

Majelis Taklim and Muslim Urban Society Development: Genealogy, Intellectual Pedagogy, and Preachers' Integrity in Fostering Wasatiyyah

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Abstract

Majelis Taklim (MT) constitutes the most significant non-formal Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, functioning as a primary platform for religious instruction, moral formation, and communal cohesion, particularly within the context of Muslim urban society development. Amid escalating religious polarization and the proliferation of extremist ideologies in urban spaces, MT holds considerable potential for consolidating Wasatiyyah Islam (Islamic moderation). However, existing scholarship has predominantly addressed MT's general sociological functions, leaving a substantive gap in understanding the specific methodological and ethical mechanisms through which moderation is cultivated in practice. Employing a qualitative-normative approach, this study proposes an integrated three-pillars framework for institutionalizing Wasatiyyah within MT. The framework centers on three interrelated dimensions: genealogical rootedness in classical Islamic tradition, reflective pedagogical methodologies, and the ethical integrity of religious instructors as constitutive mechanisms through which moderation is systematically cultivated and sustained to support sustainable urban social cohesion.

Keywords: *Wasatiyyah*, *Majelis Taklim*, Moderation, Dakwah Pedagogy

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Introduction

The concept of *Wasatiyyah* commonly understood as Islamic moderation or the middle path has gained significant traction in contemporary Islamic discourse as a theological and ethical framework to counter religious extremism, polarization, and social fragmentation (Halstead 2007). Rooted in the Qur'anic notion of *ummatan wasatan* (a middle community; Q2:143), *Wasatiyyah* advocates balance, justice, and contextual intelligence rather than rigid literalism or doctrinal compromise. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, *Wasatiyyah* is not merely an abstract ideal but a lived tradition historically embodied through peaceful propagation, cultural accommodation, and civic engagement. *Majelis Taklim* (hereon referred to as MT) often described as informal Islamic study circles or community based religious gatherings, plays an indispensable role in shaping the religious consciousness of millions of Indonesian Muslims (Anwar, 2002). The terminology is derived from Arabic words *majelis* (a place or forum) and *taklim* or *ta'lim* (study or teaching). Historically, the term was introduced by the Hadhrami community from Yemen who migrated to Indonesia during the colonial period, and it has since evolved into a distinctly Indonesian Islamic institution, not commonly found in the same form in Middle Eastern Muslim societies (Fadillah, 2023).

In Java, MT is often used interchangeably with the term *pengajian*, referring to informal religious learning sessions traditionally led by a *kyai* (religious teacher) (Anwar, 2002). The modern emergence of MT in Indonesia is widely attributed to Habib Ali ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Habshi (d. 1968), who regularly conducted religious gatherings called MT at the *Kwitang* Mosque in Central Jakarta, a forum that later inspired figures like Abdullah Syafei and Thahir Rahili to spread the model nationwide (Andi Faisal Bakti, n.d.). As a non-formal educational space, MT operates through informal networks, oral transmission, and affective trust, making it a powerful vehicle for religious socialization, especially for women and those with limited access to formal Islamic education. (Zamhari and Howell 2020; Anwar 2002) describe the role of MT as guiding and nurturing the ummah (Muslim community), while more recent studies highlight its function as a site of popular Islamic piety that blends ritual, learning, and social bonding in accessible and relational settings. Importantly, MT has also been recognized by the state as an alternative educational forum under Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System (*Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System (BKPM) (1)*, n.d., p. 16).

Despite its significance, academic attention to MT has often been limited to its sociological dimensions, demographic profiles, gender roles, or community functions while overlooking the pedagogical, methodological, and ethical mechanisms through which MT can foster religious moderation. Similarly, studies on *Wasatiyyah* in Indonesia tend to focus on state policies, ideological pronouncements of major organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, or theoretical treatises with little examination of how moderation is enacted in grassroots and non-formal educational contexts (Bruinessen 2013). This gap is particularly pressing given the vulnerability of MT to ideological infiltration as observed by (Hafidz, 2020) who noted that such spaces are increasingly targeted by transnational movements promoting rigid, decontextualized interpretations of Islam.

This article seeks to bridge this scholarly gap by moving beyond descriptive accounts of MT's social functions to analyze the concrete pillars that enable MT to effectively cultivate *Wasatiyyah*. Specifically, it investigates three interconnected dimensions including the genealogy of how *Wasatiyyah* is rooted in inclusive *dakwah* tradition of the *Nusantara* and exemplified by concepts such as *pribumisasi* Islam (indigenization of Islam) and historical models of peaceful propagation. Second is how MT can adopt an intellectual pedagogy that shifts from content-based preaching to method-based facilitation emphasizing critical reasoning, management of khilafiyah (differences of opinion), and non-provocative communication. Lastly, how can the moral and intellectual integrity of preachers (da'i) serves as the embodied manifestation of *Wasatiyyah*, where ethical conduct and consistency become the primary evidence of moderation.

Methods

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative-normative approach grounded in a purposive, thematic literature synthesis rather than a systematic or exhaustive review. Sources were selected along three converging strands including classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship that directly engages the concept of *wasatiyyah*-hadith-based exegesis, juristic and ethical treatments of disagreement, priority-setting, and contemporary theorizations of moderation. The second strand draws on empirical and theoretical scholarship specific to Indonesian Islam and *Majelis Taklim*, encompassing historical, sociological, and ethnographic studies of MT's institutional development, pedagogy, and social function. Lastly, the third strand incorporates sociology-of-religion literature on religious authority, trust, and performative legitimacy in non-formal settings. These are used to theorize why preacher integrity functions as a constitutive, rather than merely reputational, dimension of *Wasatiyyah*. Sources were included where they substantively addressed either the theological-ethical content of *wasatiyyah*, the institutional or pedagogical characteristics of MT, or the mechanisms of religious authority and trust relevant to non-formal Islamic education.

