
Critical Thinking and Religious Moderation in the *Bahtsul Masa'il* Tradition at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract

This study examines Bahtsul Masā'il at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School as an institutional mechanism for internalizing religious moderation and fostering students' critical thinking skills. Drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the analysis explores how dialogical interaction, collaborative reasoning, and guided participation shape students' religious understanding within a socio-cultural learning environment. A qualitative descriptive-analytic design was employed, using in-depth interviews with ustaz and senior secondary (Aliyah) students, participatory observation of a Bahtsul Masā'il session, and document analysis. The findings show that Bahtsul Masā'il integrates the pesantren's classical scholarly tradition with contextual engagement on contemporary issues, enabling students to develop tolerant, open, and reflective attitudes aligned with the values of religious moderation. The scaffolding role of musyrif, the use of digital resources, and students' involvement in external discussion forums further enhance their analytical abilities. Challenges include uneven student preparedness and limited alignment between logic instruction and applied reasoning during discussions. While the study demonstrates the pedagogical significance of Bahtsul Masā'il, its scope is limited to a single pesantren. This study is to reveal how Bahtsul Masā'il contributes to shaping critically minded and religiously moderate students capable of addressing contemporary socio-religious challenges in accordance with the Islamic principle of Raḥmatan lil' Ālamīn.

Keywords: *Bahtsul Masa'il, critical thinking, pesantren, religious moderation, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory*

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Indonesia has faced challenges related to religious radicalism and extremism, which, according to Husna & Thohir (2020) have been triggered by inappropriate approaches to religious instruction. In response, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has promoted religious moderation to foster tolerant and inclusive attitudes, positioning *pesantren* as a stronghold against radicalism (Jahroni, 2020). *Bahtsul Masa'il* at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School, which focuses on the study of hadith, has become an effective method for instilling these values through discussions grounded in the *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts).

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Several *pesantren* have taken concrete steps to integrate these values of religious moderation into their curricula and educational activities. For example, at Nasrul Huda Islamic Boarding School in Batang Regency, the institution incorporates four indicators of religious moderation, such as tolerance, nonviolence, adaptability to local culture, and love of the homeland, into its educational programs (Mustopa, Ridwan, & Nasikhin, 2024).

In addition, religious moderation is also embodied in the concept of *wasathiyah*, a middle-path and balanced approach that integrates modern scientific knowledge with *'ilm kauniah* taught through classical *pesantren* texts. This approach aims to train students' reasoning capacity and critical thinking skills, enabling them to apply the knowledge they acquire to create *maslahah* (public benefit) for the community. With a strong foundation in *'ilm kauniah*, students are expected to avoid the potential harm that may arise from the misuse of knowledge (Bahijah, Rahmatika, Ahmad, & Ishak, 2022).

Recent scholarly debates on Indonesian Islamic education demonstrate that religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*) is not a naturally occurring disposition among santri but a constructed socioreligious identity shaped through institutional discourse, pedagogical practice, and broader state narratives (Huda, 2024). Within the national context, religious moderation has been formalized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as a normative framework that emphasizes commitment to religious teachings, tolerance, anti-violence, and national cohesion, all grounded in Pancasila. *Pesantren*, which have long been regarded as custodians of Islamic tradition, have become central sites where this framework is interpreted, negotiated, and reproduced.

A growing body of research highlights that *pesantren* construct moderation through theological, sociocultural, and anthropological lenses. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama *pesantren* embed moderation within a unity of theo-socio-anthropological values, in which classical Islamic teachings are consistently contextualized within local cultural norms and imperatives of social harmony. This approach positions moderation not as a departure from orthodoxy but as an extension of long-standing *pesantren* epistemologies that valorize *tawassuṭh* (middle-path thinking), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), and *i'tidal* (balance) (Qorib & Umiarso, 2025).

At the institutional level, *pesantren* increasingly adopt formal policies and curricular interventions to cultivate moderate religious subjectivities. Athoillah, Rahman, Firdaus, & Septiadi (2024) document how many *pesantren* implement structured programs that explicitly align with state discourses on religious moderation. These initiatives construct moderation as both a religious obligation and a civic virtue, thereby linking Islamic identity with national loyalty. Yet, the authors also note that implementation is uneven: in some institutions, moderation remains a symbolic label rather than a deeply internalized pedagogical orientation.

Pedagogical practices play a decisive role in shaping *santri's* understanding of moderation. Subair et al. (2024) demonstrate that multilingual learning environments expand students' interpretive horizons and expose them to diverse Islamic discourses. This linguistic plurality fosters openness to difference and mitigates insular or monolithic interpretations of religious texts. The study suggests that moderation is cultivated not only

through explicit instruction but also through the discursive ecology of *pesantren* life, where teachers model respectful disagreement (*ikhtilāf*) and encourage comparative engagement with classical sources.

The construction of moderation is also intertwined with the *pesantren's* role in countering radicalism. Nasution (2023) argues that *pesantren* actively position themselves as supports of “authentic” Indonesian Islam, such as peaceful, inclusive, and culturally rooted, which in fact contrasts their identity with transnational radical ideologies. Through community-based activities, critical discussions, and the promotion of Islam *rahmatan lil-alamin*, *pesantren* cultivate a collective narrative in which moderation becomes a marker of institutional legitimacy and moral authority. This discursive boundary-making reinforces moderation as a shared identity among santri.

Although Afwadzi et al. (2024) focus on Islamic university students, their findings offer valuable insights into how moderation is internalized. They show that students' orientations toward moderation depend heavily on hermeneutical training, specifically whether they are taught to interpret religious texts contextually and purposively (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). Applied to *pesantren*, this suggests that moderation is constructed not merely through exposure to moderate content but through pedagogical methods that cultivate interpretive flexibility and critical engagement.

