1.63-94.

In Aceh, the role of *ulama* has evolved due to historical and sociopolitical dynamics.[31] The Dutch colonial era disrupted the traditional role of *ulama*, but the establishment of the Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh (PUSA) organization, the United Ulama of Aceh, revitalized their influence, fostering a new generation of modern *ulama* with multidisciplinary expertise.[32] Today, *ulama* from *dayah* (Aceh Islamic boarding school) background holds authority over religious practices, as demonstrated by their rejection of *Salafist/Wahhabi* ideologies that conflict with the *Ahlusunnah Wal Jamaah* doctrine upheld in the region. Their authority is further reinforced by governmental policies that endorse adherence to the Shafi'i school of thought, ensuring the preservation of local Islamic traditions and safeguarding the *ulama*'s role as custodians of religious life.[33]

The significance of *dakwah* in Indonesia extends beyond religious propagation; it has the potential to promote social harmony, economic development, and social justice. The peaceful development of Islam in Indonesia, achieved without conflict or the denigration of other religions, serves as a historical testament to the potential of *dakwah* as a tool for encouraging harmony and unity within a pluralistic society. Despite these positive examples, Aceh faces unique challenges in fostering inclusivity.[34] Religious minorities in the province encounter

significant barriers to accessing public spaces, rooted in entrenched prejudices and restrictive regulations.[35] This dynamic has contributed to a polarized public sphere where the majority's religious identity dominates, marginalizing minority groups.[36] Such exclusion perpetuates a dichotomized citizenship, with minority communities often forced to create alternative spaces for navigating their identities. Reports of intolerance and radicalism in Aceh, such as attacks on the Muhammadiyah Mosque in Samalanga, highlight the intersection of religious ideology, state policies, and paramilitary support in perpetuating sectarian violence.[37] Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that fosters inclusive public spaces and encourages dialogue among religious communities.

Efforts to counter radicalism in Indonesia have evolved in response to radical groups's shifting tactics, which have transitioned from large-scale attacks to low-level violence.[38] This shifting has forced Indonesian authorities to adopt stringent measures, including the use of lethal force. Traditional organizations like *dayah* are pivotal in this effort., The Dayah *ulama, like NU,* s use values such as *tawazun* (balance), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawasut* (moderation), and *i'tidal* (fairness) to foster inclusivity and national solidarity.[39]

Due to the implementation of Sharia law in Aceh, *dayah ulama* highlighted groups advocating for a stricter and more extreme interpretation of Islamic law. In this context, there are few

[31] Jarjani Usman, Syabuddin Syabuddin, and Faishal Zakaria, "Teungku Identity Development: The Role of Dayah Community of Practice," *SAGE Open* 11, no. 3 (July 12, 2021): 215824402110315, https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211031532.

[32] Ismail Fahmi Arrauf Nasution, Miswari Miswari, and Sabaruddin Sabaruddin, "Preserving Identity through Modernity: Dayah Al-Aziziyah and Its Negotiations with Modernity in Aceh," *Hayula: Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (July 30, 2019): 211–32, https://doi.org/10.21009/hayula.003.2.06.

[33] Syafieh Syafieh, Noviandy Noviandy, and Muhammad Amin, "Fastabiq Al-khairĀt: Islamic Congregation And Everyday Competition Among Puritan And Traditionalists Muslim In Aceh," *Futura Islamic Scientific Journal* 22, no. 1 (February 23, 2022): 63, https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v22i1.7760.

[34] Al Makin, "Islamic Acehnese Identity, Sharia, and Christianization Rumor: A Study of the Narratives of the Attack on the Bethel Church in Penauyong Banda Aceh" 10, no. 01 (2016): 1–36; Yogi Febriandi and Yaser Amri, "Stuck in Sharia Space: The Experiences of Christian Students to Reside in Langsa, Aceh," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 59, no. 1 (May 26, 2021): 33–56, https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2021.591.33-56.

[35] Febriandi and Amri, "Stuck in Sharia Space: The Experiences of Christian Students to Reside in Langsa, Aceh."