More explicitly, the three pillars articulated in this paper were derived inductively from the convergence of the three strands of sources rather than stipulated a priori. The genealogical pillar emerged from historical and sociological literature explaining where MT's capacity for moderation originates, namely in the accommodative, non-coercive trajectory of Islamization in the Nusantara and its institutionalization through *pribumisasi* Islam. The pedagogical pillar emerged from classical exegetical and contemporary educational literature addressing how moderation is methodologically transmitted within MT's non-formal, dialogical setting. The integrity pillar emerged from Islamic ethical theory and sociology-of-religion literature explaining why moderation requires embodied verification through the preacher's conduct in order to be socially credible. Read together, the three pillars thus correspond to three distinct but interdependent analytical questions-origin, method, and embodiment-which this study argues must operate synergistically for MT to function effectively as an institutional pillar of *Wasatiyyah*. To provide a clear analytical roadmap, the qualitative-normative research procedure employed in this study is structured into four sequential stages, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

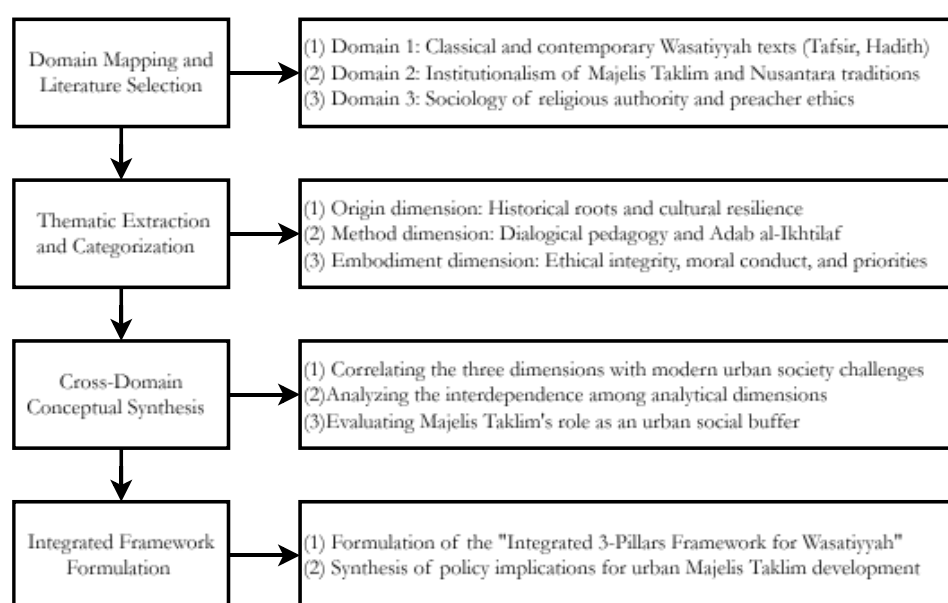


Figure 1. Procedural stages of the qualitative-normative study on fostering *Wasatiyyah* in *Majelis Taklim*.

This procedural design ensures that the conceptualization of *Wasatiyyah* is directly connected to the socio-religious dynamics of Muslim urban society development.

Results and Discussion

3.1 *Wasatiyyah*: A Universal Principle of Islam

Wasatiyyah is not a cultural or derivative concept, but a fundamental principle rooted in Islamic doctrine (Ibn-Ḥaǧar al-‘Asqalānī et al. 1959). The term *wasat* could be translated to mean the middle, balance, and justice. It signifies a normative stance that avoids excess (*ifrāt*) and deficiency (*tafrīt*). This understanding is based on the Qur’anic description of the Muslim community as *ummatan wasaṭan* (Q 2:143) which establishes moderation as a core moral quality rather than a pragmatic or situational compromise. Classical ḥadīth-based interpretation offers a definitive explanation of this concept. In his authoritative commentary, *Fath al-Bārī*, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī interprets the verse *ummatan wasaṭan* by citing a Prophetic report defining *wasat* as al-‘*adl*’ (justice). He asserts this definition is *marfū*, directly attributed to the Prophet ﷺ, not a later interpretation. Ibn Ḥajar also connects this designation to the eschatological role of the Muslim community as *shuhadā*’ (witnesses) over previous nations. This demonstrates that *Wasatiyyah* signifies moral credibility and epistemic trustworthiness rather than neutrality or relativism. In this view, moderation is intrinsically linked to justice, ethical responsibility, and the ability to truthfully testify.

Building on this classical foundation, *Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī* sees *Wasatiyyah* as the original epistemological and ethical orientation of Islam, which he calls *al-Islām al-Anwāl*. For *al-Qaraḍāwī*, *Wasatiyyah* is not a modern compromise with pluralism or a reaction to extremism, it is a return to the Islam of the Qur’an, the authentic Sunnah, and the lived practice of the Companions (Qaraḍāwī, 2012). He explicitly rejects both submission to external (especially Western) normative frameworks and rigid literalism rooted in blind imitation (*taqlīd*), advocating for a balanced approach, grounded in textual fidelity and responsible reasoning. Within *al-Qaraḍāwī*’s framework, *Wasatiyyah* achieves a principled synthesis between seemingly opposing forces; revelation and reason, moral ideals and social realities, and fixed principles (*thawābit*) and contextual variables (*mutaghayyirāt*). This balance explicitly applies across all aspects of Islam, which are creed (‘*aqīdah*’), worship (‘*ibādāt*’), ethics (*akhlāq*), and legal reasoning (*fiqh*), allowing Islam to maintain doctrinal integrity while engaging with diverse historical and social contexts.