Religious moderation in *pesantren* is increasingly understood as a learned orientation shaped by institutional culture, teacher guidance, and the broader national agenda rather than an innate disposition among santri (Muizzuddin, Masyhudi, & Sari, 2026). Several studies show that moderation is formed through structured educational processes, including curriculum design, classroom interaction, and *pesantren* socialization (Rohmadi, Ibrahim, & Munir, 2024). Because moderation is shaped by learning, it is important to examine the cognitive skills that enable students to interpret religious teachings in balanced and contextual ways. Recent research highlights that *pesantren* encourage critical thinking by exposing santri to diverse Islamic texts, encouraging debate, and guiding them to compare different scholarly opinions (Zarkasyi, Firmansah, & Rahmadias, 2024).

Therefore, it becomes evident that Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) play a strategic role in fostering religious moderation and developing students' critical thinking skills, as demonstrated by previous studies. Burga & Damopolii (2022) highlight the potential of *pesantren* as centers of multicultural education. Similarly, Rasyid, Muvid, Lubis, & Kurniawan (2022), and Athoillah, Rahman, Firdaus, & Septiadi (2024) emphasize the contribution of *pesantren* in building an inclusive paradigm through the national fiqh and moderation policies. However, challenges such as the patron–client relationship between *kiai* and *santri* may constrain the development of critical thinking, as identified by Yasin & Khasbulloh (2022).

Arthars & Markauskaite, (2025) found that Collaborative interaction nurtures shared understanding across differences, reinforcing key principles of religious moderation such as dialogue, perspective-taking, and mutual meaning-making. Central to the study's argument is the claim that knowledge construction is inherently social — a premise that aligns closely with the moderation values of coexistence and tolerance. *Pesantren* is a highly

effective agent of religious moderation because it does not isolate itself from local culture; rather, it actively employs local wisdom as a strategic and organic framework to foster a tolerant, balanced, and context-aware understanding of faith (Zahrah & Amaliyah, 2024).

One learning method in *pesantren* that is effective in cultivating values of religious moderation is *Bahtsul Masa'il*. This tradition is a distinctive *pesantren*-based method of discussion and study that encourages students to engage in dialogue, articulate arguments, and consider diverse perspectives when addressing various issues. *Bahtsul Masa'il*, as described by Saenong (2021) and Burhani (2012) It constitutes a profound and continuous Islamic learning tradition with strong roots in classical Islamic scholarship. Within this tradition, students are encouraged to think critically and employ textual evidence (*dalil*) to resolve religious issues. By applying the method of *ilhaq al-masā'il bi nazā'iri-hā*, *Bahtsul Masa'il* connects contemporary problems with authoritative opinions found in the *kitab kuning*, thereby serving as an effective means of understanding and contextualizing Islamic teachings in modern life. Saenong (2021) opines that this method serves not only as a means of producing fatwas responsive to the demands of the times, but also as a pedagogical approach that encourages students to think critically and employ *ijtihad* in addressing contemporary issues. In addition, Burhani (2012) believes that *Bahtsul Masa'il* also represents an implementation of the concept of moderation (*al-tawassuṭ wa al-i'tidāl*), encouraging students to avoid extremism and to maintain balance in religious life. Thus, *Bahtsul Masa'il* not only strengthens students' religious insight but also instills moderate values that are essential for responding to the challenges of modern life.

In the context of strengthening students' analytical capacity, several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of *Bahtsul Masa'il* as a learning method capable of enhancing critical thinking skills. Hudri demonstrates that the *Bahtsul Masa'il* method can deepen students' understanding of religious texts, particularly in the study of classical texts (*kitab kuning*) such as *Fathul Qorib* (Hudri, 2023). This study extends previous research by analyzing *Bahtsul Masa'il* through the lens of social constructivism, highlighting how social interaction in group discussions not only enhances textual understanding but also internalizes values of religious moderation. This finding aligns with Hidayatulloh's research, which affirms that the application of contextual learning in *Bahtsul Masa'il* at Al-Muhibbin Bahrul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Tambakberas, Jombang, effectively encourages students to think in a solution-oriented, contextual manner when addressing issues of Islamic law in society (Hidayatulloh, 2018).

Based on the reviewed literature, a research gap remains in understanding how the *Bahtsul Masa'il* method not only enhances students' religious understanding but also fosters the values of religious moderation and critical thinking skills. Most existing studies tend to focus on multicultural education, national fiqh, or the effectiveness of *Bahtsul Masa'il* in improving comprehension of religious texts. Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by examining how *Bahtsul Masa'il* at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School functions to develop both religious moderation and students' critical thinking abilities. In doing so, the research seeks to fill the existing gap in the literature and to provide theoretical

and practical contributions to the development of *pesantren*-based learning methods in responding to contemporary religious challenges.

To address this issue, the *Bahtsul Masa'il* method at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School is analyzed in this study using Lev Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory. Vygotsky's theory (1978) emphasizes that critical thinking develops through social interaction, particularly through the guidance of *musyrif* and cultural mediation such as the *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains how *santri* achieve higher cognitive potential through collaborative discussion, thereby facilitating the internalization of the values of religious moderation, such as *tasamuh* (tolerance). This approach is relevant for understanding *Bahtsul Masa'il* as a learning forum that integrates *pesantren* traditions with contemporary issues, thereby addressing the challenges of radicalism and social polarization. The perspective of ZPD reaffirms that an individual needs scaffolding to bridge the gap between what a student can do independently and what a student does under the guidance (Newman & Latifi, 2021).

