

Tarekat as Moral Formation: Reframing Religious Moderation through Moral Theology in North Sumatra

Tarekat sebagai Pembentukan Moral: Rekonstruksi Moderasi Beragama melalui Teologi Moral di Sumatera Utara

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Abstract: *This study critically examines the role of Tarekat (Sūfī orders) in fostering religious moderation within the socio-cultural plurality of North Sumatera. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in in-depth interviews, the research explores how spiritual teachings and embodied practices of the Tarekat shape moral dispositions that encourage tolerance, social harmony, and inclusive coexistence. Unlike previous sociological studies on Tarekat that primarily emphasize their social and cultural functions, this article examines Tarekat as a process of moral formation that generates communal virtues supportive of religious moderation. The findings demonstrate that core spiritual principles such as self-purification (tazkiyat al-nafs), disciplined self-control, and sustained attentiveness to God function as ethical resources that mitigate tendencies toward religious extremism among adherents. Beyond individual moral formation, tarekat communities actively engage in interreligious dialogue, mediate religious tensions, and promote inclusive participation in broader social life. From the perspective of moral theology, these practices illustrate how spiritually grounded ethical formation can contribute to the cultivation of communal virtues necessary for pluralistic societies. The study argues that Tarekat not only serve as loci of spiritual devotion but also operate as morally significant agents of religious moderation, offering a constructive model for sustaining social harmony in contexts marked by religious and cultural diversity.*

Keywords: Religious Moderation; Sūfī Orders (Tarekat); Ethical Formation; Communal Virtue; North Sumatera



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Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji secara kritis peran tarekat dalam membangun moderasi beragama di tengah pluralitas sosial dan budaya di Sumatera Utara. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang didasarkan pada wawancara mendalam, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana ajaran spiritual dan praktik-praktik tarekat yang dijalankan secara nyata membentuk disposisi moral yang mendorong toleransi, harmoni sosial, dan koeksistensi yang inklusif. Berbeda dengan penelitian-penelitian sosiologis sebelumnya mengenai tarekat yang lebih menekankan fungsi sosial dan budayanya, artikel ini memandang tarekat sebagai suatu proses pembentukan moral yang menghasilkan kebijakan-kebijakan komunal yang mendukung moderasi beragama. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa prinsip-prinsip spiritual utama seperti penyucian jiwa (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), pengendalian diri yang disiplin, dan kesadaran yang berkesinambungan terhadap kehadiran Tuhan berfungsi sebagai sumber daya etis yang mampu mereduksi kecenderungan ekstremisme keagamaan di kalangan pengikutnya. Selain membentuk moralitas individu, komunitas tarekat juga secara aktif terlibat dalam dialog antarumat beragama, memediasi ketegangan keagamaan, serta mendorong partisipasi inklusif dalam kehidupan sosial yang lebih luas. Dari perspektif teologi moral, praktik-praktik tersebut menunjukkan bahwa pembentukan etika yang berakar pada spiritualitas dapat berkontribusi pada pengembangan kebijakan-kebijakan komunal yang diperlukan dalam masyarakat pluralistik. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa tarekat tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai ruang pengabdian spiritual, tetapi juga sebagai agen moral yang signifikan dalam memperkuat moderasi beragama, serta menawarkan model konstruktif untuk menjaga harmoni sosial dalam konteks masyarakat yang ditandai oleh keberagaman agama dan budaya.

Kata Kunci: Moderasi Beragama; Tarekat; Pembentukan Etis (atau Formasi Etika); Kebijakan Komuna; Sumatera Utara

Introduction

Existing scholarship on Tarekat in Indonesia may be grouped into three major strands. The first examines Tarekat as a historical and socio-cultural phenomenon, focusing on the development of Sufi orders, the transmission of spiritual authority, ritual practices, religious leadership networks, and the adaptation of Tarekat traditions within changing social and political contexts.¹ The second strand discusses the relationship between Tarekat and religious moderation, particularly its role in promoting peaceful coexistence, countering radicalism, strengthening social cohesion, and encouraging tolerant attitudes among Muslim communities.² However, most of these studies remain descriptive and sociological, emphasizing observable social outcomes rather than examining the internal moral processes through which moderation is formed.³ The third strand comes from moral theology and virtue ethics, which argues that ethical life is shaped through moral formation, habituation, discipline, and the cultivation of virtues rather than through abstract norms alone.⁴

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains. Existing studies have largely treated Tarekat either as a historical-cultural institution or as a sociological factor associated with moderation, while moral theology has rarely been applied to empirical cases of Sufi communities. Consequently, little attention has been given to how Tarekat functions as a process of moral formation that cultivates virtues capable of sustaining religious moderation in everyday life. In particular, the formative role of spiritual disciplines such as *tazkiyat al-nafs*, ritual habituation, *dhikr*, *suluk*, and guidance under a *Mursyid* in shaping humility, patience, self-restraint, and openness toward religious difference remains underexplored.