This doctrinal and theoretical understanding of *Wasatiyyah* deeply resonates with Indonesia’s experience of Islam. (Azra 2013) observes that Indonesian Islam has developed unique characteristics influenced by local histories and social conditions, particularly its emphasis on tolerance and moderation. He contends that Indonesian Islam embodies a middle way (*ummatan wasaṭan*) between secularism and Islamism. While such claims may face objections, especially from Muslims who perceive Islam as a uniform and timeless tradition, he acknowledges that Indonesian Islam’s particularity is widely recognized by scholars. He argues that this uniqueness should be understood as a legitimate historical expression rather than a deviation from normative Islam. This recognition of historical particularity finds its most explicit formulation in Abdurrahman Wahid’s concept of *pribumisasi* Islam. Wahid offers a strong foundation for constructing Indonesian Islam culturally. He critiques scholars and modernist Muslims who argue that Islam in Indonesia loosely aligns with High Islam. Unlike Geertz and other anthropologists, he contends that Indonesia’s unique Islamic characteristics do not diminish its Islamic nature compared to other regions. Wahid views this characteristic positively, even strengthening it by proposing the project, grounded in distinctive Indonesian traits (Burhani 2013).

In MT, contextualising *dakwah* is not just a pedagogical preference, it is a structural necessity. Muhammad Hafidz’s study of MT within *Nahdliyyin* communities reveals that non-formal religious forums operate at the grassroots level. Here, religious understanding is primarily shaped by lived experience, emotional bonds, and repeated communal interaction rather than an abstract doctrinal instruction (Hafidz 2020). *Dakwah* that overlooks these social realities risks becoming ineffective or disconnected from its audience’s everyday concerns. This urgency is heightened in contemporary Indonesia due to the rise of transnational Islamic movements promoting rigid, decontextualised interpretations of Islam. Hafidz demonstrates that these

movements actively target educational and religious spaces, especially among younger generations, often challenging or displacing locally rooted expressions of Islam. In this view, contextualised *dakwah* serves as a form of cultural and religious resilience, allowing Islamic teachings to be articulated in ways that remain faithful to normative principles while addressing concrete social conditions.

As a non-formal institution deeply embedded in daily communal life, MT occupies a unique position distinct from formal schools, madrasas, and *pesantren*. Hafidz demonstrates that MT reaches a wide spectrum of society across class, profession, gender, and educational background circumventing the hierarchical barriers typical of formal institutions. This accessibility enables MT to significantly influence popular religious sensibilities, moral dispositions, and communal identity on a broad scale. Due to these characteristics, MT serves as an effective medium for internalising values associated with *Wasatiyyah* such as balance restraint and social harmony. Through *mau'izah hasanah* and shared ritual practices, moderation is transmitted as a lived religious ethos rather than an imposed ideological slogan. As Hafidz concludes, consistent and inclusive management of MT functions as a social buffer against religious extremism by normalising moderation within everyday religious life.

Meanwhile, Islam historically spread throughout the Nusantara region through acculturation, trade networks, Sufi transmission, and ethical exemplification, not coercion or political domination. This propagation method fostered a unique *dakwah* tradition rooted in *tawassut* (the middle path) and allowed Islam to seamlessly integrate into existing social and cultural structures while maintaining its core principles. Unlike an oppositional ideology, Islam in the Nusantara context served as a mediating moral force, facilitating gradual transformation and social cohesion (Azra 2013). Rather than demanding an immediate and total rupture with pre-Islamic traditions, Islamisation in the Nusantara context unfolded as a gradual process of increasing conformity with Islamic orthodoxy. From the late twelfth century, Islamisation gained momentum. Although, its pace and form varied significantly across regions and islands. In many cases, Islam first took root in coastal areas through the efforts of Sufi preachers and Muslim traders. These coastal communities were typically cosmopolitan, deeply embedded in international trade networks dominated by Muslim polities. As Anthony Reid argues, participation in global trade associated Islam with economic opportunity and political authority, providing an additional incentive for local populations to embrace the new religion.

Within this historical context, MT can be considered the contemporary institutional successor to the classical *halqah* tradition. Similar to earlier learning circles, MT prioritises face-to-face transmission moral authority and communal belonging over formal certification or rigid curricula. This institutional form embodies the egalitarian ethos of Islamic knowledge transmission by embedding religious learning within everyday social life rather than confining it to elite scholarly settings (Hafidz, 2020). MT serves as a strategic informal institution for fostering Islamic moderation at the grassroots level. Its inclusivity, diverse gender, class, profession, and educational backgrounds allows it to shape popular religious understanding through repetition, familiarity, and communal participation. Unlike polemical instruction, MT transmits religious values through *mau'izah hasanah* (emotional bonds and shared rituals), enabling moderation to become an internalised religious ethos.