[36] Muhammad Ansor, IF Arrauf, and Yaser Amri, "Under The Shadow of Sharia: Christian Muslim Relations From Acehnese Christian Experience," *Community* 8, no. 1 (2014): 1–17.

[37] Nirzalin and Yogi Febriandi, "Aswaja Mobilization And Intolerance: Sub-State Ideology, Religious Vigilantism in Aceh, Indonesia," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (December 31, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2089382.

[38] Yogi Setya Permana, "Subnational Sectarianisation: Clientelism, Religious Authority, and Intra-Religious Rivalry in Aceh," *Religion, State and Society* 49, no. 2 (March 15, 2021): 142–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2021.1881392.

[39] Ahmad Zainul Hamdi, "Constructing Indonesian Religious Pluralism: The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Countering Violent Religious Extremism," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 15, no. 2 (December 1, 2021): 433, https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2021.15.2.433-464.

contributions to understanding how *dayah ulama* fosters religious moderation in Aceh. This paper shows that the *ulama* encounters significant obstacles in promoting these moderate values amid complex social dynamics. They effectively spread moderation Islamic ideas through inclusive approaches. These efforts are intended to foster collective awareness and support for social harmony.

**The Profiles of *Ulama***
**Tgk. Zainuddin (Abah Zein)**

Tgk. Zainuddin, widely known as Abah Zein, was born on July 27, 1972, in Seunebok Village, Sungai Raya Subdistrict, East Aceh.[40] East Aceh is renowned for producing influential *ulama*, a legacy deeply embedded in its community's identity and respect for Islamic teachings. East Aceh is recognized for its deeply devout Islamic community, where religion shapes not only identity but also education and politics.[41] In this context, the *ulama* holds strategic roles as spiritual leaders, social harmonizers, and custodians of local identity. Abah Zein grew up in a strong Islamic traditions region and became a charismatic *ulama* in East Aceh. Abah Zein exemplifies such leadership by bridging traditional Islamic values with modern societal needs, which can be seen in his management of *dayah* education grounded in moderation.

As the leader of *Dayah* Bustanul Ilmi Sarah Teubee, Abah Zein not only teaches Islamic knowledge in his *dayah* but also plays a vital role in promoting moderate Islamic values in society. His *dakwah* approach blends Acehnese local wisdom with Islamic scriptures, making his messages accessible and well-received across different societal groups. In his teaching sessions—held in mosques, pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), and public forums—Abah Zein consistently emphasizes the importance of unity, tolerance, and balance in practicing Islam.

In his capacity as the leader of the Alumni Association of *Dayah* Paya Pasi, Abah Zein fosters strong networks among *ulama* and alumni, creating a robust social structure in East Aceh. His leadership has significant influence over religious matters in the region. His leadership and innovation were proven during the COVID-19 pandemic when he integrated vaccination programs into the *dayah* curriculum, demonstrating his commitment to public health and his ability to navigate societal resistance. This initiative highlights his dedication to incorporating modern health practices into the traditional *pesantren* environment.

Beyond religious influence, Abah Zein plays a significant role in politics as an advisor to Partai Aceh. His close relationship with the East Aceh government, particularly during Hasballah's tenure as regent, reflects the critical role of *ulama* in shaping local policy. This dual influence in spiritual and political spheres underscores the multifaceted role of the *ulama* in East Aceh.

Abah Zein's ability to balance deep-rooted Islamic traditions with the demands of modern society places him as a pivotal figure in shaping East Aceh today. His efforts to promote Islamic moderation through education and *dakwah*, as well as his great initiatives such as the vaccination program, and political engagement, position him as an inclusive and visionary leader rooted in tradition yet responsive to contemporary challenges.