North Sumatera provides a compelling context for addressing this gap. The province is marked by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, alongside a strong presence of Tarekat traditions, especially those associated with the Naqshbandiyah lineage. In this setting, Tarekat communities function not only as centers of spiritual devotion but also as moral institutions that shape social interaction, conflict mediation, and interreligious engagement. Yet their contribution to religious moderation has rarely been examined through the lens of moral theology and virtue formation.

This study therefore investigates how Tarekat communities in North Sumatera cultivate moral dispositions that support religious moderation and social harmony. Drawing on qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews across several Tarekat communities, the research explores how spiritual teachings, ritual practices, and forms of formative authority shape ethical sensibilities related to tolerance, non-violence, and inclusivity. Unlike previous studies that primarily analyze Tarekat as a historical, cultural, or sociological phenomenon, this article advances a moral-theological perspective by conceptualizing Tarekat as a process of moral formation that generates communal virtues supportive of religious moderation.

Within moral theology, religious moderation is best understood not merely as a regulatory or political strategy, but as a question of moral formation. Public discourse often frames moderation as an instrument for managing diversity, preventing conflict, or maintaining stability. While these aims are important, moral theology emphasizes the deeper issue of how persons and communities are formed to live with restraint, responsibility, and respect for the dignity of others. Moderation, in this sense, does not mean ideological neutrality or shallow compromise, but a pattern of moral agency in which religious conviction is practiced without domination, exclusion, or violence. Moral agency emerges within traditions that shape what people love, fear, hope for, and prioritize, while training desires, emotional responses, and moral perception over time.⁵

This formation-oriented account also reframes the problem of extremism. Studies of radicalization often emphasize ideology, networks, and political grievances, but

moral theology adds another layer by asking how failures of moral formation produce extremist dispositions.⁶ Extremism is often marked by rigid certainty, moral absolutism, and the inability to perceive the other as morally significant. Moderation, by contrast, requires virtues that keep judgment open to complexity, restrain the impulse toward retaliation, and preserve commitment to the common good. The language of social friendship and fraternity articulated by Pope Francis offers a helpful moral horizon here: peaceful coexistence requires habits of encounter, patience, solidarity, self-restraint, and recognition of the dignity of others. Religious moderation thus becomes a form of practical wisdom exercised in plural contexts.

A virtue-oriented approach provides a rigorous lens for understanding moderation as a moral reality rather than merely a political posture. Virtues are not isolated personal traits, but stable dispositions cultivated through participation in practices, narratives, and communal forms of guidance.⁷ Virtue formation is inseparable from discipline, understood not as coercion, but as structured guidance that habituates moral attention and refines moral perception.⁸ Recent scholarship in moral formation and religious education shows that ethical consistency is rarely produced by instruction alone; rather, it is cultivated through repeated practices that train attention, regulate emotion, and make moral deliberation less reactive.⁹ In plural settings, this habituation is decisive because moderation becomes possible when moral perception is trained to engage difference without immediately converting it into fear, offense, or hostility.

The communal dimension of ethics extends virtue formation beyond the individual level. Moral theology insists that ethical life is fundamentally social. Virtues acquire public meaning when they shape patterns of interaction, conflict resolution, and shared responsibility. Religious communities function as moral institutions insofar as they transmit ethical norms, embody virtuous practices, and sustain forms of moral accountability that influence collective life for interpreting religious moderation as something more than a private achievement.¹⁰ Moderation therefore becomes socially effective when communities create environments that support and reinforce restraint, humility, respect for difference, and nonviolence. It is sustained not by individual goodwill alone, but by communal structures of formation that shape what responses are considered faithful, admirable, dangerous, or distorted.¹¹

Within Islamic contexts, Sufi traditions organized through Tarekat offer a distinctive model of ethical pedagogy that integrates spiritual discipline with moral formation.¹² Sufism is sometimes treated as primarily mystical or inward, but it is also a structured moral tradition oriented toward the transformation of character. Concepts such as *tazkiyat al-nafs*, *riyadah*, and *mujahadah* reflect a moral vision that understands ethical life as a gradual process of purification, training, and struggle. Tarekat practices such as *dhikr*, *suluk*, and mentorship under a *Mursyid* function as

mechanisms of ethical habituation.¹³ *Dhikr* disciplines attention and regulates emotional volatility; *suluk* provides a space for self-examination and reshaping desire; while guidance under a *Mursyid* embeds moral life within accountability and example.

Importantly, Tarekat ethical pedagogy is communal rather than individualistic. Moral formation occurs within relational networks characterized by trust, shared ritual life, and communal accountability.¹⁴ The authority of the *Mursyid* may function not as authoritarian control, but as formative guidance that stabilizes moral judgment and locates religious zeal within humility and restraint. At the same time, moral theology remains attentive to potential risks, including dependency on charismatic authority and communal exclusivism when boundaries harden. This means that Tarekat should not be assumed to be uniformly moderate; rather, its moderating potential depends on whether religious intensity is channeled through ethical formation rather than confrontational identity politics.