This exemplifies *al-Qaraḍāwī's* concept of *Wasatiyyah* in practice, a *dakwah* model balancing doctrinal integrity with social responsibility and normative commitment with contextual wisdom. Its effectiveness lies not in ideological confrontation but in moral credibility and social integration, gradually marginalising exclusivist and rigid interpretations of Islam within everyday religious life (Qaraḍāwī, 2012). From this perspective, MT transcends its contemporary educational role, continuing the Nusantara *dakwah* tradition as a historical model of *Wasatiyyah*. Its enduring relevance stems from its ability to translate universal Islamic principles of justice, balance, and moderation into accessible, culturally resonant, and ethically grounded practices within Muslim community lived realities.

Indonesian Islam's institutional dynamism in religious education further illustrates this genealogical distinctiveness. Unlike the Middle East or South Asia, where Islamization proceeded through conquest accompanied by ulama courts and madrasahs, Islam in the Nusantara spread gradually and elite-brokered, leaving pre-Islamic structures largely intact, while formal *fiqh*-centred madrasah education only institutionalized in the late nineteenth century (Hefner 2013). Because this institutionalization coincided with Islamic reformism and anti-colonial nationalism, rather than preceding them as in the Middle East, it avoided the rigid, reform-resistant religious establishment that early madrasah dominance produced elsewhere; post-independence curricular reform further embedded general education within Islamic schooling without diminishing their social relevance. Hefner concludes that Indonesian Islamic education ranks among the most innovative in the Muslim world precisely because its educators have historically identified reform with religious mission rather than resisted it. This same reform-embracing, non-rigid disposition is the broader institutional climate from which MT emerged and operates: just as Indonesian madrasahs avoided ossifying into a closed religious establishment, MT inherited a non-formal, adaptive orientation toward religious authority that directly enables the dialogical, *Wasatiyyah*-oriented pedagogy discussed below.

3.2 Shifting From Content to Method

The transformation of *dakwah* methodology must move beyond merely curating themes of religious moderation. It must prioritize guiding preachers to adopt a *Wasatiyyah* delivery in MT, following the communicative excellence of the Prophet. This foundation is firmly rooted in the Qur'an Surah An-Nahl (Q16:125) 'O you Prophet, call people to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way.' Allah commands to call upon people with wisdom, good lessons, and to argue in the best way. This verse sets out three methodological pillars that reject authoritarian and rigid proselytizing and emphasizes a rational, ethical, and adaptive approach.

The key meaning of the first pillar, al-hikmah (wisdom), was authoritatively explained by well-known classical *mufasssirs*. *Ibn Kathir* in *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim* interprets it as an appeal with clear and convincing arguments, both *naqli* (textual) and *aqli* (rational), adapted to the conditions of the audience (ابن كثير, n.d.). While Imam *al-Tabari* in *Jami' al-Bayan* quotes the interpretation of accuracy in word and deed (الطبري, n.d.). From this perspective, wisdom is not merely about the content of truth, but inherently includes methodology that is accurate, deep of reasoning, and contextual in delivery. The existence of the MT in contemporary Indonesia necessitates a fundamental transformation in the delivery of religious messages. The emphasis must shift significantly from merely what is conveyed to a greater focus on how these messages are communicated and engaged in dialogue. Conceptually, the pedagogy of *Wasatiyyah* asserts that religious learning in non-formal public spaces must be delivered through methodologies that honor reason.

(Fazlur Rahman 1982) contends that the failure of Islamic education often stems from the absence of an intellectual method capable of connecting texts with a dynamic reality. Therefore, religious propagation (*dakwah*) within the MT should no longer be confined to rigid one-way information transmission. Instead, it must evolve into a methodological process that actively cultivates the congregation's critical reasoning in engaging with religious texts. (Rahman, 1982) This shift is crucial to avoid the practice of authoritarian *dakwah*, where a preacher (*da'i*) imposes a single interpretation as the absolute will of God. Within non-formal educational spaces such as the MT, the method of delivery is decisive in shaping whether congregants (*jama'ah*) will develop inclusive or exclusive tendencies. (Abou El Fadl 2014) warns that without a proper and responsible methodology, a religious teacher risks authoritarian usurpation of God's authority by ignoring the complexity of meaning within the texts. Consequently, the effectiveness of disseminating moderate thought in the MT is highly dependent on the preacher's ability to employ methods that distinguish between the absolute sacred text and the relative products of human thought.

Evidently, MT using dialogical and interdisciplinary methods tends to produce pilgrims who are more resistant to extreme religious ideologies than those who use closed doctrinal methods (Liht and Savage 2013). Although, this finding is derived from a UK Muslim context, and its transferability to the Indonesian MT setting cannot be assumed without qualification, comparable evidence from within Indonesia lends support to the pattern. (Dikdayana 2026) finds that Majelis Taklim sustaining deliberative, dialogical engagement among congregants foster continuity and resilience even amid institutional constraints, reinforcing rather than merely paralleling the cross-context claim.

Without the proper method, the religious spirit is vulnerable to being trapped in blind fanaticism due to a lack of deep religious literacy. The findings of (Maulana 2024) places ulama as political mediators, social actors, and motivators in development, indicating religious authority cannot rely solely on symbolism. In contemporary public spaces including the digital space, their success depends precisely on the methodological ability to engage in policy formulation, build education, and provide relevant guidance. Thus, the effectiveness of *Dakwah* and the dissemination of the value of moderation in the MT must begin with training preachers in the mastery of inclusive, transformative, and contextual teaching methodologies.