**Tgk. Muchtar (Abati Aramiyah)**

Tgk. Muchtar, born in 1972, displayed a keen interest in Islamic education from an early age. After completing elementary school in 1984 and junior high school in Krueng Geukuh, North Aceh, in 1987, he studied in *dayah* from 1987 to 2008.[42] He studied at *Dayah* Mudi Mesra Samalanga, a formative period that shaped his character and scholarship as an *ulama*. Tgk. Muchtar's dedication to learning continued when

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[40] Interview

[41] Syarifah Faradiba, Muhammad Muhammad, and Endang Ekowati, "The Role of Dayah Scholars in the Development of the Aqidah of Muslims in Sampoimah Village, East Aceh Regency," *Al-Hikmah: Journal of Theosophy and Islamic Civilization* 4, no. 2 (December 21, 2022), https://doi.org/10.51900/alhikmah.v4i2.14705.

[42] Interview

he pursued higher education at the Islamic College (STAI) Al Aziziyah Samalanga, completing his studies in 2013. His career began as a teacher at *Dayah* Mudi Mesra in 1996, where he also took on administrative roles, serving as Head of Public Relations (1996–2000) and Vice Director I (2000–2008).

In 2014, he assumed leadership of LPI Misbahul 'Ulum Diniyah Al Aziziyah (MUDA) Aramiyah in East Aceh, transforming it into a leading Islamic educational institution. Under his leadership, the *dayah* not only preserved traditional values but also embraced innovation rooted in Islamic moderation. Tgk. Muchtar actively contributes beyond formal education. As a member of the East Aceh Majelis Permusyawaratan *Ulama* (MPU), he played a key role in promoting social harmony through moderate Islamic approaches. His effective communication style, deeply rooted in Acehnese local wisdom, strengthened his ability to convey Islamic values to the community.

In 2020, Tgk. Muchtar was appointed as a Chairman of the East Aceh Himpunan *Ulama Dayah* Aceh (HUDA) and MPU, serving until 2024. He was also an active member of Tastafi, a movement focused on purifying Islamic faith and practice, and an advisor to Partai PAS - Aceh. His involvement in practical politics highlighted his adaptability. In the 2024 East Aceh regional election, he ran for vice-regent alongside Dr. Firman Dandy, SE., M.Si. The partnership was ideal, with Firman contributed governance expertise and Tgk. Muchtar championed Islamic education and moderation. Tgk. Muchtar's work reflects the enduring relevance and flexibility of Aceh's Islamic traditions. His contributions to education, religion, and politics show his unwavering commitment to serving the community. With his integrity and broad experience, Abati Aramiyah symbolizes the harmonious integration of tradition and modernity, offering hope for a future firmly grounded in local values and culture.

## Communication Strategies

In a society marked by religious polarization and intolerance, the role of local *ulama* in promoting religious moderation has become increasingly vital.[43] Abah Zein and Abati Aramia stand out as examples of how local *ulama* can navigate these challenges by transmitting the idea of religious moderation with religious communication. Through their distinctive yet complementary approaches, they demonstrate the transformative potential of religious leadership in fostering moderation. They emphasize the importance of agency and the ability to contextualize religious communication to align with contemporary realities.

In East Aceh, where Islamic fundamentalism remains deeply rooted, Abati Aramia and Abah Zein faced significant challenges in embedding the narrative of religious moderation into their sermons. As respected local ulama, they were aware that their approach must take into account for the region's complex social and ideological dynamics. One of the primary challenges lay in ideological resistance from conservative groups that see religious moderation as a threat to Islamic traditions. To address this, Abati Aramia and Abah Zein adopted a cautious approach, presented the idea of moderation through familiar and non-confrontational language. This methods allowed them to avoid open conflicts that could disrupt social harmony or damaged their reputation as esteemed religious leaders.

During observation of *pengajian (recitation)* led by Abah Zein and Abati Aramia in Aceh Timue, the researchers showed both have good communication that effectively transmited the idea of moderation. Their different but complementary approaches was one of the success factors in bringing religious teachings closer to the daily needs and challenges of the community. Abah Zein used the dialogical approach to engage participation from his followers in *pengajian*. His *da'wah* was not only

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[43] Muhammad Sahlan et al., "The Roles of Ulama in the Process of Post-Conflict Reconciliation in Aceh," *Society* 7, no. 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v7i2.106.

limited to one-way communication but also involved interactive forums that encouraged the congregation to ask questions and share their views. This approach made his communication more responsive to societal needs and narrowed the gap between text and context.[44] He also integrated social issues into his *da'wah*, making Islamic moderation not just theoretical but a practical solution to real-life challenges.