This article examines the *Bahtsul Masa'il* program implemented at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School, an institution specializing in the study of hadith and founded by Prof. Dr. KH. Ali Mustafa Ya'qub. As one of the prominent Islamic educational institutions in the field of hadith studies, Darus Sunnah possesses a strong intellectual tradition, making it an ideal setting for investigating how *Bahtsul Masa'il* contributes to students' critical thinking.

Based on the discussion above, this article addresses several key questions regarding the implementation of *Bahtsul Masa'il* at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School. These questions encompass three main aspects first, how the *Bahtsul Masa'il* method is implemented at Darus Sunnah. Second, how the values of religious moderation are integrated into *Bahtsul Masa'il* activities and their impact on students' critical thinking abilities. Third, what factors facilitate and hinder the implementation of *Bahtsul Masa'il* in fostering values of religious moderation and critical thinking skills among students at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive–analytic approach to examine the dynamics of *Bahtsul Masa'il* as a learning practice within the Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School (*pesantren*). A qualitative approach is uniquely suited to this inquiry, as the primary objective is to explore meanings, interactions, and socially constructed processes as they unfold naturally within a specific cultural and educational context. Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to capture the richness of participants' lived experiences and the interpretive frameworks that shape their engagement with knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In the case of *Bahtsul Masa'il*, this approach is essential because the forum is characterized by dialogical reasoning, collective deliberation, and the interpretation of classical Islamic texts within a living tradition. Such processes are

inherently complex, context-bound, and resistant to reduction into quantifiable variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This study was conducted between May and December 2024.

Data were collected through three complementary, triangulated techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. This triangulated design enhances the comprehensiveness and trustworthiness of the findings by integrating multiple perspectives and forms of evidence (Flick, 2018; Patton, 2002). In-depth interviews were conducted with two *ustaz*—Ustaz Muhammad Hanifuddin and Ustaz Ulin Nuha—and three senior secondary (*alijah*) students: Kholid, Fajar, and Ismail. Interviews are particularly valuable in qualitative research because they allow access to participants' subjective meanings, interpretive strategies, and reflective accounts of their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Through these dialogues, the researchers gained deeper insight into how participants conceptualize *Bahtsul Masa'il*, how they engage in reasoning and argumentation, and how they perceive its role in shaping their intellectual and religious development.

Participatory observation was conducted during an active *Bahtsul Masa'il* session, allowing the researchers to directly observe interactional dynamics and pedagogical processes *in situ*. This method is essential for capturing naturally occurring practices that may not be fully articulated in interviews, including non-verbal communication, turn-taking patterns, and the spontaneous negotiation of meaning (Spradley, 2016). By immersing themselves in the setting, the researchers documented how participants collaboratively construct arguments, draw upon authoritative texts, and respond to differing viewpoints within the structured format of the forum.

To further ground the data contextually and textually, document analysis was employed as an additional layer of inquiry. The documents reviewed encompassed *pesantren* guidelines, internal notes, and written outputs from *Bahtsul Masā'il* sessions, all of which offered valuable insights into the institutional norms, epistemological orientations, and discursive conventions that shape the practice. This approach aligns with Armstrong (2021) observation that document analysis is integral to qualitative research, particularly in tracing how knowledge is codified, transmitted, and reproduced within specific social settings.

To analyze the data, this study adopted the interactive model advanced by Miles et al. (2014), encompassing three successive yet fluid stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This framework proved particularly suited to the complex nature of qualitative data, as it accommodates iterative refinement of both categories and interpretations. In practice, the researchers moved back and forth between data and theory throughout the process, gradually surfacing patterns, relationships, and emerging themes (Mishra & Dey, 2022).

The analysis was theoretically grounded in Lev Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, particularly the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and cultural mediation (Verenikina, 2003). These concepts offer a compelling lens for understanding how learning unfolds through social interaction, guided participation, and the use of cultural tools. Within the context of *Bahtsul Masā'il*, students cultivate their reasoning

capacities through collaborative engagement with peers and under the guidance of an ustaz, while classical Islamic texts serve as mediational tools that shape the process of meaning-making (Daniels, 2002; Wertsch, 1998). This theoretical framework aligns closely with the pedagogical structure of *pesantren*, which places considerable emphasis on communal learning, intellectual apprenticeship, and the transmission of tradition.

Ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings was a central methodological concern throughout the study. To this end, source triangulation was employed by systematically comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents – an approach widely recognized for its capacity to reduce bias and bolster the consistency and validity of interpretations (Flick, 2018; Lincoln, 1985). Beyond triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field and careful documentation of the research process lent additional rigor to the overall inquiry. Through this layered methodological approach, the study arrives at a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of *Bahtsul Masa'il* as a pedagogical practice that weaves together cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions of learning.

Results and Discussion

An Overview of Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School and *Bahtsul Masa'il* Activities

Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School, founded in 1997 by Prof. Dr. KH. Ali Mustafa Ya'qub, focuses on the study of hadith and is managed by the Darus-Sunnah Waqf Foundation. Since 2014, the *pesantren* has offered *Tsanawiyah* and *Aliyah* programs under the vision of “Nurturing *Ulama* from an Early Age,” emphasizing holistic education grounded in the *kitab kuning* tradition to produce scholars with expertise in the Qur'an and hadith (“Profil Madrasah Darus-Sunnah,” 2021). *Bahtsul Masa'il*, which began in 2017 following the Rationalika discussion program, was introduced as an extracurricular activity to develop students' critical and analytical thinking skills. Initially focusing on *nahwu* and *sharaf*, the activity later expanded with the support of the *pesantren* leadership and through comparative studies with other *pesantren*, such as Tebuireng and Lirboyo. According to Muhammad Hanifuddin, this program is held every Monday evening and involves *Tsanawiyah* and *Aliyah* students on a rotational basis to support the regeneration of young *ulama*.