The moral-theological significance of Tarekat lies in its capacity to translate spiritual discipline into communal virtue with public consequences. By cultivating self-restraint, emotional regulation, and ethical attentiveness, Tarekat practices can form modes of religious agency compatible with pluralism and civic coexistence.¹⁵ This perspective challenges the assumption that intensive religiosity necessarily leads to extremism. Instead, it suggests that deep spiritual discipline may sustain moderation when mediated through ethical discipline and communal accountability. By reading Tarekat as ethical pedagogy, this study highlights how religious traditions can support social harmony by forming agents capable of living faithfully without succumbing to exclusionary or violent moral imaginaries.¹⁶ In doing so, the article bridges the literature on Tarekat, religious moderation, and moral theology, offering a framework for understanding how spiritual traditions contribute to social harmony in pluralistic societies.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on in-depth interviews to examine the moral-theological significance of Tarekat practices in fostering religious moderation.¹⁷ A qualitative approach is appropriate because the ethical dispositions under consideration such as self-restraint, humility, patience, and openness to difference are in lived experience, spiritual practice, and relational forms of authority that cannot be meaningfully reduced to numerical indicators. Rather than measuring prevalence or causal impact, the study attends to how moral meanings are articulated, interpreted, and sustained within concrete religious' communities.

Consistent with contemporary approaches in moral theology, empirical data are treated as sources of theological reflection rather than instruments for statistical generalization. Interview narratives function as expressions of moral reasoning, spiritual self-understanding, and ethical aspiration shaped by Tarekat traditions, not as representative samples or predictive evidence. This interpretive–normative posture recognizes that moral formation is most adequately accessed through reflective engagement with lived practice, where ethical dispositions emerge through language, ritual, and communal interaction. Accordingly, the study does not aim to establish universal claims or quantify the effectiveness of religious moderation, but to illuminate how specific spiritual disciplines plausibly cultivate moral dispositions that support moderation and social harmony within plural social contexts.

To make this methodological orientation explicit, the accompanying tables synthesize the research design, field context, and analytical framework. Rather than serving as instruments of statistical reporting, they clarify the epistemological commitments guiding the study and the integration of empirical inquiry with moral theological interpretation. Table 1 summarizes the overall research design and epistemological orientation, emphasizing the treatment of interview data as sources of theological reflection rather than as evidence for statistical generalization.

The fieldwork was conducted between January and April 2025 over a period of four months. A total of 18 informants participated in this study, selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in Tarekat communities and their relevance to the research objectives. The participants consisted of 3 Mursyid, 4 Khalifah, 8 regular Tarekat members (*jamaah*), and 3 local religious leaders who were familiar with the role of Tarekat in community life. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants’ experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding spiritual practices and religious moderation. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data validation was carried out through source triangulation by comparing information across different categories of participants, member checking by confirming key interpretations with selected informants, and peer debriefing with fellow researchers knowledgeable in Islamic studies and qualitative research methods. These procedures helped ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected participants’ perspectives while minimizing researcher bias.

Table 1. Methodological Overview of the Study

Component		Description	Moral-Theological Relevance
Research	Design	Qualitative research using in-depth interviews	Enables exploration of lived moral experience and ethical self-understanding rather than measurement of behavioral frequency

Epistemological Orientation	Interpretive–normative	Treats empirical data as reflective material for moral-theological interpretation, not as statistically generalizable evidence
Data Function	Source of theological reflection	Interview narratives function as expressions of moral reasoning, virtue formation, and spiritual interpretation
Methodological Aim	Understanding moral formation	Focuses on how Tarekat practices shape ethical dispositions relevant to religious moderation
Analytical Focus	Moral dispositions and communal practices	Examines virtues such as self-restraint, humility, patience, and openness to difference

Fieldwork was conducted in several locations across North Sumatera Langkat, Medan, Tanjung Morawa, Simalungun, and Padang Sidempuan selected for their sociocultural diversity and the active presence of Tarekat communities within everyday social life. Although these sites differ in demographic composition and local history, each provides insight into how Tarekat practices operate within contexts marked by religious and cultural plurality. Participants included Tarekat members and local religious figures directly involved in spiritual instruction, ritual practice, and community engagement.¹⁸ Rather than aiming for an exhaustive sociological mapping of Tarekat networks, the study approaches participants as morally reflective agents whose experiences illuminate the ethical dimensions of Tarekat life.¹⁹ Demographic information is therefore presented selectively, only insofar as it clarifies participants' roles and their relationship to Tarekat practices. Table 2 summarizes the research sites and their relevance for examining religious moderation.