In contrast, Abati Aramia demonstrated his agency through a collective approach that emphasized the importance of dialogue and consensus. He believed that maintaining harmony in a diverse society could only be achieved through inclusive discussions. As a member of the Aceh *Ulama* Council (MPU), he often involved in formulating religious policies that not only align with Islamic values but also consider the diversity of perspectives within society. This approach illustrates that the agency of a religious scholar goes beyond delivering sermons, extending to efforts to build more harmonious social structures.

*Pengajian* in the *dayah* was one of the primary methods observed in this study. These recitations were open to all groups, including the Islamic students (*santri*) and the public. In an interview with one of the *Santri*, it was noted: "The *pengajian* is flexible; the schedule depends on the availability of theulama, but the material is always relevant to our lives." The content presented during these recitations focuses on values such as tolerance, justice, and inter-religious harmony. This was particularly evident in one of the recitations observed, where Abah Zein linked values of moderation to the social challenges faced by Acehnese society.

In addition to regular recitations, religious moderation is also promoted through special events like the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday and *kenduri (traditional feast)*. One interviewee remarked: "These events are

usually attended by many people, including those who rarely attend *pengajian*, so the message of moderation can be more widely accepted." Based on the data findings from three months of observation in East Aceh , Abah Zein seems to prioritize dialogic and participatory communication in his *da'wah*. Abah Zein not only conveys religious messages, but also provides space for congregants to express their concerns and aspirations. This approach strengthens the emotional bond between Abah Zein and his followers, making his message of moderation easier to accept. In each session, he often refers to verses from the Qur'an and hadith that emphasize the principle of *wasathiyah* (the middle way). According to one of his students, "Abah Zein always uses *qiyas* (parables) as references when explaining the problems faced by the congregation."

Meanwhile, Abati Aramia complements her communication approach with strong non-verbal messages. One interviewee stated: "Abati's demeanor is very calming. We learn from the way he lives, not just from his words".[45] This approach makes Abati a concrete example for the community of how Islam can be practiced in harmony and moderation. By modelling the values he preaches, Abati Aramia effectively encourages the adoption of moderation within the wider community.

Additionally, the authority of these two *ulama* plays a vital role in their *da'wah* communication. Abah Zein utilized his scholarly authority to reinforce the message of moderation. In one of his recitations, he explained the importance of *wasathiyah* by referring to several Qur'anic verses and hadiths. This was supported by an interview with a participant who stated: "When Abah explains, there is always evidence. It makes us believe that what is being taught is true." In contrast, Abati Aramia leveraged his authority as a member of the MPU (*Ulema Consultative Assembly*) to develop policies that reflected values of moderation. In an interview, Abati mentioned:

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[44] Thomas M Lessl, "Toward a Definition of Religious Communication: Scientific and. Religious Uses of Evolution," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 16, no. 1 (1993): 127–41.

[45] Interview

"My job is to ensure that the policies we create are acceptable to all parties." Although these two figures did not directly use social media, the observations showed that *Santri* and worshippers often recorded and shared their recitations on social media such as Facebook and YouTube. One of the *Students* interviewed expressed: "We feel this is our way of contributing to spreading Abah and Abati's message to a broader audience."

The dedication of Abah Zein and Abati Aramia shows the important role of *ulama* as agents of social change. They have a significant impact on the social and cultural life of their communities. Using their deep understanding of religious texts, they take a unique approach that combines open dialogue with their congregation and sets a good example with their behavior in providing religious guidance.[46] Their work goes beyond simply teaching religious principles; it helps shape a social structure based on tolerance, justice, and moderation. Through thoughtful conversations and relevant discussions, they inspire people to embrace these values, which are essential in a diverse and complex society.

