

The Role of Big Five Personality Traits on Religious Moderation Mediated by Moral Intelligence in Islamic Higher Education

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Abstract

While State Islamic Universities (PTKIN) are central to promoting religious moderation, occasional instances of student intolerance remain a challenge. Recent literature indicates that this vulnerability stems primarily from psychological rather than ideological factors, identifying personality traits and moral intelligence as significant factors associated with moderate attitudes. This study aims to determine the role of moral intelligence as a mediator variable in the influence of the Big Five personality traits on religious moderation in PTKIN students. This quantitative, cross-sectional study involved 424 students (302 females, 122 males; aged 17–30) from various Islamic universities in Indonesia, recruited via convenience sampling. Personality, religious moderation, and moral intelligence were assessed using the Big Five Personality Scale, the Religious Moderation Scale (MBS), and the Moral Intelligence Scale (MIS), respectively. Data analysis was conducted using a simple mediation model. Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness positively influenced moral intelligence, which directly enhanced religious moderation. Furthermore, moral intelligence significantly mediated the relationship between these five traits and moderation ($R^2 = .430$). Neuroticism showed no significant direct or indirect effects. This study addresses a critical gap in the literature, specifically by examining moral intelligence as a mediating mechanism that bridges personality factors and religious tolerance. Consequently, these findings provide a valuable framework for understanding how religious tolerance emerges within individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation is defined as maintaining balance, directness, firmness, and egalitarianism in religious practice. It encompasses a commitment to nationalism, tolerance, the accommodation of local cultures, and the avoidance of religious extremism (Derung et al., 2023; Fahri & Zainuri, 2019; Nurdin, 2021; Saifuddin, 2019; Zahdi, 2021). The ideal manifestation of high religious moderation is primarily evident in an individual's everyday behavior, particularly in their respect for others. Fostering religious tolerance serves as a primary key to religious moderation, especially in multicultural settings (Widhiyana, 2022). To sustain coexistence in such a diverse society, attitudes of tolerance, fairness (non-discrimination), mutual respect, and mutual appreciation are essential (Chudzaifah et al., 2024).

However, as a religiously diverse nation, Indonesia faces unique challenges in continuously fostering this moderation among its citizens. These challenges are reflected in disrespectful actions, such as hate speech directed at followers of different faiths (Akbar, 2024),

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as well as a substantial number of intolerant incidents recorded between 2017 and 2022 (Setara Institute, 2022). Beyond individual behavior, challenges also persist at the policy level regarding religious freedom, such as the government's failure to officially recognize indigenous local beliefs (Azhari, 2014). Furthermore, within the context of higher education, specifically at State Islamic Universities (PTKIN), there are ongoing challenges in practicing the religious tolerance necessary to achieve true religious moderation (Nisar et al., 2022; Saifuddin, 2019; Selvia et al., 2022).

Current literature suggests that tolerance is deeply rooted in personality (Ahmed, 2021). Specifically, empirical evidence links personality types to religious tolerance (Meiza, 2018) and shows that personality significantly and positively impacts moderate attitudes (Alawiyah et al., 2023). Specific personality traits, particularly openness, significantly influence balanced and moderate attitudes toward religion (Hassan et al., 2020; Saroglou, 2002). This aligns with findings that personality development—including the fostering of a multicultural personality—is highly effective in cultivating religious tolerance and moderation (Al Fariz & Saloom, 2021; Huda et al., 2020). The existing literature indicates that personality is a significant factor associated with tolerance, which ultimately fosters religious moderation within the context of religious behavior. Consequently, this study employs personality variables to predict religious moderation. Specifically, we utilize the Big Five personality traits (Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism), as this framework represents the most prominent and widely accepted model in modern psychology.

Beyond personality traits, moral variables also significantly explain tolerance toward diversity, which subsequently leads to religious moderation in Indonesia. For instance, students' morality is positively associated with moderate attitudes (Vashti & Dachlan, 2023). Similarly, other studies identify moral education as a critical predictor of religious moderation within the student context (Susilawati et al., 2020). Furthermore, broader research highlights the role of morality—particularly moral evaluation—as a catalyst for intergroup tolerance, dictating whether individuals exhibit behaviors of acceptance or rejection (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2026). Collectively, this demonstrates that a solid moral foundation is a crucial factor for cultivating religious moderation (Isti'anah et al., 2024) and for maintaining respect for religious differences (Klimczuk, 2017; Saumantri & Bisri, 2023).