Table 2. Research Sites and Contextual Characteristics

Location	Contextual Characteristics	Relevance to Religious Moderation
Langkat	Strong historical presence of Tarekat, close-knit religious communities	Illustrates long-term moral habituation through sustained spiritual discipline
Medan	Urban, multi-religious, socially diverse environment	Provides insight into how Tarekat ethics operate within plural and heterogeneous settings
Tanjung Morawa	Semi-urban area with active religious networks	Highlights interaction between spiritual practice and everyday civic engagement
Simalungun	Ethnically and culturally diverse district	Shows how Tarekat contribute to mediation and social cohesion across differences
Padang Sidempuan	Regional religious center with traditional Islamic institutions	Demonstrates continuity of moral authority and ethical guidance through Tarekat leadership

Table 3 describes the characteristics of research participants and the nature of the data collected, underscoring the focus on moral roles and lived ethical experience rather than demographic representation.

Table 3. The characteristics of research participants

Aspect	Description	Analytical Significance
Participant Profile	Tarekat members and local religious figures	Participants approached as morally reflective agents, not as representative samples
Role in Community	Spiritual practitioners, instructors, and community mediators	Allows access to ethical reasoning embedded in practice and authority
Data Type	Narrative interview data	Captures moral language, ethical self-interpretation, and spiritual meaning
Sampling Logic	Purposive and contextual	Prioritizes depth of moral insight over demographic representativeness
Use of Demographics	Limited and contextual	Demographic details included only to clarify moral roles and practices

The analysis adopts an interpretive–normative orientation that integrates empirical insights with moral-theological reflection. Interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to spiritual discipline, moral self-understanding, and social engagement, which were then interpreted through the conceptual lenses developed in the moral-theological framework, particularly those concerning virtue formation, discipline, and communal ethics.²⁰ The guiding analytical question is therefore not merely descriptive what do Tarekat communities do? but normative and theological: what forms of moral formation are generated by Tarekat practices,²¹ and how do these shape dispositions relevant to religious moderation?.

By foregrounding this question, the analysis remains attentive to both the internal moral logic of Tarekat life and its broader ethical significance for sustaining social harmony in plural societies. This interpretive–normative approach reflects a growing consensus in religious and ethical studies that empirical inquiry gains depth when placed in dialogue with normative frameworks, especially where moral agency and religious practice are closely intertwined. Accordingly, the study balances attentiveness to lived experience with critical theological interpretation, allowing empirical findings to inform and be informed by ongoing discussions in moral theology. Table 4 summarizes this analytical orientation and the guiding normative question that shapes the interpretation of the findings.

Table 4. Analytical Orientation and Guiding Question

Analytical Dimension	Description
Analytical Approach	Thematic analysis integrated with moral-theological interpretation
Interpretive Lens	Virtue ethics, moral formation, and communal ethics

Normative Orientation	Evaluative and reflective, not predictive
Central Analytical Question	What forms of moral formation are generated by Tarekat practices, and how do these forms shape dispositions relevant to religious moderation?
Expected Contribution	Clarifying the moral-theological significance of Tarekat as agents of religious moderation

Tarekat as Moral Formation, Self-Purification and Moral Restraint A central feature of Tarekat life is its sustained emphasis on self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), understood not as an abstract spiritual ideal detached from daily conduct, but as a continuous moral process shaping self-perception, emotional regulation, and ethical response in situations marked by tension or difference.²² Within the communities studied, participants consistently described self-purification as an inner discipline through which outward behavior is aligned with restraint, attentiveness, and moral responsibility. From a moral-theological perspective, self-purification functions as a formative intervention at the affective level of moral agency.

Moral failures in plural contexts often arise less from ignorance than from unmanaged emotions such as anger, fear, or resentment that narrow moral vision and legitimize exclusionary responses.²³ Through repeated spiritual exercises, this discipline cultivates inner calm and moral vigilance, enabling adherents to recognize reactive impulses and subject them to ethical discernment rather than immediate expression. Empirical accounts from North Sumatera illustrate how this formation is enacted in everyday life, particularly in interreligious encounters, where moderation is understood not as withdrawal or silence, but as the capacity to respond without hostility, to listen before judging, and to restrain speech under emotional pressure.

In this sense, self-purification operates as an ethical counterweight to dynamics often associated with religious extremism. Extremist orientations typically depend on moral certainty reinforced by emotional intensity, where anger or fear is mistaken for moral clarity. By contrast, Tarekat practices cultivate humility and critical self-awareness, directing spiritual struggle inward toward the regulation of desire and ego rather than outward toward the condemnation of others. This inward moral orientation reframes ethical responsibility as beginning with the self, thereby supporting coexistence in plural settings. Another key dimension of moral formation within Tarekat life concerns the role of authority, particularly the guidance of the Mursyid. Contrary to assumptions that equate religious authority with authoritarian control, the empirical material reveals a more nuanced moral reality. Participants described obedience not as blind submission, but as disciplined trust developed through sustained relational engagement. The authority of the Mursyid derives less from formal

power than from moral exemplarity, exercised through counsel, example, and corrective guidance aimed at shaping character rather than enforcing conformity.