He describes that the *Bahtsul Masa'il* tradition at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School is still relatively new and has required adaptation from both students and teachers (*asatiz*). In its early stages, many participants did not fully understand the mechanisms of *Bahtsul Masa'il*. To address this, he took the initiative to regularly send delegations of students and teachers to various *pesantren* in East Java, West Java, and Banten to participate in similar activities. This strategy enabled students to learn through social interaction with other *pesantren* communities, where knowledge is constructed collaboratively and mediated by cultural tools such as discussions based on the *kitab kuning*. In addition, to provide an initial understanding of the *Bahtsul Masa'il* process, students were encouraged to watch video documentation of similar activities available on YouTube. This served as an introductory strategy to visually familiarize them with the tradition of scholarly discussion

before they engaged in direct practice. Over time, both students and teachers developed a clearer understanding of the format and essence of *Bahtsul Masa'i*. Thus, *Bahtsul Masa'il* at Darus Sunnah serves as a learning platform that leverages peer interaction and teacher (*ustaz*) guidance to instill religious values and develop students' analytical abilities.

Implementation of *Bahtsul Masa'il* at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School

The implementation of *Bahtsul Masa'il* at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School is structured systematically, adopting the traditional *pesantren* format with local adaptations to facilitate collaborative learning that supports the development of critical thinking and religious moderation. The *Bahtsul Masa'il* activities are divided into three main stages: the preparation stage, the implementation stage, and the closing stage. In this regard, Muhammad Hanifuddin is of the opinion that,

“I presented YouTube recordings of *Bahtsul Masā'il* sessions conducted in Islamic boarding schools across East Java. I explained, in a systematic manner, the essential components required in a *Bahtsul Masā'il* forum, including the participants, the formulation council (*dewan perumus*), the verification council (*dewan mushohih*), the moderator, and the resource persons. Each element was described in detail. In addition, I outlined the seating arrangements and the various tools and materials necessary to support the implementation of the forum.” (Hanifuddin, 29 May 2024).

The first stage, preparation, involves determining the theme to be discussed. Themes are selected based on current issues and classical problems relevant to students' lives. This process involves the active role of teachers (*asatiz*) as *musyrif*, who provide guidance and ensure that discussions remain focused. The role of the *musyrif* is crucial in mapping out the main points of discussion and encouraging students to think critically by posing questions that broaden their perspectives. Nevertheless, the primary responsibility for selecting themes and organizing the activities lies with the Darus Sunnah Students Association (*Ikatan Santri Darus Sunnah—ISDAR*), which consults with the *asatiz* to ensure that the chosen themes are appropriate and meaningful (interview with Fajar, 2024). This preparatory stage enables students to prepare for discussion under the guidance of the *musyrif*, helping them understand religious issues more systematically.

The themes addressed in *Bahtsul Masa'il* activities at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School tend to be contextual, aligning with issues that are widely discussed in society. According to Muhammad Hanifuddin, selecting topics relevant to current conditions is one of the factors influencing students' motivation and enthusiasm to participate in discussions. For instance, during periods leading up to general elections, the themes discussed have included issues such as money politics (*politik uang*). This approach ensures that discussions in *Bahtsul Masa'il* are not merely theoretical but closely connected to the social realities faced by the community (Muhammad Hanifuddin, 2024). This contextual approach strengthens students' ability to analyze contemporary issues in light of religious principles, thereby helping them distance themselves from extreme viewpoints. The emphasis on contextual understanding imparted to students is consistent with the findings of Thohari *et al.*'s

research, conducted at the same *pesantren* but at a different educational level, namely the *mahasantri*. Their study shows that contextualizing the understanding of religious evidence, such as hadith, not only enhances students' analytical capacities but also helps prevent tendencies toward radicalism (Thohari, Muslim, Zada, & Misbahuddin, 2021), reflecting the process of internalizing the values of religious moderation through social interaction.

The issues discussed in the *Bahtsul Masail* activities at *Pesantren* Darus Sunnah are also tailored to the students' educational level. For students at the *Aliyah* level, the themes addressed tend to be more complex, such as contemporary issues with *fiqh* dimensions, including money politics, Islamic economics, or social problems that require an understanding of Islamic law. This approach is designed to train students' analytical skills in contextualizing Islamic studies with current realities, enabling them to connect theory with practice in society (interview with Ulin Nuha, 2024).

Meanwhile, for students at the *Tsanawiyah* level, the themes addressed are simpler and more foundational, such as discussions on *nahwu* and *sharaf*. The focus on studying *nahwu* and *sharaf* aims to provide students with a solid initial foundation in understanding the structure of the Arabic language (Ismail, 2024). This approach helps *Tsanawiyah* students master the basics of Arabic as a foundation for more complex discussions in the future, with support from collaboration within discussion groups. This is crucial, given that the ability to understand yellow books (*kitab kuning*) heavily depends on mastery of Arabic grammar. Haris finds that one of the most important aspects in reading unvocalized Arabic manuscripts is mastering Arabic grammar (Haris, 2022). Moreover, the *kitab kuning* used in *pesantren* is predominantly written in Arabic without vowel markings (*ḥarakāt*), commonly referred to as *kitab gundul*.