To conclude, the transition from content to method is at the heart of *Wasatiyyah* intellectual pedagogy. The success of religious moderation at the grassroots will not be achieved simply by increasing the material on tolerance, but by improving the way the material is discussed. As abstracted from the principles of education in Islam conveyed by K.H. Hasan Abdullah Sahal; “*al-Tariqah abammu minal maddab; al-mudarris abammu minat Tariqah; rubul mudarris abammu minal mudarris nafsibi*” (the method is the path to understanding...) (Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, n.d.). Therefore, strengthening the *dakwah* methodology that places pilgrims as intellectual subjects is an absolute prerequisite for the continuity of the MT as a pillar of moderation in Indonesia.

The second pillar in *Wasatiyyah* intellectual pedagogy is the ability of MT in managing dissent (*khilafiyah*) as intellectual property, and not the seed of division. The main principle to be upheld is the comprehensive presentation of arguments which allows worshipers to be introduced to the diverse schools of thought (*madhaib*) fairly. (al-Alwani 1993) states that dissent is a natural phenomenon and a mercy for the Ummah when managed with intellectual ethics (*Adab al-Ikhtilaf*). By presenting a broad spectrum of opinions, MT trains congregants to have a broad horizon of thinking and not easily disbelieve fellow Muslims who practice or worship differently. *Wasatiyyah* pedagogy also aimed at encouraging the growth of intellectual piety among congregants. This piety is characterized by being reserved in judging different opinions and always looking for a common ground (*al-jam'u wa al-taufiq*). (Al-Ghazali 2023, p. 110-13) stressed the importance of *wara'* (cautious) attitude not only in property, but also in issuing fatwas and addressing differences.

Furthermore, the management of differences in *Wasatiyyah* in Indonesia is strongly influenced by the way MT responds to sensitive contemporary issues. Intersubjective religious patterns allow worshipers to accommodate the rights of other groups without necessarily losing their own theological identity. (Abdullah 2020, p. 235) adds that intersubjectivity is the key to building harmony in a pluralistic society. This is in line with the principle of (Kamali 1996) who states that open dialogue is a means of achieving *maslahah* (public interest). Thus, MT serves as an intellectual mediation space that reduces the potential for horizontal conflicts due to differences in religious understanding. The management of the *Wasatiyyah* is a manifestation of independence of thought and spiritual maturity. A successful *Majelis Taklim* is able to transform tensions of difference into synergistic forces through education based on argument and ethics. By making intellectuality the basis of religion, differences are no longer seen as a threat, but as evidence of the breadth of God's Grace. This pedagogy ensures that worshipers are not only ritually pious, but also wise in addressing the diversity of human reality.

The communication Model in MT should reflect the values of *Wasatiyyah* through a non-provocative, polite, and educational approach. One particularly relevant strategy is the Socratic strategy, which encourages the use of reflective questions to spark healthy dialogue between preachers and worshippers. This strategy is in line with the command of the Qur'an (An-Nahl:

125) to preach with wisdom and *Ma'uizah al-hasanah* (good advice). (Kamali 1996) asserts that discussion and consultation (Shura) is not only a right, but a religious obligation to achieve truth. This Model changed the atmosphere of MT from a space of indoctrination into a space of enlightening dialectics.

Wasatiyyah communication also requires discernment in the delivery of sensitive materials, especially those related to Inter-Religious relations or identity politics. The use of intellectual property disclaimers and audience restrictions for certain materials is essential to avoid misinterpretation in the digital public space. The integrity of religious communication is measured by the extent to which teachers provide context boundaries so that their messages are not abused for violence (Abou El Fadl 2014). In Indonesia, where pieces of video lectures often go partially viral, a careful and contextual communication model is the main protection for the dignity of MT.

The application of this non-provocative communication is very relevant to efforts to fight hate speech which is often under the guise of religion. *Wasatiyyah* Preachers use language that embraces and avoids the use of labels that denigrate others. (Arifinsyah et al. 2020) posits that the internalization of moderation values conveyed through polite and dialogical language is able to create social harmony and reduce the potential for intolerance in the community. This evidence confirms that the communication strategy of a religious educator has a profound psychological impact on the way congregants view the peaceful existence with others. In addition, this communication model must be able to build congregants' resistance to hoaxes and provocations on social media. By training them to always perform *tabayyun* (verification) and critical thinking through dialogue in MT, *Wasatiyyah* pedagogy indirectly builds religion-based media literacy. Furthermore, the communicative MT provides space for congregants to ask questions that have been considered taboo, so that their intellectual anxiety is answered with a soothing narrative.

Overall, the model of non-provocative communication and not discussing vices or misjudging other preachers in front of the congregations is the spearhead of *Wasatiyyah* intellectual pedagogy. The effectiveness of a message of moderation is not determined by the loudness of the voice, but by the depth of meaning and the clarity of the logic conveyed. By adopting Socratic dialogue and high communication ethics, MT can be an antidote to communication pollution in the era of information disruption. Politeness in communication is a reflection of the glory of *Wasatiyyah* teachings itself, which will eventually give birth to a more inclusive society with mutual respect, and the ability to respond to differences with maturity of thought.