Additionally, the practices of Abah Zein and Abati Aramia show how religious leaders can address contemporary challenges effectively. They respond thoughtfully to social issues and misunderstandings about culture, ensuring that their message of moderation and peace is passed on to future generations. They combine traditional methods, such as lectures and community events, with modern communication tools, which allow them to reach a larger audience.

By setting an example, Abah Zein and Abati Aramia offer a valuable model for other clerics who want to promote social harmony and improve interfaith understanding. Their commitment to blending traditional wisdom with modern methods highlights the potential of religious studies to make a positive contribution to building a more inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous society.

## Adjusting the Narrative of Religious Moderation

Charisma has long been a vital attribute for *Ulama* in maintaining its authority and influence within its communities.[47] In an rapid social transformation era, religious authority not only secures the *ulama*'s prominent societal position but also provides a critical source of guidance for communities grappling with contemporary challenges. U*lama, especially in rural communities,* serve as intellectual and spiritual anchors, skillfully navigating the complex balance between upholding religious traditions and solving current social issues.[48]

There are challenges arising from misconceptions about religious moderation within the community. Many perceive it as a compromise with values deemed "un-Islamic." To address this, Abati Aramia and Abah Zein frequently used stories from classical Islamic texts to emphasize the balance between preserving faith and coexisting in a diverse society. By integrating the values of religious moderation into the local cultural and traditional context, they illustrated that moderation is not a concept from the state but a core element of Islam's teachings as a *Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin* (blessing for all creation).
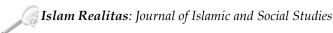
Their efforts were also guided by the need to keep their congregations engaged and united. By doing so, they maintain the ability to guide the community effectively. For instance, Abah Zein often highlighted the importance of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) while subtly embedding messages of tolerance and coexistence relevant to daily life. Abah Zein often discussed

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[46] Thomas M Lessl, "Toward a Definition of Religious Communication: Scientific and. Religious Uses of Evolution," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 16, no. 1 (1993): 127–41.

[47] Muhammad Sahlan et al., "The Roles of Ulama in the Process of Post-Conflict Reconciliation in Aceh," *Society* 7, no. 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v7i2.106

[48] Syarifah Faradiba, Muhammad Muhammad, and Endang Ekowati, "The Role of Dayah Scholars in the Development of the Aqidah of Muslims in Sampoimah Village, East Aceh Regency," *Al-Hikmah: Journal of Theosophy and Islamic Civilization* 4, no. 2 (December 21, 2022), https://doi.org/10.51900/alhikmah.v4i2.14705.

differences in the rulings on *Qunut* (a du'a conducted while standing in Subuh) and how the Prophet's companions practiced it. He views the recitation of Qunut as a matter of worship that should not compromise social unity. This negotiation underscores the complexities of promoting religious moderation in East Aceh. Success requires wisdom, a deep understanding of local contexts, and effective communication strategies to ensure that the message of moderation is embraced without sparking divisive conflict.

Abah Zein and Abati Aramia share a strong commitment to the principles of religious moderation, although they approached these principles in distinct yet complementary ways. Their methods offered valuable insights into how *da'wa* can be effectively implemented within the complexities of a diverse and evolving modern society.[49] Abah Zein prioritizes dialogue and educational engagement as foundational strategies for the dissemination of Islamic knowledge. He advocates for a gradual learning process, encouraging beginners to read the Qur'an using *Latin* script as an introductory method before advancing toward proficiency in Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. This pedagogical approach reflects a balanced and inclusive model of religious moderation that accommodates learners at various stages of understanding and guides them toward deeper engagement with Islamic texts. In contrast, Abati Aramia places a strong emphasis on preserving the integrity of Islamic beliefs. His approach highlights the centrality of maintaining *aqidah* (creed) while drawing inspiration from the practices of the Prophet Muhammad. By situating religious adherence within the framework of interfaith coexistence, Abati Aramia presents a vision of moderation that is firmly rooted in Islamic principles.

