



Sufism and Islamic Moderation in the Digital Era: The Relevance of KH. Said Aqil Siroj's Thought in Sustainable Character Education

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Abstract

KH. Said Aqil Siroj's thought on Sufism as the foundation of moderate Islam offers a substantive contribution to strengthening sustainable Islamic character education in the digital era. This study explores KH. Said Aqil Siroj's conceptualization of Sufism-based moderation, the role of Sufism in cultivating inclusive and tolerant attitudes, and the impact of his thought on multicultural society. The research employs a descriptive approach through qualitative analysis using the library research method. The data analysis techniques include data reading, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings of this study show that: 1) KH. Said Aqil Siroj emphasizes tolerance, *ukhuwah imaniyyah* (spiritual brotherhood), and interfaith solidarity. His perspective highlights social harmony, respect for differences, and the nurturing of unity in diversity to create a peaceful Indonesia. 2) KH. Said Aqil Siroj underscores the importance of Sufism in teaching tolerance, interreligious dialogue, and moral development. His teachings help Muslims confront radicalism and foster an inclusive society. 3) KH. Said Aqil Siroj's thought on Sufism promotes harmony and influences government and educational policies that support tolerance and pluralism. So that Sufism can become an impactful educational paradigm that integrates spiritual, social, and sustainable values. This study contributes a novel perspective by positioning Sufism as a model of sustainability-oriented character education in the digital era, bridging Islamic moderation discourse with global discussions on digital ethics, religious pluralism, and character formation in technologically mediated societies.

Keywords:

Sufism-Based Character Education; Digital Ethics; Islamic Humanism

A. INTRODUCTION

The study of moderate Islam continues to gain importance amid the challenges of multicultural coexistence, identity tensions, and the digital disruption of values. KH. Said Aqil Siroj provides an example of Islamic moderation that originates from Sufi teachings and focuses on spirituality, morals, and the peaceful coexistence of society (Khairullah, 2024). His perspective positions Sufism not merely as personal piety, but as a transformative framework capable of countering radicalism, strengthening interreligious relations, and guiding character education in the digital era (Siroj, 2006). The relevance of this discourse becomes increasingly urgent, as Indonesian society seeks frameworks that integrate spiritual depth, cultural rootedness, and national commitment in promoting peaceful coexistence (Siroj, 2014).

This not only establishes the novelty of the study, which combines a Sufi-based perspective with the discourse of sustainable character education, but it also requires looking at the concept or framework of religious moderation as presented by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia for better understanding of the discussion in this research. These indicators

are used to decide whether a certain religious perspective, attitude, or behavior can be regarded as a moderate one, or whether it is extreme. The indicators of religious moderation employed in this study cover four aspects, including: (1) national commitment, (2) tolerance, (3) anti-violence, and (4) accommodation of local culture. These four indicators work as tools for measuring the level of religious moderation practiced by the people of Indonesia, hence providing the possibility of the right steps to be taken for the strengthening of moderate religious attitudes (Saifuddin, 2019).

Several previous studies are relevant to the topic of this research. *First*, a survey by Hasan Baharun and Farah Nuril Badriyah discusses Said Aqil Siroj's thoughts on multicultural education framed within the concept of Islam Nusantara (Baharun & Badriyah, 2020). *Second*, a study by Budi Harianto and Nurul Syalafiyah explores Said Aqil Siroj's views on *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) as constructed by Nahdlatul Ulama (Harianto & Syalafiyah, 2019). *Third*, research by Eko Nani Fitriono et al. examines philosophical Sufism and its contribution to Islamic thought from Said Aqil Siroj's perspective (Fitriono et al., 2023). *Fourth*, a study by Lufaefi investigates the reactualization of Wali Songo's teachings echoed by Said Aqil Siroj through a persuasive approach (Lufaefi, 2018). *Fifth*, research by Salam N focuses on Said Aqil Siroj's thoughts on Sufism that give rise to a moderate understanding of Islam (Salam, 2020). *Sixth*, a study by Munawwir and Sri Mulyati discusses Said Aqil Siroj's ideas concerning the concept of humanism (Munawwir & Mulyati, 2021). *Seventh*, research by Budi Harianto explores Said Aqil Siroj's views on the theological relations within Aswaja (Budi Harianto, 2019). *Lastly*, a study by Rustam Ibrahim and Moh. Ashif Fuadi examines Said Aqil Siroj's statements regarding online jihad from the perspective of pesantren education (Ibrahim & Fuadi, 2021).