3.3 Beyond Sermons: *Wasatiyyah* as Behavior

Contemporary discussions of *Wasatiyyah* (Islamic moderation) frequently reduce the concept to a matter of doctrinal positioning or balance, emphasizing inclusive language, conciliatory sermons, or explicit rejection of extremism (Halstead 2007). Such discursive elements are not insignificant, but risk obscuring a more foundational dimension of moderation within Islamic thought, and its ethical and behavioral embodiment. In the Islamic moral tradition, religious truth is not transmitted primarily through propositional claims but through exemplary conduct, where the coherence between speech and action constitutes the epistemic ground of authority. *Dakwah* operates through multiple dimensions, among which *dakwah bil-hāl* (preaching through lived example) occupies a central position. The Qur'anic designation of the Prophet as *uswatun ḥasanah* (Q 33:21) establishes a normative model in which ethical comportment functions as a primary medium of *dakwah*. From this perspective, *Wasatiyyah* is not an abstract midpoint between extremes, it is a habitual orientation shaping how knowledge is held, disagreement is managed, and power is exercised.

This ethical understanding of moderation is particularly salient in the Indonesian context where religious authority is deeply performative. MT as a non-formal institution does not derive its legitimacy from standardized curricula or formal certification, it is built on long-term affective trust between preachers and congregants (Zamhari and Howell 2020, pp. 47–75). In such settings, the audience evaluate religious messages less than they perceive the sincerity, humility, and moral consistency of the preacher. Consequently, *Wasatiyyah* cannot be sustained if moderation remains

confined to sermon themes while the preacher's behavior reflects rigidity, sectarian bias, or moral self-righteousness.

A preacher who promotes moderation while engaging in polemical attacks, delegitimizing alternative interpretations, or exacerbating communal tensions is perceived as violating the moral substance of *Wasatiyyah* regardless of any rhetorical claims. Islamic discourse on moderation particularly as articulated by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah has long emphasized *akhlak* and social harmony as core religious values. Concepts such as *tasāmuh* (tolerance), *tawāzun* (balance), and *ta'ādul* (justice) are consistently framed not merely as theological positions but as ethical dispositions manifested in everyday conduct (Ampel 2013; Bruinessen 2013a p. 26). MT audience are increasingly sensitive to ethical inconsistency and often respond with skepticism toward figures whose public conduct contradicts their calls for moderation. The discrepancy between moderate discourse and im-moderate behavior has become increasingly visible in Indonesia's contemporary religious public sphere, particularly in the era of digital *dakwah* (Raya 2025). The rise of popular preachers and online religious content has intensified public scrutiny of preacher integrity, as sermons are no longer isolated events but part of a continuous moral performance accessible to diverse audiences (Nisa 2018).

Another vulnerability of *Wasatiyyah* discourse related to Preachers' behavior is its susceptibility to instrumentalization. When moderation is defined primarily as a discursive stance, it can be selectively adopted to enhance institutional legitimacy without requiring substantive ethical transformation. By contrast, an embodied conception of *Wasatiyyah* imposes demanding moral criteria on preachers, requiring consistency across speech (*kalam*), action (*'amal*), and intention (*niyyah*). MT audience are often socially diverse, encompassing varying educational backgrounds, theological orientations, and levels of religious literacy. In such plural settings, ethical comportment functions as a unifying language that transcends doctrinal differences. A preacher who demonstrates patience in disagreement, humility in knowledge claims, and sensitivity to communal priorities effectively communicates *Wasatiyyah* even without explicitly naming it. Conversely, exhibiting fanaticism or polemical zeal risks undermining the concept. Therefore, (Mulyana 2023) posited that *Wasatiyyah* within MT must be conceptualized not merely as the content of sermons, but as an embodied ethical orientation enacted by preachers in their modes of reasoning, interaction, and leadership. This agent-centered understanding provides the analytical foundation for identifying the key characteristics of *Wasatiyyah*-oriented preachers, which the following section elaborates through a focused examination of intellectual openness, honesty, and social sensitivity.

Wasatiyyah is understood as an embodied ethical orientation rather than a purely discursive phenomena, and the integrity of preachers becomes its most visible evidence. In other words, rather than performing; ethical coherence and aligning knowledge, attitude, and conduct in the management of religious authority is beyond a requirement. Drawing from Islamic ethical traditions, Sunni pluralist thought, and contemporary Indonesian *dakwah* debates, three interrelated characteristics that define *Wasatiyyah*-oriented preachers within MT include anti-fanaticism and intellectual openness, intellectual honesty, and social sensitivity.

A defining marker of *Wasatiyyah*-oriented preachers is their rejection of fanaticism (*ta'aşşub*) and their embrace of intellectual openness rooted in the Sunni tradition of legitimate disagreement (*ikhtilāf*) (Hallaq 2009). Classical Sunni scholarship has long recognized disagreement as an inevitable and even productive feature of religious reasoning. Jurists such as *al-Shāfi'i* famously acknowledged the provisional nature of legal judgment, encapsulated in the maxim; "My opinion is correct but may be wrong, and the opinion of others is wrong but may be correct" (Kamali 2015). This epistemic humility forms a foundational ethic of Sunni pluralism, where diversity of interpretation is accommodated within shared moral boundaries. *Wasatiyyah*, therefore, presupposes the recognition of human fallibility in interpreting divine sources and the willingness to engage alternative viewpoints without delegitimization.