At the 2024 Maulid Nabi Muhammad event at *Dayah* Misbahul Ulum Diniyah Al-Aziziyah, Abati Aramia expressed his views regarding strengthening religious moderation through his da'wah. On this occasion, he highlighted the important role of *ulama*, umara, and benefactors in building a harmonious society. Abati Aramia explained:

> "The four pillars of the world: *ulama*, umara, philanthropies, and the *du'a*. If the *ulama* are not willing to speak out for good or are willing but not listened to, this is one of the fragile pillars of the world.'

He added that religious moderation places religion as a pillar of social and political life. Furthermore, Abati Aramia also emphasised the importance of a close relationship between clerics and leaders. According to him, "*Do not dream that the government will be just without the blessing of the ulama.*' This statement, according to Abati Aramia, shows that religious moderation is not only limited to matters of faith but also includes the role of religion in ensuring the sustainability of justice in leadership. In addition, Abati Aramia called on people to reject extreme practices by building a civilisation based on religious knowledge and morals.

Abah Zein and Abati Aramia underscore the importance of respecting diversity, although their methodologies differ significantly in focus and implementation. Abah Zein advocates for an empathetic approach toward learners and practitioners at various stages of religious comprehension. He fosters an environment characterized by restraint from judgment, thereby reflecting a form of moderation that avoids both rigid dogmatism and excessive permissiveness.

In observations made by researchers at the Muhajirin Mosque, East Aceh, the location of *pengajian* Abah Zein, the researchers found that in his preaching, Abah Zein consistently invited worshipers to understand Islam moderately. For example, he emphasised that "*Acehnese must display compassionate Islamic law and avoid extreme and anti-government attitudes.*" He stressed that religious moderation does not mean weakening beliefs but

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[49] Thomas M Lessl, "Toward a Definition of Religious Communication: Scientific and. Religious Uses of Evolution," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 16, no. 1 (1993): 127–41.

rather maintaining balance in interacting with a pluralistic society. Furthermore, in an interview with Abah Zein's congregation, he stated:

> I support Abah Zein's messages because they teach moderation in Aceh's situation, which is full of social challenges. At first, I thought the concept of moderation was part of the government's way of undermining Islamic thought in Aceh, but Abah explained that it was the government that was trying to bring the idea of moderation to compromise the basic religious principles believed in Aceh.'

Responses from the younger generation also reflected similar sentiments. As Faisal, a university student who actively attends Abah Zein's *pengajian*, put it, "*Moderation in religion, in my opinion, is very important. In Abah Zein's preaching, we are taught to stick to religious teachings but remain open to the times and social changes*". Abah Zein conceptualizes religious moderation as a process that begins with a profound commitment to learning (*ta'allum*). This approach involves cultivating a deep understanding of Islamic teachings through progressive stages, particularly in areas such as proper Qur'anic pronunciation (*Makharijul Letter*) and the comprehension of its textual meanings. His methodology embodies the Islamic principle of *wasathiyah* (the middle way), which advocates for balance and equity in religious practice. Conversely, Abati Aramia emphasizes *aqidah* as the fundamental cornerstone of religious moderation. He posits that unwavering faith in Allah and the Hereafter serves as the basis for developing a balanced disposition, enabling individuals to navigate the extremes of radicalism and undue leniency.

Abah Zein's approach toward engagement with non-Muslims is implicit in his dialogical and inclusive preaching. By creating a conducive environment to open inquiry and contextual understanding of Islamic principles, he encourages non-coercive exploration of religious tenets. This methodology implicitly extends to interfaith engagement by fostering mutual understanding and respect. In contrast, Abati Aramia explicitly addresses the dynamics of interfaith interaction. He emphasizes the necessity of respecting the rights of non-Muslims as mandated by Islamic teachings and enshrined in state law. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that such interactions must not compromise Islamic beliefs or values, thereby promoting a model of moderation that balances inclusivity with doctrinal integrity.

The comparative perspectives of Abah Zein and Abati Aramia illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of religious moderation within contemporary Islamic discourse. Abah Zein emphasizes gradual education and inclusivity as pathways to fostering religious understanding, while Abati Aramia advocates for a steadfast commitment to *aqidah* and systemic inclusivity. Together, their approaches provide a comprehensive framework for navigating religious diversity and addressing modern societal challenges through the lens of Islamic moderation.