The mechanism by which morality acts as a mediator or catalyst can be understood through an individual's cognitive and emotional processes. In psychology, Kohlberg's (1969) prominent theory posits that moral reasoning occurs within human cognition, serving as a catalyst that directs subsequent behavior. Alternatively, the social intuitionist model suggests that moral judgments are primarily driven by rapid, emotionally charged intuitive responses, with logical reasoning occurring post hoc to justify the behavior (Haidt, 2013). Furthermore, Bandura's (2012) social cognitive theory of moral agency identifies four loci through which morality influences behavior—the behavior locus, agency locus, outcomes locus, and victim locus—operating at both the individual and social system levels. For instance, individuals who engage in harmful actions, such as intolerance, often engage in moral disengagement to alleviate their guilt; they justify their misdeeds through manipulative language, displace responsibility, minimize the resulting harm, or blame the victims. Consequently, moral constructs are conceptually ideal as mediating variables.

Existing literature extensively documents how an individual's morality is influenced by their personality traits. For instance, Alsmeeen (2024) demonstrated that various personality dimensions—including neuroticism, conscientiousness, kindness, and openness to experience—collectively play a significant role in explaining variations in moral intelligence levels. Furthermore, other researchers have indicated that specific personality traits (such as conscientiousness, extraversion, convergence, neuroticism, and internal locus of control) share a positive and significant relationship with ethical components, including morality (Yablovi et

al., 2016). Consistent with these findings, Hossein et al. (2021) identified personality as a strong predictor of moral behavior, highlighting moral intelligence as a crucial mediator in this relationship. In conclusion, personality is intricately linked to moral intelligence across various levels, and this moral intelligence ultimately serves as a catalyst for an individual's moral behavior in this case how to foster religious moderation.

In this study, personality is conceptualized based on the Big Five personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Moral intelligence is defined as an individual's capacity to control and apply fundamental moral values, allowing them to evaluate and analyze situations to shape their subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Saleh, 2018). Furthermore, religious moderation is understood as behavior grounded in balanced attitudes, straight and firm positions, tolerance, egalitarianism, deliberation, reform, prioritizing what is essential, dynamism, and innovation (Afrizal & Muklis, 2015). The selection of this specific model addresses a gap in the existing literature, which has largely overlooked moral action as a primary focus when operationalizing intergroup relations—specifically religious moderation—particularly within the context of State Islamic University (PTKIN) students. Therefore, this study aims to elucidate the underlying factors influencing religious moderation among these students. Building on these theoretical frameworks, we hypothesize that personality traits predict religious moderation, with moral intelligence serving as a crucial mediator.

METHODS

Design

This research aims to measure the extent to which the five personality types (Big Five Personality) and moral intelligence influence the level of religious moderation among PTKIN students in Indonesia. This study employs a non-experimental quantitative approach using a survey method that emphasizes quantitative data in the form of numbers obtained through measurements and processed using statistical analysis (Azwar, 2017).

Participants

The participants in this study comprised 424 students from 12 State Islamic Religious Universities in Indonesia, selected via non-probability convenience sampling using online questionnaire. This sample size is statistically sufficient based on the rule of thumb for regression and mediation analyses, which recommends an upper median sample size of 352 (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007; Sim et al., 2022). Furthermore, a sample exceeding 315 participants is considered highly adequate for multivariate regression analysis (Muthén & Muthén, 2002). Additionally, a statistical power analysis was conducted following the approach by Schoemann et al. (2017). Utilizing a Monte Carlo simulation with 1,000 replications for the indirect effect of each predictor on the outcome via the mediator, the analysis yielded a statistical power exceeding .80. Demographically, the respondents had an average age of 20 years (range: 17–30). The majority were 20 years old (29%), while the smallest age group was 17-year-olds (0.24%). Regarding gender, 70.99% of the participants were female and 29.01% were male.

Instruments

Big Five Personality Scale (BFPS)

Personality traits were assessed using the 25-item Big Five Personality Scale (BFPS), based on the Five-Factor Model of personality proposed by McCrae and Costa (1997). The scale assesses five broad personality domains, with five items representing each domain: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Extraversion reflects sociability, activity, and interpersonal engagement; agreeableness reflects cooperativeness, empathy, and concern for others; conscientiousness captures organization, responsibility, and goal-directed behavior; neuroticism reflects susceptibility to negative

emotions and emotional instability; and openness reflects curiosity, imagination, and receptiveness to new ideas and experiences. Higher subscale scores indicate a stronger expression of the corresponding personality trait. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .792 for extraversion, .799 for agreeableness, .805 for conscientiousness, .742 for neuroticism, and .806 for openness, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency across the five domains.

