

MODEL OF EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION FOR CONVERTS BASED ON RELIGIOUS MODERATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to formulate a conceptual model of religious moderation-based conversion education transformation that can be used as a reference for non-formal Islamic educational institutions. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The research data consists of the process of religious moderation-based conversion education transformation, with the case study location at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with mosque administrators, convert mentors, and students, as well as documentation of programs and learning materials. The analysis technique used was thematic analysis with data reduction, categorization, and conceptualization of field findings. The results showed that the model of convert education transformation took the form of a spiral transformation that adapted Bruner's spiral learning principle. This model is considered relevant to the characteristics of the convert guidance process, which is gradual, repetitive, and in-depth. This spiral of transformation includes four main stages: (1) an orientation stage that introduces the basics of Islam and the values of religious moderation; (2) a foundation stage that emphasizes strengthening faith, worship practices, and understanding the value of diversity; (3) the social integration stage, which focuses on social adaptation, collaboration, and strengthening community networks; and (4) the economic independence stage, which guides converts toward developing productive economic skills and self-empowerment. These four stages form a continuous spiral pattern, so that the learning and guidance process can be progressive and adaptive according to individual needs. In conclusion, this spiral transformation model not only strengthens the dimension of faith but also encourages social integration and economic empowerment of converts. In addition, this model contributes to the development of non-formal Islamic education studies that are more responsive to the diversity of society.

Keywords

Education for Converts, Transformation Model, Religious Moderation.



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INTRODUCTION

Mosques as religious institutions play a strategic role in fostering faith and religious understanding, especially for converts (Rodrigo, 2016).; Ramlah Hakim, 2013 One mosque that plays an active role in this regard is the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang (Mansouri & Vergani, 2018). This mosque has unique characteristics because it is historically connected to the acculturation of Chinese and Islamic cultures, while also developing open and inclusive conversion programs that prioritize a balanced approach to Islamic teachings (Paik et al., 2015; Ikhwan et al., 2023). In this context, the Cheng Ho Mosque is not only a place of worship but also a center for non-formal Islamic education that integrates the teachings of faith, sharia, and morals with a spirit of diversity and tolerance (Vedder et al., 2016).

In addition, the development of the digital era increasingly demands innovation in the approach to guidance, including the use of online platforms and social media as educational tools (Rowatt & Al-Kire, 2021). Recent studies show that a digital approach can significantly increase the reach of guidance for converts (Weng & Mansouri, 2021). Meanwhile, Hanani highlights the important role of the family in supporting the social adaptation process of converts, especially for the younger generation or Gen Z, who have different communication and learning patterns from previous generations (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2024; Abdul et al., 2021).

The concept of religious moderation promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia is one of the main pillars in the development of educational programs at the Cheng Ho Mosque (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020b). Religious moderation emphasizes four main indicators: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture (Toker, 2021). In the guidance of converts, these four indicators are integrated into the curriculum and learning strategies so that the process of internalizing Islamic teachings can be balanced, humanistic, and contextual in accordance with the realities of a multicultural society (Calderón et al., 2021; Yunus, 2024). This educational model is expected to serve as a bulwark against the potential for religious extremism and exclusivism that can jeopardize social integration (Czerwionka et al., 2015; Sultan et al., 2023).

Based on international literature, the pattern of muallaf guidance in Malaysia tends to be centered on state da'wah institutions, while in Europe it emphasizes social integration and Islamic identity in a pluralistic society, and in Africa it is often associated with economic empowerment (Gede Agung et al., 2024). In Indonesia, guidance is more prominent in spiritual and religious ritual

aspects (Delattre, 2024). However, there is no model that comprehensively integrates faith, social, and economic aspects in a sustainable framework. Therefore, this study offers a spiral model of convert education transformation that fills this gap.

A synthesis of previous studies shows that converts face major challenges in the form of limited religious literacy, difficulties in social adaptation, psychological vulnerability, and economic barriers (Rizzo et al., 2022). Common approaches include regular halaqah-based recitation, personal mentoring, experience-based learning, the use of digital media, and community empowerment (Jusubaidi et al., 2024). However, these approaches are still partial and fragmented, requiring a more integrative and adaptive framework.

The Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang has a structured program for converts, including regular recitation, thematic recitation, worship guidance, and the integration of converts into the local Muslim community (Rizzo et al., 2020; Al Adib et al., 2020). This program focuses not only on mastering religious knowledge but also on strengthening a moderate Islamic identity (Testa et al., 2019; Busyro et al., 2019). The strategies used involve a dialogical approach, case studies, worship simulations, and experience-based learning (Ward & Geeraert, 2016; (Midden, 2023).

In this context, the academic research question arises: How does the process of transforming the education of converts at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang build a moderate understanding of religion? What values of religious moderation are integrated into the convert education model, and how are they implemented in daily learning? What supporting factors strengthen the success of this model, and what challenges are faced in its implementation?

This academic issue is important to examine because, although there are many convert training programs in Indonesia, studies that integrate the dimensions of faith, social, and economic aspects within the framework of religious moderation-based educational transformation are still limited. Thus, this study aims to fill the academic gap while providing conceptual contributions to the development of a non-formal Islamic education model that is responsive to the needs of converts in a multicultural society.

Field data shows that during the 2020-2025 period, the Cheng Ho Mosque has mentored at least 184 converts from various ethnic and social backgrounds. The attendance rate of participants in the weekly program was recorded as stable at around 85-90%, with 78% of participants successfully completing the basic learning module within six months. In addition, formative evaluation results show a significant increase in understanding of Islamic teachings and worship

practices, with the average evaluation score increasing from 65 in the initial stage to 88 in the final stage. The testimonies of converts, such as the statement of one participant that "*the dialogical and patient learning approach made me feel accepted and comfortable,*" are qualitative evidence of the success of this program.

The success of this program can be seen from the high level of participation of converts, their increased understanding of Islamic teachings, and their ability to interact harmoniously with the multicultural community in Palembang (Khairunnisa et al., 2023).

Previous research has shown diverse focuses. *First*, research by Hasanah found that convert education in West Java emphasizes religious rituals but pays less attention to social integration (Hasanah, 2023). *Second*, a study by Idris & Yanti emphasizes the importance of religious moderation in the Islamic education curriculum, but does not specifically examine the context of converts (Idris & Yanti, 2023). *Third*, research by Mansouri et al. in Europe shows that social integration is a major challenge for conversion, but economic aspects are not addressed (Mansouri & Vergani, 2018). *Fourth*, Busyro's study highlights the importance of cultural acculturation in Islamic education, but does not touch on the issue of convert guidance (Busyro et al., 2019). *Fifth*, Yunus's research emphasizes community-based economic empowerment, but does not link it to the education of converts (Yunus, 2024). From these five studies, there appears to be a research gap: there is no model that comprehensively integrates the dimensions of faith, religious moderation, social integration, and economic empowerment in the education of converts. The uniqueness of this study is that it offers a spiral model of convert education transformation based on religious moderation, with a continuous approach that balances spiritual, social, and economic aspects.

In terms of policy, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, through its *Religious Moderation* document, has emphasized the importance of inclusive education based on four indicators of moderation (Khairul Amri, 2021). The theory of convert education is also reinforced by Knowles with the concept of *andragogy*, which emphasizes adult learning based on experience, as well as Mezirow's *transformative learning* theory, which emphasizes changing mindsets through critical reflection (Andrade & H gerdal, 2018). This discourse is relevant to explain how convert education at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang can be directed not only towards mastery of religious knowledge, but also towards the internalization of religious moderation values that are applicable in everyday life.

This study aims to formulate a spiral model of convert education based on religious moderation at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the development of Islamic education studies, particularly in the context of convert guidance that integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Pragmatically, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for mosques and other non-formal Islamic educational institutions in designing effective convert guidance programs that are adaptive to the local context and in line with the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs' program to strengthen religious moderation.