This thematic division strategy not only ensures that the material aligns with the competencies of each student level but also provides a gradual foundation for mastering Islamic sciences. *Tsanawiyah*-level students who have already acquired the basics of *nahwu* (Arabic grammar) and *ṣarf* (morphology) are better prepared to engage with more complex *fiqh* issues when they advance to the *Aliyah* level. As noted by Bruinessen, in the tradition of classical *pesantren*, knowledge of Arabic linguistics—particularly *nahwu* and *ṣarf*—constitutes a fundamental foundation for students' religious learning (Bruinessen, 2012). Accordingly, the process of student cadre formation through *Bahtsul Masail* at *Pesantren* Darus Sunnah proceeds systematically and continuously (interview with Ulin Nuha, 2024).

Although the themes addressed in *Bahtsul Masail* within *pesantren* often relate to public issues, the activity is primarily oriented toward internal objectives. Its main focus is to serve as a medium for training students in critical thinking and cultivating future religious scholars expected to make meaningful contributions to society. *Pesantren* do not present the outcomes of these discussions as final answers or authoritative references for the wider community; rather, they are intended to train students to analyze problems and explore solutions based on classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) and the principles of moderate Islam. This approach allows students to construct religious knowledge collaboratively, with *kitab kuning* serving as a guide for reinforcing balanced and moderate perspectives.

This model differs from formal *Bahtsul Masail* forums convened to address societal issues, where the outcomes are disseminated to the public through sermons or religious lectures (Zulkhairi, Hajar, Safriadi, Marzuki, & Saifullah, 2024). In contrast, *Bahtsul Masail* activities within *pesantren*, such as at *Pesantren Darus Sunnah*, function primarily as training spaces. These discussions provide students with opportunities to sharpen analytical skills, explore textual evidence from *kitab kuning*, and internalize principles of tolerance, thereby preparing them to engage with society through relevant and inclusive approaches.

The next stage involves forming an organizing committee, in which fifth-grade students (second-year *Aliyah*) who are members of ISDAR assume responsibility for the technical and administrative preparation of the activity. ISDAR oversees the entire implementation process, including scheduling, selecting discussion themes, and ensuring the smooth execution of the sessions. These students receive direct guidance from *asatiz* (teachers), who act as mentors and supervisors, particularly in providing input on discussion methodology, the validity of textual evidence, and the resolution of differing opinions. This implementation model not only fosters students' independence in managing activities but also encourages the development of leadership and analytical skills within a framework of religious values (interview with Fajar, 2024).

During the material preparation stage, students utilize both printed *kitab kuning* and digital resources accessed through the *Maktabah Syamilah* application, particularly at the *Aliyah* level, to facilitate quicker access to references (interview with Khalid, 2024). The use of this technology reflects the *pesantren's* moderate approach in integrating tradition and modernity.

The implementation stages of *Bahtsul Masail* at *Pesantren Darus Sunnah* are designed to provide students with a comprehensive experience in exploring, analyzing, and resolving religious issues. After the problem description is read and it is confirmed that all participants understand it, the discussion begins. There are two formats employed in *Bahtsul Masail* at *Pesantren Darus Sunnah*. In the first format, participants are invited to respond to questions or case narratives prepared in advance, beginning with a search for relevant textual references in *Kitab Kuning*. This search process is crucial, as it not only sharpens students' skills in tracing legal sources but also familiarizes them with the method of *istinbāt* (deriving legal rulings from textual sources).

During the discussion, *musyawirin* are given the opportunity to present their views based on the references they have identified. The moderator ensures that the discussion remains focused on the issue at hand, while the *musyrif* or *ustaz* provides additional guidance to deepen the analysis. One of the key roles of the *ustaz* is to stimulate critical thinking by offering alternative perspectives or follow-up questions. In this way, students learn not only to answer questions but also to develop deeper and more reflective reasoning. In developing arguments, Ismail argued:

“Typically, the *musyrif* (supervisor) plays a guiding role by directing the discussion toward its key points, ensuring that it does not deviate into less relevant areas. At the same time, the *musyrif* stimulates further critical thinking among the participants— for instance, by presenting an initial answer and then inviting reconsideration through alternative scenarios, such as, “What if the case were like this?” This approach encourages students (*santri*) to reflect more deeply and to explore a wider range of possible responses” (interview with Ismail, 30 May 2024).

While Khalid added that,

“In general, expressing an opinion must be grounded in authoritative textual evidence (*dalil*), rather than relying solely on personal views. This is because one’s individual opinion cannot yet be claimed as an absolute truth. Consequently, when articulating arguments, participants are required to maintain logical coherence between the answers they consider correct and the positions established in the classical texts that serve as their references. ” (interview with Khalid, 30 May 2024).

In the second format, text-based learning using *kitab kuning* requires students to analyze the texts directly. They are guided to examine the text in detail, including its linguistic structure, vocabulary meanings, and substantive content. This process not only enhances Arabic language proficiency but also cultivates students’ sensitivity to textual context and meaning. Discussions arising from this analysis typically focus on linguistic comprehension and its application within the framework of Islamic law.

At the conclusion of the discussion, *musyawirin* are asked to formulate conclusions or responses to the issues discussed. These conclusions must be supported by strong textual evidence from *Kitab Kuning* as well as coherent logical arguments. In both formats, the activity concludes with a review by the *musyrif*, who evaluates the discussion process and offers feedback for future improvement. Through the combination of these two formats, *Bahtsul Masail* at *Pesantren* Darus Sunnah functions not only as a training ground for critical and analytical thinking, but also as a space for practicing the long-standing Islamic intellectual tradition that has developed within *pesantren*

Implementation of Religious Moderation Values and the Enhancement of Critical Thinking Skills in Bahtsul Masail Activities

The internalization of religious moderation (*wasathiyah*) values through *Bahtsul Masail* at *Pesantren* Darus Sunnah constitutes the core of shaping students’ tolerant and critical dispositions, with collaborative group work serving as a key driver in fostering these values. Through this forum, students are trained to understand and apply principles of tolerance and to appreciate the diversity of perspectives through structured discussions. One of the primary values cultivated in this process is the acceptance of diversity within Islamic thought. Education plays a significant role in behavioral transformations. Students transition away from vulnerable, exclusive views toward an active commitment to national values, diversity (*kemajemukan*), and anti-violence (Afifah et al., 2025).