The role of the *ulama* in balancing religious doctrine with diversity is particularly crucial in conservative societies like Aceh. With their significant social authority, *ulama* serve as bridges between strict religious interpretations and the realities of societal pluralism. They act as mediators, conveying the principles of religious moderation to communities that may view pluralism and moderation as conflicting with their understanding of Islamic teachings. *Ulama* can emphasize the principle of tolerance, which is deeply rooted in Islamic law (*sharia*). The Qur'an contains numerous verses highlighting the importance of coexistence, mutual respect, and appreciation of differences. For instance, Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13) underscores that differences among tribes and nations are part of Allah's divine plan. Through thoughtful interpretation, the *ulama* can demonstrate that Islam not only acknowledges diversity but also promotes peace and harmony among people of different faiths.

*Ulama* also plays a vital role in educating communities to resist extremism and the rigid enforcement of beliefs. They emphasize that Islam, as a religion of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* (mercy for all creation), obliges its followers to adopt an inclusive stance toward diversity in religion, ethnicity, and culture. Engaging in interfaith and intercultural dialogue is another important avenue for *ulama*. Through inclusive and dialogic approaches, they can act as agents of change, bridging differences and reinforcing the understanding that diversity is an inevitable aspect of human existence that must be embraced and respected. As trusted figures, the *ulama* is uniquely positioned to provide tangible examples of how to coexist harmoniously in a diverse society without compromising fundamental religious principles. In Aceh, notable figures such as Abati Aramia and Abah Zein exemplify how *ulama* can use their authority and influence to promote moderation in non-confrontational and widely accepted ways. They integrate local wisdom with religious teachings to address social challenges, such as intolerance, demonstrating how *ulama* can effectively mediate between doctrinal adherence and societal diversity.

### Religious Communication and Moderation Transmitting

The contributions of Abati Aramia and Abah Zein, the prominent religious figures in East Aceh, illustrate how the concept of religious moderation can be effectively integrated into the socio-cultural realities of a largely conservative society. Their success stems not only from their intellectual abilities but also from their ability to harmonise the concept of moderation with the deeply embedded religious values of the local community.[50] Introducing the concept of religious moderation through the recitation of Abati Aramia and Abah Zein provide a strong theological foundation for its acceptance. This success is inseparable from their communication style which uses metaphor in explaining religious moderation.[51] Such as the use of the phrase obedience to the state is the same as obedience to the *umara*. The use of the word 'umara' to replace the word state shows an effective metaphor game to avoid people's bad sentiment towards the state. As explained by Lessl, one of the advantages of religious communication is the use of metaphors that can provide a variety of interpretations to listeners.[52] Because the message conveyed through metaphor does not present the actual reality but abstracts reality, the preachers are able to include meaning in the message. Abati Aramiyah and Abi Zain use metaphor communication to effectively explain that moderation does not mean sacrificing one's beliefs or accepting the beliefs of others.

In addition, the communication employed attempts to align the message delivered with the local culture. Abah Zein and Abati Aramia convinced the community that moderation strengthens social harmony while preserving the identity of Islamic law. This effort shows that moderation is an essential component of Islamic teachings. Several scholars have pointed out, the implementation of Islamic sharia in Aceh shows a strong narrative of Islamic majoritarianism, resulting in social problems.[53] This is inseparable from the idea of Islamic law which is considered exclusively owned by conservative groups. As shown in Abah Zein's preaching which says that social harmony will have an impact on the quality of worship. Here Abah Zein uses the diction 'social harmony' to show an attitude of diversity. Abati Aramia and Abah Zein also show that '*dayah*', traditional *pesantren* that are often seen as symbols of religious conservatism, can embrace the ideals of moderation. This achievement underscores the idea that conservatism and moderation are not mutually exclusive; rather,

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50 Aksa Aksa and Nurhayati Nurhayati, "Religious Moderation Based On Culture And Local Wisdom In The Donggo Community In Bima (Socio-Historical Review)," *Harmony* 19, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 338–52, https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v19i2.449.