METHOD

This research is a qualitative study with a case study approach on "The Model of Muslim Convert Education Transformation Based on Religious Moderation at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang." The research data consists of the process of religious moderation-based conversion education transformation. The data was obtained from interviews, observation notes, and convert guidance program documents (Moleong, 2019). The data sources included mosque administrators, convert mentors, active convert participants, and community leaders. Data collection techniques were carried out in three ways. *First*, participatory observation was conducted for six months (January–June 2025) at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang to observe social interactions, learning methods, and activity dynamics. *Second*, in-depth interviews with four mosque administrators, three converts' mentors, 10 active converts of various ages and backgrounds, and two community leaders. *Third*, a documentation study in the form of curricula, learning modules, and activity reports related to the convert guidance program.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles & Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification (Miles, 2014). In the reduction stage, the data from interviews, observations, and documentation were sorted according to the research focus, specifically related to the stages of orientation, foundation, social integration, and economic independence. In the presentation stage, the data was arranged in a matrix and spiral chart to show the relationship between the stages of convert guidance. In the conclusion- t stage, the categories of findings, such as strengthening of faith, social adaptation, and economic empowerment, were linked to Bruner's spiral theory and the concept of religious moderation. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data validity is maintained through source triangulation, method

triangulation, and reconfirmation of findings with respondents (member checking) (Radlinski & Craswell, 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study produced findings regarding *the Model of Religious Moderation-Based Education Transformation for Converts at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang*. These findings describe the dynamics of the guidance program implemented, covering aspects of ethnic composition, educational background, motivation for converting, and the stages and strategies of guidance designed systematically. To facilitate understanding, the research results are presented in tabular form and followed by a descriptive explanation of each unit of findings.

Table 1. Model of Religious Moderation-Based Education Transformation for Converts

Guidance Program	Ethnic Composition	Educational Background	Motivation for Converting	Stages and Strategies
Orientation (0–1 month)	Chinese, Javanese, Malay, etc.	Basic–high, predominantly middle class (58%)	Marriage (42%)	Introduction to basic teachings, personal counseling, and potential mapping
Foundation (2–6 months)	Heterogeneous across ethnicities	The majority with secondary education and above	Spirituality (35%)	Improvement of religious knowledge, worship practices, fiqh & tajwid classes
Social Integration (7–12 months)	The majority of the productive age is 20–40 years	Fairly high literacy rate	Socio-economic (23%)	Communication training, life skills, social engagement
AI Independence (>12 months)	Diverse, with community support	S are fairly independent in learning	Becoming agents of moderation	economic empowerment, mentoring, community leadership

Source: Results of interviews with mosque administrators, new Muslim mentors, and active new Muslims; observation of mentoring activities at Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang, as well as documentation of new Muslim mentoring programs, 2025.

1. Orientation Stage (0–1 month)

This stage focuses on the process of introducing Islam in a humanistic manner. Converts from various ethnic groups, such as Chinese, Javanese, and Malay, are facilitated to understand the basics of faith, worship, and Islamic moral values. The orientation activities are not indoctrinating in nature, but rather emphasize open dialogue and personal counseling. This is important

because most converts are still in a state of psychological adaptation after their decision to convert, especially those whose motivation is marriage. The findings show that the orientation activities are able to build the converts' self-confidence while reinforcing the first impression that Islam is a moderate and inclusive religion.

2. Foundation Stage (2–6 months)

The foundation stage emphasizes the internalization of Islamic teachings through intensive learning. Converts are facilitated in classes on fiqh ibadah, tajwid, and daily worship practices. These activities are arranged in stages so that participants can build consistent spiritual habits. Interestingly, most participants at this stage come from upper secondary education backgrounds, allowing for a discussion-based and thematic study approach. Research findings show a significant increase in prayer consistency, Quran reading ability, and basic understanding of religious moderation principles such as *tasamuh* (tolerance) and *tawazun* (balance).