Bahtsul Masail activities provide space for students to engage in dialogue and articulate arguments from multiple perspectives. Each group frequently refers to different schools of thought (*madhhab*), classical texts, or scriptural evidence in accordance with their respective understandings. This diversity is acknowledged and respected as part of Islam’s intellectual richness, enabling students to deepen their insights through collaborative learning. Group discussions allow students to use *kitab kuning* as a reference to understand diverse viewpoints, thereby reinforcing a balanced and moderate stance. Through this process, students learn that differences of opinion are not obstacles but opportunities to broaden understanding through dialogue.

The principle of tolerance also serves as a foundational element of these activities, particularly in addressing differences among Islamic legal schools. *Muysirif and Ustaz* emphasize that each *madhhab* is grounded in its own evidentiary basis and methodological framework, all of which deserve respect. During discussions, students are encouraged not to impose a particular viewpoint as the sole truth, but rather to understand the social contexts and varying needs of the Muslim community. For example, in discussions concerning differing views on *ṣalāt li ḥurmat al-waqt* and *ṣalāt jam‘*, participants are guided to consider not only the textual dimensions of classical sources but also the actual circumstances faced by the subjects of the legal issues.

This approach strengthens respect for diversity by integrating *shar‘ī* evidence with social realities through guided and focused discussions. The concept of *tasāmuḥ* refers to an attitude of mutual respect, appreciation, and cooperation among diverse social groups—whether differentiated by culture, language, ethnicity, politics, or religion. Tolerance is a noble value organically embedded in Islamic teachings. Doctrinally, Islam mandates tolerance, as its very definition denotes peace, safety, and submission. As articulated in the concept of *raḥmatan lil-‘ālamīn*, Islam does not seek to eradicate pre-existing religions, but rather promotes dialogue and tolerance through mutual respect and cooperation.

According to Shihab (2002) In *Tafsir Al-Misbah*, the concept of *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance) has a strong theological foundation, as reflected in the Qur’an, particularly in Surah Yūnus (10:99–100), which emphasizes that faith cannot be imposed by force and that human diversity in belief is part of God’s will.

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَأَمَنَّ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلَّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرَهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ

“And had your Lord willed, all those on earth would have believed—every one of them entirely. So will you then compel people to become believers?”

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفْسٍ أَنْ تُوْمِنَ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ ۗ وَيَجْعَلُ الرَّجْسَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

“And had your Lord willed, all those on earth would have believed—every one of them entirely. So will you then compel people to become believers?”

Shihab (2002) describes that these verses affirm the principle of freedom of belief and reject coercion in matters of faith. Diversity in belief is presented as part of divine wisdom, while human responsibility lies in using reason, dialogue, and ethical persuasion rather

than force. This interpretation provides a strong theological foundation for *tasāmuḥ* as a core value in Islamic moderation (*wasathiyah*).

These verses remind believers that God grants human beings the freedom to choose whether to believe or not. This freedom is grounded in the endowment of reason and intellect bestowed upon humans, enabling them to distinguish between truth and falsehood. In the narrative of Prophet Yunus (Jonah), some members of his community chose to believe in God after receiving divine warnings and were consequently spared from punishment, while others persisted in defiance. The message conveyed by these verses underscores the importance of respecting freedom of choice without neglecting the obligation of *da'wah*—namely, to remind, advise, and convey the truth. Tolerance in Islam does not imply validating all positions indiscriminately; rather, it entails providing space for dialogue and cultivating mutual respect as a form of honoring human freedom (Shihab, 2002, pp. 512–514). Within *Bahtsul Masail*, these verses serve as a theological foundation, reinforced through group discussions in which students learn to respect the diversity of choices under the guidance of a *musyrif*.

At *Pesantren Darus Sunnah*, the value of *tasāmuḥ* is implemented across various activities, including *Bahtsul Masail*. Students are trained to respect differing viewpoints and to engage in discussions grounded in textual evidence and social context. For instance, in deliberations on *fiqh* issues involving contemporary challenges, students are encouraged to consider the diversity of scholarly opinions alongside the needs of modern society. This approach strengthens their understanding of Islam's support for social harmony and enables students to develop inclusive attitudes through collaborative discussion.

The discussion of *ṣalāt jam'* (combined prayer) and *ṣalāt li ḥurmat al-waqt* during a *Bahtsul Masail* session held at *Pesantren Darus Sunnah* serves as a concrete example of how values of religious moderation are applied in Islamic discourse. Students were divided into four groups: al-Mu'taṣim, al-Munādī, al-Asrā, and al-Mujāhil (Rachmidiharja, 2024).

The discussion began with a case involving a worker named Haikal, who was caught in traffic congestion caused by a road accident while returning home from work. The congestion risked causing him to miss the *Maghrib* prayer. The central question was whether it would be preferable for him to combine the prayers upon arrival at home or to perform *ṣalāt li ḥurmat al-waqt*—a prayer performed in an imperfect state due to unmet conditions or pillars, intended to honor the prescribed prayer time. In this discussion, students from different groups presented divergent views on the most appropriate solution. Groups al-Mu'taṣim and al-Munādī favored performing *ṣalāt li ḥurmat al-waqt* followed by making up the prayer (*qadā'*), whereas groups al-Asrā and al-Mujāhil argued that Haikal should combine the *Maghrib* and '*Ishā'* prayers upon reaching home.