Previous studies have analyzed several aspects of KH: Said Aqil Siroj's thought, such as multicultural education, Islamic humanism, Aswaja theology, and philosophical Sufism. Yet these studies have not clearly explained how Sufism functions as the foundational framework for Islamic moderation and how it contributes to sustainable character education in the digital era. Furthermore, existing studies tend to dwell upon thematic expositions of Said Aqil's ideas without theoretically explaining their relevance for contemporary multicultural society and religious moderation indicators as set forth by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This gap underlines the need for a study that systematically connects Said Aqil's Sufi framework to the practical challenges of moderation, inclusivity, and character formation in the digital era.

This study explores KH. Said Aqil Siroj's conceptual exposition of Sufism as the foundation of moderate Islam and its implications for multicultural society and sustainable character education. Accordingly, this research is conducted with a view to answer the following questions: 1) How does KH. Said Aqil Siroj conceptualize Sufism as the basis of Islamic moderation? 2) What roles do Sufi values play in shaping inclusive, tolerant, and harmonious social relations? 3) How does Said Aqil's Sufi-based moderation contribute toward sustainable character education in the digital era?

Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse on Islamic moderation by clarifying the Sufi-based conceptual foundation proposed by KH. Said Aqil Siroj, and it also offers a new perspective connecting Sufism, indicators of moderation, and sustainable education. These results can serve as references for policymakers, educators, and interfaith facilitators in designing programs that promote tolerance, pluralism, and national cohesion through spiritual-ethical ways.

B. METHODS

In conducting this research, the researcher focuses on moderate Islam grounded in Sufism as a means of building a multicultural society, viewed through the perspective of KH. Said Aqil Siroj. The approach employed is descriptive, using a qualitative analysis method within the type of library research. The library research is operationalized through a structured document analysis procedure. Texts were selected based on three criteria: (1) relevance to Sufism, religious moderation, and KH. Said Aqil Siroj's thought; (2) publication authority, prioritizing peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and published works by KH. Said Aqil Siroj; and (3) publication year, limited to 2000–2024 to ensure

conceptual relevance in the contemporary discourse. This research is limited to the descriptive level, presenting data systematically and in a manner that is easy to understand. In this study, the researcher adopts Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics as the interpretive framework to examine KH. Said Aqil Siroj's texts. This framework emphasizes the fusion of horizons (Horizontverschmelzung), allowing the researcher to interpret Sufi concepts within their historical, linguistic, and sociocultural contexts (Gadamer, 2013). Hermeneutics is used to understand the meaning, intention, and socio-theological implications of Sufism and moderation embedded in the primary texts.

The primary data source in this study is the book on Sufism and Moderate Islam by KH. Said Aqil Siroj, titled "*Tasawuf Sebagai Kritik Sosial: Mengedepankan Islam Sebagai Inspirasi Bukan Aspirasi*" written by Prof. Dr. KH. Said Aqil Siroj, M.A (Siroj, 2006). The secondary data sources consist of previous research findings, journals, articles, and several relevant books. The data collection technique used in this study involves gathering, evaluating, and synthesizing literature with similar themes to strongly support the research. The data analysis follows the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana qualitative analysis framework, consisting of: (1) data condensation, where key concepts related to Sufism and moderation were identified and coded; (2) data display, where themes were organized into conceptual matrices; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, where emerging patterns were interpreted using hermeneutic reflection (Miles et al., 2014). Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, comparing KH. Said Aqil Siroj's primary texts with scholarly interpretations from peer-reviewed journals and academic commentaries. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted by discussing emerging interpretations with Islamic studies experts, such as supervisors, to minimize subjective bias.

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

The Concept of Sufism as the Foundation of Moderate Islam

Sufism plays an important role in shaping an understanding of moderate Islam, particularly in the context of tolerance and appreciation of diversity. KH. Said Aqil Siroj emphasizes that Sufism teaches profound spiritual values that can help Muslims understand the essence of religious teachings more holistically. In his view, Sufism is not only focused on ritual aspects but also on the purification of the heart and the development of good character. Thus, Sufism becomes a means to internalize the values of moderation necessary to face the current challenges of radicalization and extremism (Widiya et al., 2023). Through this approach, Muslims are expected to lead a balanced and harmonious life within a pluralistic society.