Moral Intelligence Scale (MIS)

Moral intelligence was assessed using the 20-item Moral Intelligence Scale developed by Yakut and Yakut (2021). The instrument comprises four dimensions: empathy, conscience, self-control, and kindness/courtesy. Empathy reflects sensitivity to and understanding of other people's emotions; conscience concerns awareness of and adherence to moral principles; self-control reflects the capacity to regulate emotions and behavior; and kindness/courtesy captures respectful and considerate behavior towards others. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), producing a possible total score of 20–100, with higher scores indicating greater moral intelligence. The original scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .845$). In the present study, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .791, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Religious Moderation Scale (MBS)

Religious moderation was assessed using a 16-item instrument developed with reference to the characteristics of wasathiyah described by Afrizal and Mukhlis (2015). Their conceptual framework describes religious moderation in terms of attitudes and practices such as taking a middle position (*tawassuth*), balance (*tawazun*), proportionality or fairness (*i'tidal*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), egalitarianism (*musawah*), deliberation (*syura*), reform or constructive improvement (*ishlah*), prioritisation (*aulawiyah*), openness to development and innovation (*tathawwur wa ibtikar*), and civility (*tahadhdhur*). The instrument is intended to capture the extent to which respondents endorse balanced, tolerant, non-discriminatory, deliberative, and adaptive approaches to religious life. Higher scores indicate a stronger orientation towards religious moderation. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the present study was .65, indicating modest internal consistency.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, this study sought and obtained ethical clearance from the Research and Community Service Institute at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. Following this approval, data were collected from 12 state universities operating under the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. Acknowledging practical constraints and given that the findings are not intended for broad population generalization (Morling, 2018), a non-probability convenience sampling method was employed. Participants were recruited via online invitations distributed across social media platforms. Before participating, all individuals were provided with an informed consent form detailing the research procedures and explicitly guaranteeing the confidentiality of their data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inferential statistics to test the research hypotheses (Creswell, 2018). Prior to hypothesis testing, classical assumptions were evaluated, requiring the data to be normally distributed ($p > .05$), linear ($p < .05$), free from multicollinearity (tolerance $> .10$, VIF < 10), and homoscedastic ($p > .05$). Multiple regression analysis was then conducted, utilizing an F-test to assess the simultaneous effect of the five personality traits on religious moderation, and a t-test for their individual partial effects (significance threshold at $p < .05$).

Mediation analysis with multiple independent variables was executed using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro (Model 4). To estimate the unique contribution of each Big Five personality trait, five separate mediation models were evaluated. For each model, one trait served as the primary predictor (X), while the other four traits were controlled as covariates. This approach allowed for the simultaneous control of overlapping variance among the personality traits when predicting moral intelligence (M) and religious moderation (Y). Confidence intervals (95% CI) for the indirect effects were generated using 5,000 bootstrap replications.

RESULTS

The initial phase of the data analysis involved computing descriptive statistics for all variables. Table 1 presents these descriptive statistics, including the mean scores, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the study variables. The correlation results indicate that all variables are significantly correlated with one another, with the exception of Neuroticism, which showed no significant correlation with Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Moral Intelligence, and Religious Moderation.

Table 1. Descriptives statistics of data

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. BFP	77.78	8.19	1						
2. EX	14.28	2.89	.722**	1					
3. AG	15.93	2.25	.711**	.520**	1				
4. CS	16.17	2.27	.733**	.460**	.566**	1			
5. NE	15.36	3.07	.399**	-.055	-.027	.050	1		
6. OP	16.04	2.30	.700**	.423**	.376**	.423**	.132**	1	
7. MI	85.12	9.08	.234**	.203**	.253**	.282**	-.038	.102*	1
8. RM	62.26	5.88	.602**	.485**	.519**	.550**	.037	.432**	.282**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$; BFP=Big five personality; EX=Extraversion; AG=Agreeableness; CS=Conscientiousness; NE=Neuroticism; OP=Openness to experience; MI=Moral intelligence; RM=Religious moderation; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

Prior to conducting the linear regression and mediation analyses, the dataset was subjected to rigorous diagnostic testing to ensure compliance with classical statistical assumptions. The data demonstrated a normal distribution ($p = .384$) and satisfied the assumption of linearity ($p = .500$). Multicollinearity diagnostics revealed no problematic redundancies among the predictors; tolerance values were well above the 0.10 threshold, ranging from .582 (agreeableness) to .962 (neuroticism), while the Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) remained safely below the 10.0 cutoff, ranging from 1.039 to 1.719. Furthermore, homoscedasticity was confirmed across all variables, as non-significant values from the heteroscedasticity evaluations spanned from .110 to .897 ($p > .05$). Collectively, these robust psychometric diagnostics confirm that the statistical properties of the Big Five traits, moral intelligence, and religious moderation fully satisfy the prerequisites for stable linear modeling.