From a moral-theological standpoint, this distinction between authoritarian control and formative authority is decisive.²⁴ Authority undermines moral agency when it suppresses reflection or conscience, but it can support moral freedom when it educates desire, sharpens discernment, and situates judgment within a tradition oriented toward the good. In the communities examined, formative authority proved most constructive when it fostered humility, patience, and restraint, particularly in contexts of conflict or provocation. By embedding moral reasoning within communal guidance and accountability, Tarekat authority interrupts patterns of individualized moral certainty that often sustain extremism. When exercised pedagogically and open to accountability, the guidance of the Mursyid contributes to moral stability and disciplined religious commitment compatible with peaceful coexistence in plural societies.

Ritual, Habituation, and Ethical Stability

Ritual practice constitutes a third pillar of moral formation within Tarekat life. Practices such as dhikr and *suluk* are not approached merely as devotional acts oriented toward personal piety.²⁵ Rather, they function as disciplines of habituation that gradually shape moral perception, emotional response, and ethical stability. Through repetition and embodied participation, these practices inscribe moral dispositions into the rhythms of daily life, transforming spiritual exercises into mechanisms of character formation. Participants consistently emphasized the cumulative effect of ritual practice. Ethical stability, they noted, does not emerge through isolated moments of insight or instruction but through sustained repetition that forms habits of attention, self-control, and moral awareness. One Naqshbandi practitioner in Langkat explained:

“Dhikr is not simply a ritual that we perform after prayer. It trains the heart to remain calm. Before joining the Tarekat, I often reacted emotionally when disagreements occurred. Through continuous remembrance of God, I learned to pause, reflect, and control my anger before responding to others.”

This testimony illustrates how dhikr, understood as the repeated remembrance of God, serves as a practical exercise in emotional regulation. By anchoring attention in divine remembrance, adherents learn to interrupt cycles of anger, frustration, or anxiety before these emotions are translated into harmful actions. In this sense, ritual practice becomes an ethical technology that shapes both inner consciousness and outward behavior. The formative role of ritual was similarly evident in participants' reflections on *suluk*, which often involves periods of guided retreat and intensified

spiritual practice. Participants described these retreats as opportunities for moral recalibration and self-examination, where patterns of speech, desire, and conduct are critically assessed.²⁶ A senior Tarekat member in Deli Serdang stated:

“During suluk, we are encouraged to evaluate ourselves honestly. We reflect on how we speak to others, how we treat our neighbors, and whether pride has entered our hearts. The purpose is not to isolate ourselves from society, but to return as better people who can contribute positively to the community.”

Another participant from Medan emphasized the transformative dimension of the retreat:

“Suluk teaches us that the greatest struggle is not against other people but against our own ego. When we learn to control the ego, it becomes easier to respect differences and avoid unnecessary conflict.”

These accounts demonstrate that *suluk* is not understood as a withdrawal from social responsibility. Rather, it functions as a structured environment in which ethical habits are reinforced, corrected, and reoriented. The retreat provides a disciplined space for self-reflection that prepares adherents for more attentive, compassionate, and restrained engagement upon returning to everyday social life. From a moral theological perspective, the significance of ritual habituation lies in its capacity to form character over time. Virtues are sustained not by intention alone but by practices that shape what feels natural and appropriate in moments of tension or uncertainty. In plural societies, where encounters with religious, cultural, and social differences can easily trigger defensive reactions, the habituation of restraint becomes ethically decisive.²⁷ Ritual practice trains both body and emotion to respond with patience rather than hostility, reflection rather than impulsivity, and understanding rather than prejudice. Empirical observations across different research sites in North Sumatra suggest that this formative logic operates consistently across varied social contexts. Whether in urban settings characterized by religious heterogeneity or in more socially cohesive rural communities, participants described similar ethical effects of ritual practice. A Naqshbandi practitioner in Medan noted:

“Our environment is very diverse. We interact daily with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The teachings of the Tarekat remind us that maintaining harmony is part of our spiritual responsibility.”

Likewise, a participant from Langkat observed:

“Dhikr and the guidance of our teacher help us avoid judging others too quickly. We are taught to improve ourselves first before criticizing anyone else.”

Although the social challenges faced by these communities differed, the moral dispositions cultivated through ritual remained remarkably similar. This suggests

that the ethical contribution of Tarekat rituals does not depend primarily on context-specific strategies but on the internal coherence of the practices themselves and the virtues they seek to cultivate. Importantly, the study does not claim that ritual practice automatically produces moderation.²⁸ Moral theology resists such deterministic conclusions. Habituation can reinforce exclusion as well as openness, depending on the narratives, interpretations, and moral orientations accompanying the practice. As one Tarekat teacher in North Sumatera explained:

“Dhikr alone is not enough if it is not accompanied by humility. A person may perform many rituals, but if they still look down on others, then the purpose of spiritual training has not been achieved.”