In the context of internalizing the values of moderation, KH. Said Aqil Siroj emphasizes that the teachings of Sufism must be applied in daily life. Sufism teaches Muslims to practice tawasuth (moderation), tawazun (balance), and tasamuh (tolerance). KH. Said believes that by applying these principles, Muslims can avoid extreme and radical attitudes that harm themselves or others. He advocates for integrating Sufi education into the religious education curriculum so that young generations can grow with a correct understanding of moderation in Islam (Widiya et al., 2023). In this way, Sufism becomes not only a personal spiritual practice but also a tangible contribution to a more peaceful and tolerant society.

According to KH. Said Aqil Siroj, Sufism plays an important role in instilling social piety that aligns with the principles of moderate Islam. Sufism is not merely an individual spiritual practice but also teaches believers to live a life that benefits the wider community. KH. Said Aqil Siroj emphasizes that the teachings of Sufism encourage people to avoid selfishness and arrogance, replacing them with qualities such as simplicity, empathy, and wisdom in interacting with others. By strengthening the social dimension of Sufism, Muslims not only improve their personal character but also contribute to social welfare through inclusive and compassionate attitudes. According to Said, through this approach, Sufism can guide Muslims toward behavior that supports peace and openness, thereby creating a moderate and harmonious social order (Siroj, 2006).

As an example of the implementation of Sufism in moderation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) follows the Abu Hasan Al-Asy'ari school of thought, which integrates the Qur'an, Hadith, and reason. This

approach enables Muslims to avoid rigidity if they study only the Qur'an and Hadith, and to avoid liberalism if they rely solely on reason. For instance, in Tafsir Al-Manar, Rashid Rida explains that the word "wasathan" means just and balanced, referring to the avoidance of ifrath (arrogance) and tafrith (weakness) (Fattah, 2020). If compared to progressive Muslim thinkers like Nurcholish Madjid, who emphasize rationality and social reform, Siroj's approach places more emphasis on spirituality as a driving force for moderation (Hamidah, 2011). Tariq Ramadan even criticized the moderation model, which focuses solely on morality without structural change. This distinction emphasizes that Siroj's model still requires a more comprehensive public policy framework and socio-political approach.

Understanding Moderate Islam and the Principle of Inclusivity

From the very beginning of their existence on this earth, humans have been bestowed with honor by God compared to other creatures, as stated in His verse in Q.S. Al-Isra:70:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بْنَيْ آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيَّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِنْ حَلْقَنَا تَفْضِيلًا.

Siroj argues that the weakening of spiritual consciousness contributes to the rise of identity-based conflicts; however, this claim requires further scrutiny. Contemporary scholars highlight that social fragmentation in Indonesia is also driven by economic inequality and digital echo chambers (Lim, 2017), suggesting that spiritual decline is not the sole contributing factor. Therefore, Siroj's perspective is valuable but must be situated within broader socio-political drivers. While Siroj emphasizes universal faith across religions, critics note that such universalism may overlook power asymmetries and the socio-political realities of interreligious relations (Hefner, 2011). Thus, inclusivity must be paired with structural justice to become truly transformative.

Tolerance in moderate Islam is not merely about acknowledging diversity but also involves active efforts to respect the beliefs of others. Inclusive education is key to instilling the values of tolerance from an early age. Young generations need to be taught to appreciate different religious celebrations and participate in interfaith activities (Nurliah & Supriyanto, 2024). For example, during Eid al-Fitr, Christians and Hindus often join in the celebrations by visiting their Muslim neighbors. This mutual respect demonstrates that diversity is not an obstacle but a strength that enriches communal life (NU Online, 2023). In his lectures, KH. Said Aqil Siroj often cites Qur'anic verses emphasizing the importance of a moderate and non-extremist approach to religion, such as in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, which states that Muslims are a moderate community (Khairullah, 2024).

وَكَذِيلَكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا .. الْآيَة

Moderate Islam prioritizes tolerance as a fundamental value that applies not only among Muslims but also in relations with other religious groups. This tolerance is rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an, such as in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 256, which states, "There is no compulsion in religion." This verse often serves as the basis for the moderate Islamic view that religion should not be used to impose one's beliefs or practices on others, but rather as a means to understand and respect different faiths. According to The Study Qur'an by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, this verse indicates that Islam allows broad religious freedom, in line with the spirit of moderation and tolerance (Nasr, 2015). Abu Al-Mughits Husain Al-Hallaj, a prominent mystic, also expressed his views on religious moderation. For example, he willingly accepted the death penalty to defend his famous concept of hulul. According to Al-Hallaj, the essence of all religions is fundamentally the same: the recognition, worship, and devotion to God, the Creator of the universe, the God of all faiths. Although His names, attributes, and symbols may differ, in essence, there is no real difference among them (Siroj, 2006).