After all groups presented their positions, each articulated its arguments through textual references (*'ibārāt*) drawn from classical *fiqh* texts. For example, group al-Munādī cited *Fath al-Qarīb*, while group al-Mujāhil—advancing an opposing argument—relied on *Fiqh al-Islām wa Adillatuhu* as its primary reference. From the perspective of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), peer collaboration functions as a dynamic context in which students act as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) for one another. When two students with

differing levels of competence work together, the more proficient student can provide appropriately calibrated scaffolding that aligns with the partner's ZPD. This social interaction bridges the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what can be achieved with guidance. Through processes of discussion, explanation, and joint problem-solving, concepts that initially lie beyond a learner's independent reach become internalized. Consequently, this process expands learners' cognitive capacities, transforming their learning potential into actual, independent competence (Puntambekar, 2022).

In this forum, acceptance of diverse perspectives within Islam emerged as a central feature reflecting moderation. Students not only listened to differing opinions but also actively sought common ground among competing arguments. When the discussion deepened to define *mashaqqah* (hardship), group al-Mu'tasim maintained its stance by referring to *Qawā'id al-Fiqhiyyah*, while other groups attempted to synthesize classical fiqh perspectives with modern contexts, such as urban traffic congestion. This is in line with Ismail's view on how the community stimulates discussion, explanation, problem-solving, and critical thinking:

"Typically, the *musyrif* (supervisor) plays a guiding role by directing the discussion toward its key points, ensuring that it does not deviate into less relevant areas. At the same time, the *musyrif* stimulates further critical thinking among the participants—for instance, by presenting an initial answer and then inviting reconsideration through alternative scenarios, such as, "What if the case were like this?" This approach encourages students (*santri*) to reflect more deeply and to explore a wider range of possible responses" (interview with Ismail, 30 May 2024).

The moderator and *musyrif* played a crucial role in maintaining a productive discussion atmosphere, demonstrating how differences of opinion can be managed constructively without undermining collective harmony. The *ustaz* also provided guidance in aligning insights from various classical texts with contemporary realities, thereby instilling an inclusive approach to understanding religious teachings.

When the discourse became overly expansive—such as when the discussion shifted from the initial comparison between *ṣalāt li ḥurmat al-waqt* and *ṣalāt jam'* to broader debates on the definition of *mashaqqah*—the role of the *ustaz* and *musyrif* became especially vital in refocusing the discussion on its core issue. Through measured intervention, they ensured that all arguments remained relevant to the topic under consideration.

Beyond the diversity of perspectives, the principle of tolerance was a key element of the discussion, particularly for understanding differences among legal schools and social contexts. Students were taught to respect differing viewpoints, whether regarding fiqh rulings or technical approaches to prayer in emergency conditions. Mutual respect for divergent opinions thus became a foundational aspect of cultivating values of religious moderation among students (Husna & Thohir, 2020, hlm. 220).

The view expressed by Ulin Nuha (interview, 30 May 2024)—emphasizing the importance of performing *ṣalāt li ḥurmat al-waqt* to honor prayer time, while subsequently making it up—illustrates how moderation is applied to offer balanced and prudent

solutions. Similarly, the perspective of KH. Ali Mustafa Ya'qub, whom he cites, supports combining prayers in emergency situations such as the one Haikal experienced, thereby demonstrating the flexibility of *fiqh* in safeguarding public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*).

This approach also reflects the concept of *Tathawwur wa al-Ibtikār* (dynamism and innovation) as a key element of religious moderation (Idris, Willya, Mokodenseho, & Musthan, 2023). In Haikal's case, the option of combining prayers represents not merely a technical adjustment but an example of how *fiqh* understanding can be adapted to modern societal realities without abandoning foundational religious principles. Such adaptations remain anchored in authoritative scholarly sources, ensuring the legitimacy of the resulting legal judgments.

This example illustrates not only how moderation values are implemented but also the relevance of the *Bahtsul Masail* approach to contemporary social life. Through contextual themes and arguments grounded in both textual evidence and social realities, students are taught to integrate religious teachings with everyday dynamics. The concept of *Tathawwur wa al-Ibtikār* further encourages students to think creatively in identifying appropriate solutions to contemporary issues while remaining firmly rooted in core Islamic values.

Through structured social interaction, *Bahtsul Masail* at *Pesantren Darus Sunnah* trains students to become critical, inclusive agents of religious moderation. The activity cultivates critical and analytical thinking, appreciation of diverse perspectives, and the ability to manage differences productively. Ultimately, students are equipped to articulate Islamic teachings within pluralistic contexts, bridge differences, and serve as agents of moderation in broader society. Overall, the implementation of moderation values and the sharpening of critical thinking skills through *Bahtsul Masail* reflect Vygotsky's social constructivism, wherein social interaction, *musyrif* guidance, and cultural mediation through *kitab kuning* facilitate the internalization of *tasāmuḥ* and contextual analytical skills, producing students prepared to contribute to social harmony within the framework of *rahmatan lil-'ālamīn*.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of *Bahtsul Masā'il* in Fostering Students' Critical Thinking Skills

The implementation of *Bahtsul Masā'il* at *Pesantren Darus Sunnah* plays a significant role in fostering students' critical thinking skills and instilling values of religious moderation. Nevertheless, its effectiveness is shaped by both supporting and inhibiting factors, each influenced by the dynamics of social interaction within the learning process. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of adequate preparation among students prior to participating in the activity. As revealed in interviews, several students reported difficulties in responding to arguments raised during discussions due to low self-confidence and insufficient preparation. As a result, they tend to experience cognitive stagnation when confronted with rebuttals from other participants.