51 Lessl, "Toward a Definition of Religious Communication: Scientific and. Religious Uses of Evolution."

52 Lessl.

53 Reza Idria, "Provisional Notes on How 'Hilarious' Living Under Sharia Law," *Kawalu* 5, no. 2 (2018): 131–58, https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.32678/kawalu.v5i2.1900; Ansor, Arrauf, and Amri, "Under The Shadow of Sharia: Christian Muslim Relations From Acehnese Christian Experience."

they can coexist when properly contextualised.[54] By encouraging openness within the *dayah* towards the concept of moderation, they facilitated its acceptance, helping the wider community to recognise it as something consistent with their Islamic identity. Their efforts highlight the importance of localised approaches in promoting religious moderation.[55] These methods anchor new ideas in familiar cultural and theological contexts, ensuring that they align with community values.

The presence of trusted religious figures such as Abati Aramia and Abah Zein is instrumental in overcoming resistance to new ideas. Their ability to act as a bridge between different groups allow them to overcome intolerance and foster harmony without alienating any segment of society. They also reframe religious moderation as a practical solution to social challenges, emphasising its potential to strengthen harmony in a pluralistic country. Furthermore, this paper shows that traditional religious institutions such as *dayah* can play a strategic role in supporting ideas of religious moderation. Far from being a barrier to change, these institutions demonstrate their potential to adapt and contribute to promoting inclusive values. By integrating moderation into the structure of traditional religious education, Abati Aramia and Abah Zein ensure that it is not perceived as an imposition from outside, but as a natural extension of values and beliefs from within the community. The integration of religious moderation into East Aceh's conservative society provides valuable lessons on how new ideas can be accepted through culturally and theologically grounded approaches. The efforts of Abati Aramia and Abah Zein demonstrate that resistance to change can be overcome when concepts are presented in ways that align with local values and traditions. By combining theological legitimacy, community beliefs, and practical relevance, their work provides a model for promoting religious moderation in similar contexts, both at regional and national levels.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of *ulama* in East Aceh as agents of religious moderation. This study concludes two key findings regarding how the *ulama* in Aceh communicate religious moderation and ensure its relevance within the region's Islamic socio-religious framework.

First, the *ulama*—particularly Abah Zein and Abati Aramia—employ inclusive and context-sensitive communication strategies that promote moderate interpretations of Islam. Drawing on Lessl's theory of religious communication, their approach combines explicit messages with implicit, metaphorical, and dialogical methods. Abah Zein uses a dialogical model that encourages interactive engagement with the community, while Abati Aramia emphasizes collective dialogue and consensus to strengthen communal harmony. These strategies make the concept of religious moderation more accessible and practical for their audiences.

Second, the *ulama* ensure that religious moderation aligns with Aceh's socio-religious landscape—characterized by the implementation of Sharia law and the persistence of certain intolerant tendencies—by contextualizing Islamic teachings to local realities. Through adaptive preaching, inclusive discourse, and responsiveness to social issues, they effectively reconcile doctrinal integrity with lived experience. In doing so, they contribute to social cohesion and serve as a counterforce to radicalism, highlighting the vital role of local religious leaders in mediating between theological principles and everyday life. Ultimately, the *ulama*'s communication strategies play a pivotal role in shaping a moderate Islamic framework that resonates with the values and needs of the Achnese community.

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[54] Vivi Alwada and Syafwan Rozi, "Reog Art as a Media to Maintain Religious Harmony in Jorong Purwajaya, Fifty Regency, West Sumatra City," *Al-Adyan: Journal of Interfaith Studies* 17, no. 1 (June 30, 2022): 1–36, https://doi.org/10.24042/al-adyan.v17i1.12135.

[55] Muhammad Ainun Najib and Ahmad Khoirul Fata, "Islam Wasatiyah and the Contestation of Islamic Moderatism Discourse in Indonesia," *Jurnal THEOLOGIA* 31, no. 1 (June 26, 2020): 115, https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2020.31.1.5764.

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