In surah Al-Hujurat verse 13, Allah says:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شَعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَاوَنُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْفَاقُكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَيْهِ حِسْبٌ.

Human beings were created as nations and tribes so that they may know one another. Respect for diversity is not only upheld within a moderate Islamic society but is also regarded as a means to broaden perspectives, foster empathy, and cultivate social cooperation. The essence of this divine message applies to all religions, particularly monotheistic faiths such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. So, how can these values of faith be transformed into a true force for universal brotherhood? The answer is found in Qur'an, Surah Al-Maidah, verse 69:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِئُونَ وَالنَّصَارَىٰ مِنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُنْ يَخْرُجُونَ.

The verse illustrates the strong bonds of partnership and collaboration among the faithful, including Jews, Christians, Muslims, and followers of other religions and beliefs. The term “the faithful” provides a clear distinction from “people of religion.” This is because the faithful encompass interfaith communities that share a synergistic foundation, whereas people of religion do not necessarily possess the same level of true faith. In some cases, religion can even be misused for personal or group interests (Siroj, 2006).

Furthermore, the principle of inclusivity in KH. Said Aqil Siroj’s perspective emphasizes acceptance and appreciation of diversity as the essence of a peaceful and compassionate Islam. According to Said, inclusivity is not only about respecting differences in religion and culture but also about fostering openness toward different perspectives and practices within a multicultural society. He asserts that through the teachings of Sufism, Muslims can develop empathy and compassion that transcend religious boundaries. This inclusivity, he explains, can serve as a foundation for building harmonious relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as reducing the potential for interreligious conflict. He emphasizes that inclusivity is a path to achieving social peace, where Islam becomes a universal inspiration that is not exclusive to any single group. Through inclusivity, Islam can emerge as a religion that unites and supports human harmony (Siroj, 2006).

The Impact of Sufism in Multicultural Society

KH. Said Aqil Siroj’s thought has a significant impact on building an inclusive society, particularly through the application of Sufism as a profound spiritual approach relevant to social life. Said views Sufism as a means to shape individuals with gentle, empathetic, and open-minded character (Siroj, 2006, pp. 279–281). In his perspective, Sufism is not only a spiritual practice but also a tool for creating a better social order. This aligns with the teachings of the Qur'an, which emphasize the importance of good relationships among humans, as stated in Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13, that Allah created humans from various tribes and nations to know one another. Thus, Sufism becomes a bridge to strengthen interfaith harmony and broaden understanding of diversity within society (Siradj, 2011).

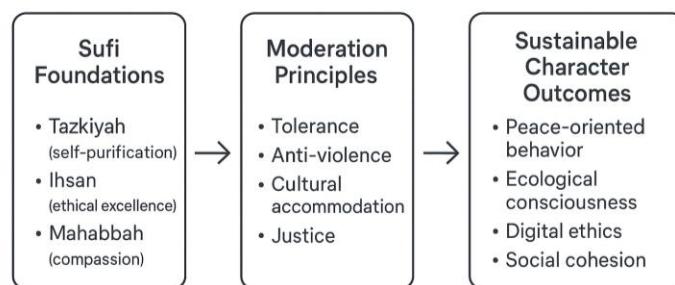
KH. Said Aqil Siroj’s thoughts on Sufism and inclusivity have also influenced the government’s approach in designing policies that promote interreligious harmony. He often emphasized that the government has a strategic role in facilitating interfaith dialogue and creating platforms that support cross-belief interactions. He proposed that the peaceful and tolerant values of Sufism be used as a foundation for policies in addressing social conflicts and strengthening national harmony (Fitriono et al., 2023). This perspective has inspired several government programs aimed at reducing the potential for religious conflict and promoting the spirit of inclusivity across various regions. Through this inclusive Sufi approach, the government can foster a more harmonious environment, where every community feels recognized and respected without discrimination (Siroj, 2006). However, Sufism faces serious challenges in a digital culture characterized by speed, superficiality, and algorithms that reinforce polarization. The contemplative principles of tazkiyah and tadabbur are often incompatible with the hyper-reactive culture of social media. Recent research shows that algorithms tend to amplify extreme content over moderate content (Lim, 2017). This indicates the need for integration of Sufi values with digital literacy.