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well the Big Five personality traits and moral intelligence predict religious moderation. The omnibus model was statistically highly significant, $F = 52.356$, $p < .001$, explaining 43.0% of the variance ($R^2 = .430$, Adjusted $R^2 = .421$) with a substantial collective correlation coefficient ($R = .655$). An examination of individual predictors indicated that moral intelligence served as the most potent driver of moderate attitudes ($\beta = .282$, $t = 6.301$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, four personality traits manifested significant positive associations with the outcome variable: conscientiousness ($\beta = .261$, $t = 5.416$, $p < .001$), agreeableness ($\beta = .192$, $t = 3.969$, $p < .001$), extraversion ($\beta = .176$, $t = 3.818$, $p < .001$), and openness to experience ($\beta = .161$, $t = 3.707$, $p < .001$). In contrast,

neuroticism failed to reach statistical significance ($\beta = .022$, $t = .592$, $p = .554$). These findings isolate moral intelligence and specific stable traits as critical internal psychological mechanisms underpinning religious moderation in higher education.

The direct path analysis revealed that specific dimensions of the Big Five personality traits serve as significant precursors to moral intelligence, which subsequently predicts religious moderation. Conscientiousness exhibited the most pronounced direct positive effect on moral intelligence ($b = 1.129$, $t = 6.040$, $p < .001$), followed closely by agreeableness ($b = 1.023$, $t = 5.379$, $p < .001$) and extraversion ($b = .906$, $t = 10.494$, $p < .001$). Openness to experience also demonstrated a significant direct relationship with moral intelligence, albeit with a lower magnitude ($b = .404$, $t = 2.112$, $p < .05$). Crucially, the path from the mediator to the primary outcome was fully supported, as moral intelligence manifested a significant direct positive influence on religious moderation ($b = .124$, $t = 4.494$, $p < .001$). Conversely, neuroticism failed to emerge as a significant predictor of moral intelligence ($b = -.113$, $t = -.782$, $p = .434$), indicating that emotional instability does not directly account for variance in students' moral cognitive capacities within this structural framework.

To evaluate the structural mechanisms underlying these relationships, a mediation analysis was conducted using the regression-based framework outlined by Hayes and Rockwood (2016). The bootstrapping results confirmed that moral intelligence significantly mediates the indirect effects of four personality traits on religious moderation, as demonstrated by the 95% confidence intervals that entirely exclude zero. Specifically, the highest indirect effect was observed within the agreeableness pathway (Indirect Effect = .106, LLCI = .081, ULCI = .239), followed by conscientiousness (Indirect Effect = .100, LLCI = .234, ULCI = .215), extraversion (Indirect Effect = .079, LLCI = .024, ULCI = .159), and openness to experience (Indirect Effect = .063, LLCI = .001, ULCI = .147). These significant indirect pathways establish that moral intelligence functions as a critical psychological catalyst into moderate religious attitudes. In contrast, the indirect effect of neuroticism on religious moderation via moral intelligence was statistically non-significant (Indirect Effect = -.021, LLCI = -.082, ULCI = .029), given that its confidence interval crossed zero.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to examine the mediating role of moral intelligence in the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and religious moderation among students. Overall, the findings reveal that specific personality dimensions play a significant role in explaining variations in religious moderation. Specifically, the inferential analysis demonstrates that extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience are positively and significantly associated with religious moderation. This suggests that students who score higher on these four traits are more likely to exhibit moderate religious attitudes. In contrast, neuroticism did not emerge as a significant predictor. This lack of significance indicates that an individual's level of neuroticism does not reliably relate to their religious moderation, implying that emotional instability is not a determining factor for moderate religious practices in this context.

Individuals with higher extraversion tend to be more sociable and open to diverse viewpoints, which may facilitate a more moderate religious perspective. Extroverts frequently engage in inclusive social and religious activities, potentially reinforcing tolerant values (Gebauer et al., 2016). Thus, this personality trait is associated with supporting an inclusive and tolerant religious environment. Similarly, agreeable individuals generally exhibit higher empathy, cooperativeness, and a preference for social harmony. These characteristics are linked to a greater appreciation for differences, which is essential for religious moderation (McCullough et al., 2019). Consequently, the empathetic nature of agreeable individuals may contribute to cultivating a harmonious and inclusive atmosphere.