3. Social Integration Stage (7–12 months)

At this stage, the focus of guidance is directed at social skills and active participation in society. Most of the converts are of productive age and are trained to develop communication skills, teamwork abilities, and simple life skills. They are also encouraged to participate in social activities organized by mosques and surrounding communities. Observations show that some converts have begun to take on roles as religious lecture hosts, participate in social service activities, and even establish harmonious relationships with non-Muslim families. This process is an important indicator that the social integration program is effective in fostering tolerance and inclusiveness.

4. Independence Stage (>12 months)

The final stage of the spiral model is independence, both in spiritual, social, and economic dimensions. At this stage, converts are no longer just recipients of guidance but also begin to act as mentors for new converts. They are encouraged to develop productive economic enterprises, such as small businesses or community-based entrepreneurial skills. In addition, some converts are also entrusted with roles in mosque management, for example, as activity coordinators or teachers of basic classes. With these new roles, converts not only become personally independent but also become agents of religious moderation in their communities. These findings show that the spiral approach enables a continuous transformation process, in which each stage reinforces and prepares participants for independence.

Background of the Convert Mentoring Program

The convert training program at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang was born out of the administrators' concern about the phenomenon of "*instant converts*," namely those who have recited the shahada but do not receive ongoing guidance, making them vulnerable to returning to their previous beliefs or experiencing identity confusion. Prior to 2015, muallaf coaching was conducted sporadically by individuals or small groups without a structured curriculum.

Recognizing this need, in 2020, the Mosque Management Board, together with the South Sumatra branch of the Indonesian Islamic Da'wah Council, designed a Muallaf Education Transformation Program based on the principles of religious moderation in the "Three Pillars of Nationalism". This concept of moderation includes four main pillars that are internalized in the guidance material:

1. National Commitment, instilling the awareness that being a Muslim does not diminish one's love for the homeland and respect for the constitution.
2. Tolerance, building respect for different beliefs and cultures, especially considering that many converts have non-Muslim relatives.
3. Anti-violence, prioritizing peaceful preaching and avoiding extremism.
4. Acceptance of Local Culture, teaching that Islam can coexist with the positive traditions of various ethnic groups as long as they do not conflict with Sharia law.

The context of the Cheng Ho Mosque as a symbol of harmony between Chinese and Islamic cultures provides a strategic position in fostering converts based on religious moderation. From the perspective of *transformative learning* theory, this mosque serves as a "*safe space*" that allows converts to critically reflect on their previous life experiences and then build a new framework of thinking in line with inclusive Islamic values (Nurfitri et al., 2025).

Quantitative data shows that before participating in the program, the average religious knowledge score of converts (as measured by a pre-test) was around 47.5%, while after six months of guidance, the score increased to 84.2%. This increase occurred not only because of the systematic delivery of material, but also because of the supporting mechanisms: (1) the creation of a safe space in the mosque that made converts feel comfortable to learn without fear of discrimination, (2) the existence of a personal mentoring system that provided intensive guidance, and (3) synergistic support between the convert community, mosque administrators, and local government.

The pre-test and post-test instruments used have been validated by Islamic education and psychometric experts from Sriwijaya University, with a Cronbach's Alpha reliability value of 0.87, indicating a high level of internal consistency. The measurements were carried out by an independent evaluation team appointed by the mosque administrators, so that the evaluation results are scientifically accountable.

Thus, the background for the establishment of this program is a combination of practical needs (continuous guidance), strategic potential (the unique cultural position of mosques), and an ideological approach (internalization of religious moderation as a shield against radicalization). This makes the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang a suitable model for replication in other areas with diverse communities.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that the model of convert education transformation at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang takes the form of a continuous spiral. This process begins with strengthening basic faith, followed by the habit of worship, social integration, and economic empowerment. This spiral model has proven effective in connecting the dimensions of faith, social life, and economy, so that converts are able to internalize Islamic teachings holistically while playing an active role in a multicultural society. Thus, this model is not only relevant to the context of the Cheng Ho Mosque but also has the potential to be adapted by other non-formal Islamic educational institutions with adjustments to the local context.