KH. Said Aqil Siroj developed the concept of Islamic intellectualism grounded in religious humanism and moderation, emphasizing that intellectualism encompasses not only cognitive aspects but also the integration of moral values into daily life (Siroj, 2006). According to him, Islam provides clear guidance for building collective peace and encourages social responsibility that goes beyond individual interests. Thus, Islamic intellectualism serves as a means to cultivate an inclusive and harmonious society, where every individual respects and understands differences (Munawwir & Mulyati, 2021). This thought also impacts education and social policy in Indonesia; Said advocates for the integration of moderation and inclusivity values into curricula to equip young generations with tolerant and open-minded attitudes. The Sufism-based education he proposes can develop individuals who are academically intelligent while also

socially empathetic. His ideas further influence government approaches in formulating policies that support pluralism and interfaith harmony (Fathurohman, 2018).

The relationship between Sufism, moderation, and sustainable education can be understood as a value chain: spiritual purification through Sufism produces self-restraint and empathy, which then shape moderate behavior (tawazun, tasamuh, tawasuth). This moderate behavior supports the vision of sustainable education through the formation of peaceful character, ecological responsibility, digital ethics, and a sense of community. To clarify the relationship between conceptual variables, this study presents a model that describes how Sufi values become the foundation of moderation and ultimately shape sustainable character as follows:

Conceptual Model: Linking Sufism, Moderation and Sustainable Character Education



A clearer theoretical connection between Sufism, Islamic moderation, and sustainable character education can be mapped through a three-stage model: (1) Sufi Values (*tazkiyah*, compassion, humility) nurture inner ethical awareness; (2) Moderation Practices (tolerance, anti-violence, cultural accommodation) translate inner awareness into social behavior; and (3) Sustainable Education Outcomes emerge when these moderated behaviors support long-term peacebuilding, ecological awareness, and responsible digital citizenship. This framework aligns with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) principles, which emphasize spirituality, ethics, and social responsibility as core to sustainability (Rieckmann, 2022). Thus, Sufism becomes not only a spiritual discipline but a driver of sustainable character formation relevant to modern educational ecosystems.

D. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that KH. Said Aqil Siroj develops a Sufi-based model of Islamic moderation that integrates spiritual purification, social ethics, and interfaith solidarity into a unified framework of character formation. Therefore, the findings suggest that Sufism, as conceptualized by KH. Said Aqil Siroj, functions not merely as spiritual practice but as a normative paradigm for cultivating moral resilience, social harmony, and inclusive citizenship in multicultural contexts. *First*, the study shows that KH. Said Aqil Siroj emphasizes the centrality of tolerance, ukhuwah imaniyyah, and interfaith cooperation as pillars of national harmony. *Second*, his Sufi epistemology underscores the importance of compassion, balance, and moral awareness as tools for confronting radicalism and restoring social cohesion. *Third*, his ideas contribute to the formulation of educational and governmental initiatives that support pluralism, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable character development.

This study contributes theoretically by expanding the framework of Islamic moderation through the integration of Sufi epistemology into character education theory. It proposes a conceptual model in which spiritual refinement (*tazkiyatun nafs*), social ethics, and inclusive dialogue become the three interrelated components that sustain a moderate Islamic identity in the digital era. This model aligns with existing scholarship on Sufism as a transformative ethical system (Nasr, 2015), and strengthens contemporary discussions of religion-based moral pedagogy. Beyond Indonesia, the model proposed in this study holds relevance for plural societies

worldwide. The Sufi-based approach to moderation may inform global debates on peacebuilding, interfaith collaboration, and moral education especially in nations grappling with polarization, identity politics, and digital-era extremism. The findings suggest that integrating Sufi-inspired values into educational policy and civic culture can enhance intercultural empathy and strengthen social cohesion in diverse global contexts. This study focuses exclusively on the thought of KH. Said Aqil Siroj and relies primarily on textual analysis; therefore, it does not capture empirical manifestations of his ideas in educational practice or community settings. Future research should examine comparative models of Sufi-based moderation across countries, employ fieldwork to observe the implementation of Sufi-inspired character education, and analyze its impact on learners and communities.

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