This principle is highly relevant to the Indonesian Islamic landscape where multiple theological orientations like the traditionalist, modernist, Salafi, Sufi, and popular *dakwah*

movements coexist within shared social space (Bruinessen 2013). Historically, Indonesian Islam have shown that moderation cannot emerge from doctrinal uniformity, it is a product of negotiated pluralism, particularly within organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which institutionalized *ikhtilaf* management as a religious ethic (Ampel 2013). Within MT, intellectual openness is especially critical. MT audience are often heterogeneous, encompassing varying levels of religious literacy and diverse interpretive commitments. Preachers who absolutize their own interpretations by presenting contested issues as settled or framing disagreement as deviation risk alienating segments of their audience and undermining the social function of MT as an inclusive learning space. (Zamhari and Howell 2020)

On the other hand, preachers who acknowledge multiple valid scholarly opinions model a form of *Wasatiyyah* that is pedagogically effective and ethically credible. State actors and Islamic mass organizations emphasize moderation, it is bound to fail if preachers maintain monopolistic claims. Anti-fanaticism cannot be reduced to just rhetorical politeness; it requires a genuine acceptance of epistemic limits. Such practices signal integrity by demonstrating that moderation is not a strategic posture, it is rather a deeply internalized ethical stance.

A core characteristic of *Wasatiyyah*-oriented preachers is intellectual honesty. In other words, this is the understanding of ethical responsibility in the production, transmission, and correction of religious knowledge. Knowledge is inseparable from moral accountability, and its misuse or misrepresentation constitutes a breach of trust (*amānah*). (Abou El Fadl 2014) emphasized that authority is not derived from the volume of knowledge possessed, but from the integrity with which it is handled. Acknowledging uncertainty, citing sources transparently, avoiding selective textual quotation, and publicly correcting errors when they occur are several ways intellectual honesty manifests in Preachers. Far from diminishing authority, such practices enhance moral credibility by affirming that religious knowledge is a collective and evolving endeavor rather than a personal possession. Sunni legal theory itself institutionalized this ethic through mechanisms of revision (*rujūʿ*) and scholarly debate, reinforcing the idea that fallibility is intrinsic to human reasoning (Hallaq 2009).

MT occupies a unique position in this landscape. As a recurring and relational forum, MT allows for sustained interaction between preachers and congregants over time. Importantly, intellectual honesty also guards against the instrumentalization of moderation. When preachers selectively invoke moderation to deflect criticism while maintaining opaque or manipulative knowledge practices, *Wasatiyyah* becomes performative rather than substantive. Integrity, by contrast, demands transparency even when it carries reputational risk. This ethical courage distinguishes *Wasatiyyah*-oriented preachers from those who merely adopt moderation as a strategic label.

Without prejudice to the foregoing, the defining characteristic of *Wasatiyyah* preachers is social sensitivity, operationalized through ethical priority-setting (*fiqh al-amlawiyyāt*). This is important because Islamic jurisprudence has long recognized that not all religious issues carry equal moral or social weight. In the words of al-Qaradawi, ethical discernment requires prioritizing communal welfare (*maṣlaḥah*) and social cohesion over engagement in divisive secondary disputes (*khilāfiyyāt*) (Kamali 2015). In plural societies, this principle acquires heightened importance just like the Indonesian Islamic thought has consistently emphasized harmony (*kerukunan*) and unity (*ukhuwah*) as religious imperatives, particularly in contexts marked by ethnic, religious, and political diversity (Ampel 2013). Foregrounding polemical debates at the expense of social stability risks transforming religious knowledge into a source of fragmentation rather than guidance. Within MT, social sensitivity manifests in how preachers select topics, frame disagreements, and respond to local tensions. MT audience often include individuals directly affected by socio-economic precarity, communal anxieties, or interreligious coexistence. In such contexts, prioritizing abstract doctrinal disputes over ethical and social concerns reflects a failure of *Wasatiyyah*, even if the preacher's arguments are textually sound.

The effectiveness of *Wasatiyyah* as a religious orientation depends not only on its theological coherence or pedagogical articulation, but fundamentally on its reception by the public.

The integrity of preachers directly shapes public trust (*thiqa*), which in turn determines whether messages of moderation are perceived as credible, persuasive, and worthy of emulation. Within Islamic moral epistemology, trust is not an abstract social sentiment but an ethical consequence of consistent moral conduct. The Qur'anic concept of *amānah* situates trust as a moral responsibility borne by those entrusted with authority, including religious teachers and preachers. Authority in religious matters is fundamentally moral rather than coercive. Sociological theories of religious authority further reinforce this insight. Authority, particularly in non-formal religious settings, is relational and performative. It must be continuously enacted and reaffirmed through interaction (Campbell 2012). In MT where engagement is voluntary and sustained, Preachers are subject to ongoing moral evaluation by congregants. Their integrity is assessed not only through sermons but through everyday comportment, responsiveness to social issues, and consistency in handling disagreements.

The Islamic life of the commons demonstrates public trust in religious figures which is highly contingent on perceived moral alignment with communal values such as harmony (*kerukunan*), humility, and social responsibility (Bruinessen 2013). Preachers who display ethical inconsistency by promoting moderation while engaging in polarizing rhetoric or partisan mobilization often experience erosion of credibility, even among audiences sympathetic to moderate ideals. These dynamics highlight a crucial insight that moderation cannot be imposed normatively, it can only be socially earned. Efforts to promote religious moderation often focus on education curriculum reforms, sermon guidelines, or discursive regulations. These measures are valuable, but they remain insufficient if preachers' integrity is not simultaneously cultivated. Drawing on the psychodynamic theory of (Bandura 1977), moderation initiatives gain traction only when they resonate with grassroots perceptions of ethical authenticity.

3.4 Majelis Taklim and Muslim Urban Society Development: A Synthesis

The institutionalization of Wasatiyyah through the proposed three-pillars framework plays a transformative role in Muslim urban society development. Modern urban centers in Indonesia are characterized by rapid social acceleration, hyper-connectivity, spatial segregation, and identity anxiety. In this environment, urban Muslims frequently experience social alienation and seek spiritual security, rendering them vulnerable to fragmented digital religious authority or rigid, exclusivist ideologies.