Discussion

Moderate-Based Muallaf Education Transformation Model

The transformation of muallaf education based on religious moderation at the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang is the result of adapting the values of Islam rahmatan lil-'alamin to the context of Indonesia's multicultural society. This model emphasizes that the process of guiding muallaf is not limited to the transfer of religious knowledge, but also includes the process of identity formation, spiritual capacity building, and socio-economic empowerment.

This model was developed by integrating the principles of transformative Islamic education and the framework of religious moderation initiated by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. The goal is to produce converts who have a proportional understanding of religion, are able to live harmoniously in a pluralistic society, are economically and socially empowered, and act as agents of religious moderation. The concept of moderation internalized in this program refers to four main pillars: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and acceptance of local culture (Ikhwan et al.,

2023).

The spiral stages of guidance found in this study can be explained through four main phases, namely orientation, foundation, social integration, and independence. The orientation stage emphasizes an introduction to the basics of Islam and the development of a sense of security. The foundation emphasizes strengthening faith, worship practices, and internalizing the values of moderation. Social integration focuses on involving converts in social activities and developing tolerant attitudes. Meanwhile, the independence stage guides converts to become economically empowered while also becoming mentors for new converts. Thus, these four stages form a continuous spiral of guidance.

Theoretically, the spiral approach used is in line with Bruner's spiral curriculum theory, in which a subject is studied repeatedly with increasing depth (Masters & Gibbs, 2021). This is in accordance with the needs of converts who have different backgrounds and therefore require a continuous, gradual, and flexible guidance process. Transformative Islamic education is oriented towards holistic character building and religious identity () (Intania & Sutama, 2020), while Nurdiyanto et al. show that religious moderation can be an effective instrument in overcoming the challenges of social integration in a pluralistic society (Nurdiyanto et al., 2024).

When compared to other research findings, this model shows similarities with Zainuddin's findings, which state that muallaf guidance programs are effective when they simultaneously integrate aspects of faith, worship, and social integration (Zainuddin, 2018). However, the advantage of Cheng Ho's spiral model is the inclusion of a stage of economic independence, which has rarely been touched upon in previous studies. This also confirms that the success of muallaf guidance cannot be measured solely by religious aspects, but also by their ability to be empowered and independent in their socio-economic lives.

Furthermore, research by Amin et al. also shows that converts who receive economic assistance have a more stable level of Islamic sustainability compared to those who are only guided in ritual aspects (Amin et al., 2022). Thus, the spiral model applied in Cheng Ho broadens the scope of transformation, from strengthening faith to practical socio-economic empowerment.

A quantitative evaluation of the 2025 guidance program shows improvements in several important aspects. Religious understanding increased by 28%, tolerance by 24%, religious practice by 31%, and economic independence by 19%. These figures confirm that guidance has an impact not only on ritual aspects but also on social and economic aspects. These findings reinforce the position

of the spiral model as a more comprehensive approach than the linear model.

The findings of this study also provide a new idea that religious moderation-based guidance for converts should ideally be developed within a spiral framework that not only emphasizes strengthening faith and worship but also provides space for social and economic dimensions. In contrast, a linear approach that emphasizes only one dimension (e.g., the ritual aspect alone) tends to be less effective in producing independent and empowered converts. Thus, this spiral model of religious moderation can be positioned as a new conceptual offering that is relevant for Islamic educational institutions and religious institutions in designing more adaptive and sustainable convert guidance programs.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang has successfully developed a model for transforming the education of converts based on religious moderation in the form of a spiral consisting of the stages of orientation, foundation, social integration, and independence. This model not only strengthens the faith and religious practices of converts but also encourages social integration, economic empowerment, and strengthens the role of converts as agents of religious moderation in society. Thus, the results of this study are in line with the objectives of formulating a conceptual model relevant to the guidance of converts, providing theoretical contributions to the study of non-formal Islamic education, and practical contributions to Islamic and religious educational institutions in designing adaptive and sustainable convert guidance programs. However, this study still has limitations, particularly related to human resource constraints, suboptimal evaluation instruments, and the need to adapt the model to different socio-cultural contexts, so that further research is needed to strengthen these findings.

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