This observation highlights a critical finding of the study. Ritual practice appears ethically generative when explicitly linked to virtues such as humility, patience, compassion, and responsibility toward others. Conversely, when ritual is interpreted narrowly or detached from ethical reflection, its moderating potential is significantly diminished. Taken together, self-purification, formative authority, and ritual habituation constitute an integrated pattern of moral formation within Tarekat life.²⁹ These dimensions interact dynamically to shape ethical dispositions that extend beyond personal spirituality into social conduct and public engagement. By disciplining emotion, situating moral judgment within communal guidance, and habituating restraint through repeated practice, Tarekat communities cultivate individuals capable of sustaining moderation amid social and religious difference.³⁰ This understanding provides the foundation for examining how these personal virtues are subsequently translated into communal ethics and public engagement within plural social environments.

Communal Ethics and Religious Moderation

The moral formation cultivated within Tarekat life does not remain confined to individual spirituality but is frequently translated into patterns of social interaction that support communal harmony. Personal virtues developed through spiritual discipline such as patience, humility, emotional self-restraint, and compassion are often expressed publicly as habitual ways of relating to others. Participants across research sites described ethical conduct in social life as a natural extension of inner discipline, suggesting that moderation is practiced not merely as an abstract ideal but as a stable moral disposition shaping everyday interaction.³¹ This outward orientation helps explain why many Tarekat communities do not withdraw from society despite their emphasis on inward spiritual practices. Spiritual discipline is understood less as a retreat from social responsibility than as preparation for ethical engagement within diverse social environments.

From a moral-theological perspective, this integration of interior formation and public practice illustrates how virtues acquire social significance when they shape conduct, conflict response, and communal participation. Self-purification enables constructive interaction, while inner calm supports respectful engagement in contexts marked by religious and cultural difference. In this sense, many Tarekat communities exemplify a form of religiosity in which ethical depth sustains, rather than undermines, plural coexistence. A prominent expression of this communal ethic is the involvement of Tarekat members in interreligious engagement and local mediation. Empirical accounts from North Sumatera indicate that Tarekat leaders and members frequently assume informal mediating roles during moments of religious tension.

Their moral authority shaped by reputations for patience, self-control, and non-reactivity often enables them to de-escalate conflict and facilitate dialogue in cooperation with institutions such as FKUB, MUI, and local civic authorities.³² Such collaboration situates Tarekat within broader networks of communal responsibility and enhances the credibility of religious moderation by grounding it in trusted moral actors rather than solely in bureaucratic mechanisms. Nevertheless, the findings of this study do not support the conclusion that all Tarekat communities are automatically moderate or immune from exclusivist tendencies. Moral theology cautions against deterministic assumptions that spiritual practices necessarily produce socially inclusive outcomes. The ethical consequences of religious formation depend not only on ritual discipline but also on how spiritual authority, communal identity, and doctrinal teachings are interpreted and practiced within particular contexts.³³

One issue that emerges in both the literature and field observations concerns the potential for excessive dependence on the Mursyid (spiritual guide). While the relationship between disciple and teacher serves an important pedagogical function in transmitting moral wisdom and spiritual discipline, it may also generate problems when obedience is detached from critical ethical reflection. In such circumstances, reverence for the Mursyid can evolve into a form of personality-centered authority that discourages independent moral judgment. Several participants acknowledged that the spiritual authority of the teacher must remain accountable to broader Islamic ethical principles and communal welfare. Thus, the moral value of spiritual authority lies not in unquestioning obedience but in its capacity to guide disciples toward greater humility, responsibility, and moral maturity.

A second challenge concerns the possibility of group exclusivism. Tarekat communities often cultivate strong internal bonds through shared rituals, spiritual experiences, and collective identity. While such solidarity can reinforce ethical commitment and social support, it may also create symbolic boundaries that distinguish insiders from outsiders. Participants generally emphasized openness and cooperation

with wider society; however, some acknowledged that certain followers occasionally develop attitudes of spiritual superiority, viewing their own path as morally or spiritually privileged. From a moral-theological perspective, such tendencies represent a distortion rather than a fulfillment of Tarekat spirituality, since authentic spiritual formation is expected to cultivate humility rather than claims of superiority.

Furthermore, historical and contemporary evidence demonstrates that tensions may arise not only between Tarekat and non-Tarekat groups but also among different Tarekat orders themselves. Differences in ritual practice, spiritual lineage, organizational authority, or interpretations of religious teachings can generate competition and conflict. Although such tensions were not dominant within the research sites examined, their existence underscores the importance of avoiding romanticized portrayals of Tarekat communities. Religious moderation should therefore be understood as an ongoing moral achievement rather than an inherent characteristic of any particular religious organization or tradition.³⁴ These observations suggest that the relationship between Tarekat and religious moderation is conditional rather than automatic. Tarekat contributes positively to moderation when spiritual discipline is accompanied by ethical reflection, when authority is exercised responsibly, and when communal identity remains open to dialogue and cooperation. Conversely, when spiritual authority becomes authoritarian, when group identity becomes exclusionary, or when ritual practice is disconnected from ethical self-critique, the moderating potential of Tarekat may be weakened.