Majelis Taklim addresses these urban vulnerabilities by operating as a critical socio-religious buffer. From the perspective of urban society development, Majelis Taklim performs three vital structural functions:

1. **Social Cohesion and Community Anchoring:** In dense urban spaces where traditional communal ties are weakened, Majelis Taklim serves as an accessible venue for social bonding and emotional support. By instilling the genealogical value of Nusantara's inclusive dakwah, it prevents urban social fragmentation and fosters civic tolerance among diverse demographic groups.
2. **Intellectual Resilience Against Digital Polarization:** Urban congregants are constantly exposed to polarizing content in the digital public sphere. By shifting dakwah from mere content delivery to a reflective, dialogical methodology (*Adab al-Ikhtilaf* and Socratic inquiry), Majelis Taklim equips urban Muslims with critical religious literacy, enabling them to navigate ideological pluralism without resorting to fanaticism.
3. **Ethical Leadership in Public Spaces:** The performative integrity of preachers provides a concrete moral compass for urban communities and professionals. When preachers embody *fiqh al-awlawiyyat* (the jurisprudence of priorities), they guide urban Muslim society to focus on constructive social action, poverty alleviation, and community empowerment rather than counterproductive sectarian disputes.

Consequently, Majelis Taklim is not merely a traditional venue for ritual gathering, but a dynamic driver of modern Muslim urban development that systematically nurtures a moderate, resilient, and ethically grounded urban citizenry.

Conclusion

This study has developed an integrated framework for strengthening *Wasatiyyah* within Indonesia's non-formal Islamic educational institution, *Majelis Taklim* (MT), specifically addressing the imperatives of Muslim urban society development. The paper advanced that the institutionalization of *Wasatiyyah* within urban MT cannot be reduced to the thematic curation of sermon content. Rather, it requires the synergistic integration of three constitutive pillars: genealogical rootedness in the inclusive *dakwah* tradition of the Nusantara, the adoption of an intellectually reflexive and dialogical pedagogy, and the embodied ethical integrity of the preacher as the living evidence of moderation. Taken collectively, the three pillars proposed reveal a crucial epistemological shift in how *Wasatiyyah* must be conceptualized if it is to function as a meaningful and durable religious orientation rather than a rhetorical instrument of institutional self-legitimation.

The predominant tendency in both state-sponsored and organizational discourses of moderation has been to define *Wasatiyyah* by what it opposes which are extremism, rigidity, and sectarianism rather than by what it positively requires. This study inverts that logic by portraying *Wasatiyyah* as a positive ethical and epistemological achievement, the product of historical rootedness, methodological discipline, and moral formation. This reorientation carries significant implications for policy, practice, and scholarship. For policymakers and Islamic organizations invested in promoting religious moderation in Indonesia, it suggests that programmatic interventions must move beyond the production of moderately-themed curricula or the dissemination of ideological counter-narratives, and invest substantively in the formation of preachers, equipping them with the pedagogical competencies, ethical self-awareness, and contextual intelligence that genuine *Wasatiyyah* demands. For MT practitioners, it suggests that institutional effectiveness is ultimately a function not of organizational scale or state recognition, but of the moral and intellectual quality of those who lead religious instruction.

It should be acknowledged, however, that this study carries inherent limitations that open avenues for further inquiry. The qualitative-normative methodology employed here, while appropriate for constructing a principled theoretical framework, does not yield empirical data on the actual implementation of these pillars within specific MT settings. Future research would benefit from ethnographic fieldwork and longitudinal studies that examine how preachers internalize and enact the proposed framework in practice, how congregants receive and respond to differing pedagogical approaches, and how institutional variables such as organizational affiliation, geographic context, and demographic composition mediate the cultivation of *Wasatiyyah*. Relatedly, the framework as articulated here remains normatively idealized and does not fully account for the realistic constraints under which most MT operate.

The pedagogical and ethical competencies described above presuppose a level of training, reflexivity, and resource access that is unevenly distributed among MT preachers, many of whom serve voluntarily, lack formal pedagogical preparation, or operate without institutional oversight or peer accountability mechanisms. Heterogeneity in preacher's capacity, alongside limitations in funding, materials, and sustained mentorship structures, may constrain the extent to which the three pillars can be consistently realized across different MT settings. Future research should therefore examine not only how the framework operates where conditions are favorable, but how it might be adapted or scaffolded where institutional and human-resource capacity is more limited. Additionally, comparative studies across the archipelago accounting for regional variations in Islamic practice, the differential influence of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, and the varying penetration of transnational movements would enrich and productively complicate the generalized framework advanced here.

Ultimately, this study affirms that MT possesses exceptional potential as a pillar of Muslim urban society development precisely because of its structural characteristics—its embeddedness in everyday communal life, its affective relational bonds, its accessibility across demographic divides, and its capacity for sustained moral formation over time. In a rapidly urbanizing Muslim-majority

society like Indonesia, which faces the twin pressures of transnational religious radicalism and urban social fragmentation, the grassroots moral authority of MT represents an irreplaceable resource. Realizing that potential requires that MT be understood and developed not merely as a space for the transmission of religious information, but as an institution of ethical formation—a place where the tradition of Nusantara *Wasatiyyah* is actively lived, intellectualized, and embodied in the everyday realities of modern urban life.

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