Conscientiousness, characterized by responsibility and self-discipline, demonstrated a positive association with religious moderation. Conscientious students may be more inclined to adhere to values and guidelines that promote inclusivity in religious practices (Saroglou, 2013). This internal discipline potentially helps them maintain a balanced and moderate stance. Furthermore, openness to experience is positively related to a moderate religious outlook, as it encourages individuals to explore diverse perspectives and embrace variety. Those scoring high in openness tend to be more flexible and receptive to novel ideas (Silberman, 2021), which is a key component in accepting differences and engaging in constructive dialogue.

Interestingly, neuroticism showed no significant relationship with religious moderation. While previous literature suggests that high neuroticism and emotional instability might hinder the acceptance of differing views (Ludtke et al., 2020), the current findings indicate that, in this specific context, emotional instability does not relate to moderate religious attitudes. This implies that religious moderation among these students may be driven more by cognitive and moral frameworks rather than being dependent on their baseline emotional stability.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed a positive and significant association between moral intelligence and religious moderation. Moral intelligence encompasses the capacity to distinguish right from wrong and adhere to ethical norms (Dacka & Rydz, 2023), as well as the ability to process ethical dilemmas effectively (Bezanjani et al., 2019). It serves as an internal compass, guiding individuals toward virtuous lives and choices that prioritize universal human values over external pressures (Yakut & Yakut, 2021). Yakut and Yakut (2021) identify four main dimensions of moral intelligence: empathy, conscience, self-control, and kindness. Empathy enables individuals to understand others' feelings and perspectives (Zhang & Lu, 2024), fostering an appreciation for diverse beliefs and encouraging constructive dialogue in pluralistic settings. Conscience acts as an inner voice distinguishing right from wrong based on universal ethics like justice and compassion (Basri et al., 2024), functioning as a filter against extreme attitudes. Moreover, self-control allows individuals to regulate their behavior consistently according to societal and moral standards (Zulfah, 2021), while kindness guides them to act wisely in resolving intergroup conflicts.

Crucially, this research demonstrates that moral intelligence significantly mediates the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and religious moderation. This highlights the vital role of moral cognition in fostering moderate religious attitudes. It suggests that while personality traits provide a foundational disposition, cultivating religious moderation cannot rely solely on personality; it requires the active engagement of moral intelligence.

Implications

Practically, the insights gained regarding personality dimensions and moral intelligence may assist Higher Education Institutions in refining Islamic Religious Studies (IR) curricula to be more adaptive. Consequently, this understanding can support learning effectiveness and help foster a moderate and tolerant disposition among students. Furthermore, recognizing specific personality dynamics could potentially serve as an additional resource for identifying students who might be vulnerable to intolerant behaviors and attitudes, thereby informing more supportive interventions. Beyond the academic sphere, these findings offer perspectives that may contribute to broader societal efforts in understanding how important moral intelligence is in promoting religious moderation. By integrating strategies informed by personality profiles, PTKIN has the potential to cultivate a more inclusive and harmonious academic environment.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the present study present opportunities for future research. First, due to practical constraints within the current study's scope, a non-probability sampling technique was employed. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings may be bounded.

Future research is encouraged to utilize probability sampling to ensure greater sample independence and representativeness. Second, the current predictive model predominantly focuses on internal, dispositional traits, which are generally stable over time. To construct a more comprehensive framework, future studies should consider incorporating external situational predictors, such as moral dilemmas or environmental contexts. Methodologically, the present study analyzed variables using composite observed scores. Future investigations would benefit from employing more robust statistical frameworks, such as Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) or network analysis, to accurately capture latent variable relationships. Notwithstanding these limitations, a significant strength of this research lies in its geographically diverse sample drawn from multiple State Islamic Universities across Indonesia, thereby providing a robust foundational bridge for understanding the complex dynamics of religious moderation.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to understand the underlying factors influencing religious moderation among students. Based on the research results, the Big Five personality traits and moral intelligence can simultaneously influence the level of religious moderation among students at PTKIN. Based on partial testing, the personality types of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and moral intelligence have a positive and significant influence on religious moderation attitudes. However, neuroticism does not have a significant effect on religious moderation attitudes. Additionally, the mediation test results indicate that moral intelligence is a positive and significant mediator variable influencing the Big Five personality traits on religious moderation. Nevertheless, in the case of neuroticism, moral intelligence does not serve as a significant mediator variable.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Tah and Sar conceptualized the study and developed the methodology. Sar conducted the investigation and acquired funding, while Tah provided the necessary resources, supervised the research, and handled project administration. TA was responsible for software management, formal analysis, data curation, and visualization. The validation of the findings was a collaborative effort among Tah, Sar, TA, NPL, Mur, DS. Tah wrote the initial draft, which was subsequently reviewed and edited by Sar and TA. Ta and ABALF revised the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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