Communal ethics within Tarekat life also manifest in commitments to civic responsibility and the rejection of violence. Participants articulated loyalty to the nation and respect for civic order as integral dimensions of religious identity rather than external obligations imposed by the state. This orientation challenges narratives that portray intensive religiosity as inherently incompatible with democratic coexistence. By emphasizing self-restraint, patience, and responsibility toward others, Tarekat practices can foster moral dispositions that resist justifications for coercion or aggression, even under provocation. However, these outcomes depend upon the continual cultivation of virtues and the critical integration of spirituality with ethical responsibility. Moderation, therefore, emerges not as an automatic product of religious affiliation but as a public virtue rooted in disciplined moral formation and expressed through peaceful coexistence, civic participation, and respectful engagement with difference.

Tarekat as Morally Significant Agents and the Reframing of Religious Moderation

The findings of this study reconfigure how Tarekat communities are understood within moral-theological discourse. Rather than viewing them merely as inward-looking spiritual associations, the analysis shows that Tarekat function as morally

significant agents within plural social contexts. Their significance lies not in formal authority, political influence, or doctrinal intervention, but in their capacity to form ethical dispositions that shape personal conduct and communal interaction over time. From a moral-theological perspective, moral significance arises where practices contribute to character formation and the sustenance of communal virtues oriented toward the common good.³⁵ The core practices structuring Tarekat life self-purification, guided obedience, and ritual habituation operate as formative processes that extend beyond individual spirituality.³⁶ They cultivate stable moral orientations that influence how adherents interpret difference, respond to conflict, and participate in civic life. In this sense, Tarekat communities function as informal moral institutions that complement formal religious and civic structures by sustaining ethical consistency in everyday practice. This formative role was consistently reflected in participants' narratives. One Naqshbandi practitioner in Langkat explained:

"The purpose of joining the Tarekat is not only to improve our worship but also to improve our character. Our teacher always reminds us that spirituality is meaningless if it does not make us more patient, more respectful, and more beneficial to society."

Similarly, a Tarekat member in Deli Serdang emphasized the social implications of spiritual discipline:

"Through dhikr and spiritual guidance, we learn to control ourselves. When disagreements occur in society, we are encouraged to respond calmly rather than emotionally. This is what our Mursyid teaches us."

These testimonies illustrate how spiritual practices are understood not merely as personal acts of devotion but as mechanisms for cultivating virtues that shape public behavior and social relationships. This account aligns with contemporary moral theology, which emphasizes embodied practices and communal traditions as primary sites of ethical formation.³⁷ Moral life is sustained not by isolated choices or abstract principles but by traditions that shape moral imagination, regulate emotion, and provide relational accountability. By embedding ethical formation within the rhythms of spiritual life, Tarekat communities contribute to the moral ecology of plural societies, offering resources for coexistence grounded in lived spirituality rather than procedural appeals to tolerance.

A second key implication concerns the assumption that intensive religiosity is inherently prone to extremism. The findings indicate that strong religious commitment does not necessarily lead to radicalization when it is mediated through traditions of ethical discipline and communal accountability. Within the Tarekat communities examined, devotional intensity is consistently accompanied by self-restraint, humility, and emotional regulation qualities that counter moral dynamics

commonly associated with extremism, such as absolutist certainty and reactive hostility. One senior Naqshbandi practitioner in Medan described this relationship between spirituality and moderation:

“People sometimes think that being very religious makes a person intolerant. In our experience, the opposite should happen. The closer a person is to God, the more they should be able to respect others, control anger, and avoid harming people.”

Likewise, a participant from Langkat reflected on how Tarekat teachings shape attitudes toward religious diversity:

“We live among people with different beliefs and backgrounds. Our Mursyid teaches us that maintaining harmony is part of our religious responsibility. We are not asked to compromise our faith, but we are taught to treat others with dignity.”

These observations suggest that religious intensity becomes a resource for moderation rather than a catalyst for exclusion when it is accompanied by ethical discipline and spiritual self-awareness. The decisive variable, therefore, is not the depth of religiosity but the formative structure through which it is cultivated. Religiosity oriented toward ethical formation, disciplined self-examination, and communal responsibility can generate moderation and openness, whereas religiosity detached from such structures may foster rigidity and defensiveness.³⁸ A formation-oriented understanding of religious moderation thus avoids equating moderation with the dilution of religious conviction and instead recognizes the ethical potential of deep religiosity. At the same time, moral-theological discernment requires acknowledging limits and risks. Formative traditions are not immune to distortion. Strong communal identity can slide into exclusivism, and authority can constrain moral agency if critical reflection is suppressed.³⁹ Several participants themselves recognized these challenges. One Tarekat teacher in North Sumatera observed:

“The Mursyid should guide people toward God, not make people dependent on him. If followers obey without understanding the ethical purpose behind the teaching, then spiritual growth becomes incomplete.”