"Sometimes we are already confident in an answer, but suddenly it gets challenged, and it makes us feel anxious. When a rebuttal comes, maybe because our mental state is already down, we suddenly can't think anymore and go blank. Usually, this happens because the preparation for *Bahtsul Masā'il* is not thorough enough" (Ismail, dd month 2024) (interview with Ismail, 30 May 2024).

This lack of preparation can be understood as a limitation in the use of cultural mediation tools, such as *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts), which hampers students' ability to participate effectively in social interactions during *Bahtsul Masā'il*. Consequently, the development of critical thinking skills is slowed.

Another challenge lies in the misalignment between the teaching of *'ilm al-mantiq* (logic) and the practical needs of *Bahtsul Masā'il* discussions. The logic material taught in the classroom is perceived as overly theoretical and difficult to apply, making it challenging for students to connect it with discussion activities that require critical argumentation. Some students admitted that logic lessons often cause confusion, which further complicates their application during *Bahtsul Masā'il*. As a result, the critical thinking skills expected to be developed through this activity are not optimally achieved.

“Logic is taught in grades five and six, but I personally feel that I still cannot connect the material in *'ilm al-mantiq* with *Bahtsul Masā'il* activities. It still doesn't connect. Maybe my mind just hasn't connected it yet. Sometimes logic itself already requires a lot of thinking, and it can be overwhelming. So when it's applied in *Bahtsul Masā'il*, it feels even more confusing” (interview with Ismail, 30 May 2024).

From Vygotsky's perspective, this misalignment reflects ineffective mediation in the teaching of *'ilm al-mantiq*, where cultural tools (logical concepts) are not sufficiently integrated into the students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). As a result, students struggle to apply logical reasoning effectively in *Bahtsul Masā'il* discussions.

Despite these challenges, several supporting factors strengthen the implementation of *Bahtsul Masā'il*. Guidance from *musyrif* (mentors or senior facilitators) plays a crucial role in directing the flow of discussion. *Musyrif* helps maintain focus and encourages exploration of diverse perspectives when addressing problems. In addition, students' participation in external *Bahtsul Masā'il* forums—such as those held in other *pesantren* or at the regional level—provides valuable experience and new insights. Khalid believes that this exposure not only enhances critical thinking skills but also reinforces the values of religious moderation through interaction with participants from diverse backgrounds.

The guidance provided by *musyrif* reflects the concept of scaffolding within Vygotsky's ZPD, whereby structured support enables students to achieve higher levels of critical thinking. Meanwhile, participation in external forums broadens social interaction and facilitates the internalization of moderation values through cross-cultural dialogue.

Thus, supporting factors such as *musyrif* guidance and participation in external forums enhance social learning in *Bahtsul Masā'il*, while inhibiting factors—such as inadequate preparation and the misalignment of *'ilm al-mantiq*—reduce the effectiveness of social interaction in developing critical thinking skills. If these obstacles can be addressed and supporting factors optimized, *Bahtsul Masā'il* has the potential to become a more effective medium for facilitating the internalization of critical thinking skills and values of religious moderation through social interaction.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Bahtsul Masā'il* at Darus Sunnah Islamic Boarding School constitutes a pedagogically meaningful and institutionally embedded practice that simultaneously cultivates students' critical thinking skills and internalizes values of religious moderation (*wasathiyah*). Analyzed through the lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the findings reveal that knowledge in this forum is not transmitted didactically but constructed collaboratively — through structured dialogue, peer interaction, and the mediating role of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*). The three-stage process of preparation, implementation, and evaluation creates a learning environment in which students engage with both canonical scholarship and contemporary socio-religious issues, enabling them to connect normative religious principles with real-life contexts. This process cultivates higher-order thinking skills — including argumentation, evaluation, and reflective reasoning — while fostering an intellectually grounded and contextually sensitive engagement with Islamic tradition.

A central finding of this study is the role of *Bahtsul Masā'il* as a vehicle for internalizing religious moderation, particularly through its cultivation of *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), openness to diverse scholarly opinions, and respect for interpretive difference across legal schools. By exposing students to multiple *madhhab* perspectives without privileging any single viewpoint, the forum cultivates an inclusive, non-dogmatic orientation aligned with the principle of *rahmatan lil-'ālamīn*. The scaffolding provided by *musyrif*, the integration of digital resources such as Maktabah Syamilah, and students' participation in external discussion forums further amplify these outcomes. These elements collectively reflect the Zone of Proximal Development in practice, bridging the gap between students' current capacities and their potential for more sophisticated religious reasoning under guided conditions. Nevertheless, the study also identifies meaningful challenges that temper the full realization of *Bahtsul Masā'il*'s pedagogical potential. Uneven student preparedness — manifesting as cognitive stagnation under counter-argumentation — and the limited integration of *'ilm al-mantiq* (logic) into applied discussion settings represent persistent structural gaps. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of *Bahtsul Masā'il* depends not only on the quality of the forum itself, but on the coherence of the broader curriculum in which it is embedded. It is therefore recommended that *pesantren* strengthen preparatory training, systematically bridge instruction in logic with applied reasoning, and invest in ongoing mentor development. Taken together, the findings affirm that *Bahtsul Masā'il*, when supported by intentional institutional scaffolding, holds significant promise as an adaptive and tradition-rooted model for cultivating critically minded, moderate, and socially engaged Muslim scholars.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT 4.0 to enhance the clarity, readability, and overall quality of the language. This tool was not employed in the collection, processing, or analysis of the research data. Following the use of this tool, the authors carefully reviewed and revised the content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this study as necessary and accept full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final publication.

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