Another participant acknowledged the possibility of exclusivist attitudes among some followers:

“Sometimes there are people who feel that their Tarekat is better than others. Our teachers always remind us that spiritual progress should produce humility, not a sense of superiority.”

These reflections demonstrate that the ethical significance of Tarekat communities is not automatic but conditional upon the responsible exercise of authority and the continual cultivation of humility and self-critique. Taken together, these findings contribute to broader moral-theological discussions by framing religious moderation as a moral achievement sustained through formation rather than control. Tarekat communities illustrate how spiritual discipline can shape agents capable of

faithful religious commitment without succumbing to exclusionary or violent moral imaginaries. As one Naqshbandi leader in Deli Serdang remarked:

“Moderation is not about reducing faith. It is about learning how to practice faith with wisdom, patience, and responsibility toward others.”

This statement captures a central insight emerging from the study: social harmony is most sustainable when religious traditions form individuals marked by restraint, empathy, humility, and responsibility. The contribution of Tarekat communities therefore lies not only in preserving spiritual traditions but also in nurturing the moral virtues necessary for peaceful coexistence within plural societies.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Tarekat communities in North Sumatera can be understood as morally significant actors whose spiritual disciplines contribute meaningfully to religious moderation within plural social contexts. By examining Tarekat as sites of moral formation rather than merely devotional or cultural associations, the analysis reveals how practices of self-purification, formative spiritual authority, and ritual habituation cultivate ethical dispositions such as humility, patience, self-restraint, and responsibility toward others. These virtues shape patterns of social interaction that support peaceful coexistence, civic engagement, and the rejection of violence. From a moral-theological perspective, moderation emerges not as a policy-driven compromise or a dilution of religious commitment, but as a lived moral achievement sustained through disciplined formation, ethical self-reflection, and communal accountability.⁴⁰

The findings also challenge common assumptions within public and academic discourse that intensive religiosity necessarily produces exclusivism or extremism. Instead, the study suggests that religious commitment can generate socially constructive outcomes when spiritual practices are embedded within ethical pedagogies that emphasize humility, self-critique, and responsibility toward others. At the same time, the research has argued that the relationship between Tarekat and religious moderation is neither automatic nor deterministic. The moderating potential of Tarekat depends upon how spiritual authority is exercised, how communal identity is constructed, and how ritual practices are connected to ethical reflection. As discussed, tendencies toward excessive veneration of spiritual leaders, group exclusivism, or inter-Tarekat rivalry may emerge when spiritual formation becomes detached from its broader ethical purposes. Religious moderation should therefore be understood as an ongoing moral accomplishment rather than an inherent characteristic of any religious community.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of moral theology by conceptualizing Tarekat as institutions of ethical formation that generate communal virtues

supportive of religious moderation. Whereas previous studies have often examined Tarekat primarily through sociological, historical, or political perspectives, this research highlights the moral-formative processes through which spiritual disciplines shape character, social conduct, and public engagement. By linking personal spiritual practices to communal ethics and interreligious coexistence, the study offers a moral-theological framework for understanding how religious traditions can function as sources of social cohesion within plural societies. This perspective broadens contemporary discussions of religious moderation by emphasizing the formative role of virtue cultivation and moral agency rather than focusing exclusively on institutional policies or state-led initiatives.

Nevertheless, this study is limited to selected Tarekat communities in North Sumatra and therefore does not claim to represent the experiences of all Tarekat orders or regions. Future research could further develop this line of inquiry in several directions. Comparative studies across different Tarekat traditions would help identify similarities and variations in the ways moral formation contributes to religious moderation. Gender-focused research could explore how women experience, negotiate, and contribute to ethical formation within Tarekat communities, an area that remains underexamined in contemporary scholarship. In addition, the rapid expansion of digital religious spaces invites investigation into the relationship between Tarekat spirituality and digital moderation, particularly how traditional practices of moral discipline are adapted, transmitted, and contested within online environments. Such inquiries would deepen understanding of the evolving role of Tarekat in shaping ethical life amid changing social and technological conditions.

Ultimately, the study suggests that sustainable religious moderation is unlikely to be achieved through legal regulation or political discourse alone. Moral theology offers a crucial insight by demonstrating that moderation is rooted in the formation of persons and communities capable of living faithfully without succumbing to exclusionary or violent moral imaginaries. In this regard, Tarekat communities provide an important example of how spiritual traditions can cultivate virtues that strengthen social harmony, foster constructive engagement across differences, and contribute to the ethical foundations of plural democratic societies.

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