

## RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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### Abstrak

Nigeria bagian timur laut menghadapi berbagai tantangan lingkungan, termasuk desertifikasi, deforestasi, kelangkaan air, dan dampak negatif perubahan iklim. Masalah-masalah ini tidak hanya mengancam keseimbangan ekologi wilayah tersebut tetapi juga mengancam mata pencaharian, kesehatan, dan stabilitas sosial komunitasnya. Di tengah tantangan ini, moderasi agama muncul sebagai faktor kunci dalam mendorong pengelolaan lingkungan yang berkelanjutan. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi perpotongan antara moderasi agama dan pengelolaan lingkungan, dengan menekankan peran penting pemimpin agama dan ajaran Islam dalam mempromosikan praktik ramah lingkungan. Menggunakan pendekatan campuran, termasuk wawancara kualitatif dengan pemimpin komunitas dan analisis kuantitatif indikator lingkungan, studi ini mengidentifikasi mekanisme kunci melalui mana moderasi agama berkontribusi dalam mengurangi degradasi lingkungan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemimpin agama yang mengadvokasi keseimbangan, pengelolaan (Khilafah), dan keadilan (Adl) secara signifikan meningkatkan partisipasi komunitas dalam upaya konservasi dan adopsi praktik pertanian berkelanjutan. Studi kasus juga menyoroti inisiatif sukses di mana lembaga agama berkolaborasi dengan organisasi pemerintah dan non-pemerintah untuk mengatasi kelangkaan air dan reboisasi. Namun, penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi tantangan seperti kemiskinan, keterbatasan sumber daya pendidikan, dan meningkatnya ekstremisme yang menghambat potensi penuh moderasi agama dalam tata kelola lingkungan. Makalah ini menyimpulkan dengan merekomendasikan kerangka kerja kolaboratif antara lembaga keagamaan, lembaga pemerintah, dan komunitas lokal untuk memperkuat dampak moderasi agama terhadap keberlanjutan lingkungan. Dengan mengintegrasikan prinsip-prinsip agama dengan kebijakan lingkungan, Nigeria Timur Laut dapat mengatasi tantangan ekologi secara lebih efektif, memastikan keseimbangan yang harmonis antara pembangunan dan konservasi. Studi ini berkontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas tentang peran

*agama dalam keberlanjutan lingkungan dan memberikan wawasan yang dapat diterapkan bagi pembuat kebijakan dan pemimpin agama yang bertujuan untuk membangun masa depan yang tangguh dan berkelanjutan bagi wilayah tersebut.*

**Keywords:** *Environmental Challenges, Northeastern Nigeria, Religious Moderation, Sustainable Practices, Islamic Teachings.*

## **Abstract**

Northeastern Nigeria faces a countless of environmental challenges, including desertification, deforestation, water scarcity, and the adverse effects of climate change. These issues not only threaten the region's ecological balance but also jeopardize the livelihoods, health, and social stability of its communities. Amidst these challenges, religious moderation emerges as a pivotal factor in fostering sustainable environmental stewardship. This paper explores the intersection of religious moderation and environmental management, emphasizing the influential role of religious leaders and Islamic teachings in promoting eco-friendly practices. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative interviews with community leaders and quantitative analysis of environmental indicators, the study identifies key mechanisms through which religious moderation contributes to mitigating environmental degradation. Findings reveal that religious leaders who advocate for balance, stewardship (Khilafah), and justice (Adl) significantly enhance community engagement in conservation efforts and the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices. Additionally, case studies highlight successful initiatives where religious institutions collaborated with governmental and non-governmental organizations to address water scarcity and reforestation. However, the research also identifies challenges such as poverty, limited educational resources, and the rise of extremism that hinder the full potential of religious moderation in environmental governance. The paper concludes by recommending a collaborative framework between religious bodies, government agencies, and local communities to amplify the impact of religious moderation on environmental sustainability. By integrating religious principles with environmental policies, Northeastern Nigeria can navigate its ecological challenges more effectively, ensuring a harmonious balance between development and conservation. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of religion in environmental sustainability and provides actionable insights for policymakers and religious leaders aiming to foster a resilient and sustainable future for the region.

**Keywords:** Environmental Challenges, Northeastern Nigeria, Religious Moderation, Sustainable Practices, Islamic Teachings.

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

Northeastern Nigeria, a region known for its rich cultural and religious diversity, is currently grappling with severe environmental challenges that threaten the livelihoods of its inhabitants. The region, which includes states such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, is particularly vulnerable to desertification, deforestation, and the effects of climate change, including irregular rainfall patterns and increasing temperatures. These environmental issues have exacerbated the socio-economic conditions in the region, contributing to poverty, food insecurity, and displacement of communities (Molyneux-Hodgson & Shehu, 2014).

Desertification is one of the most critical environmental challenges in Northeastern Nigeria. The process of desertification, driven by both natural and human factors, leads to the degradation of arable land, turning it into desert. The region's proximity to the Sahara Desert makes it particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon. Overgrazing, deforestation, and unsustainable agricultural practices have contributed significantly to the loss of vegetation cover, thereby accelerating soil erosion and desertification (Shefiu, 2024).

According to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), more than 60% of the land in Northeastern Nigeria is at risk of desertification. The encroachment of desert lands has led to the displacement of farming communities, reduced agricultural productivity, and increased food insecurity (Nche, 2020). The loss of arable land forces communities to abandon their traditional farming practices and migrate to urban areas in search of livelihoods, leading to increased urban poverty and social tensions.

The impact of desertification extends beyond agriculture; it also affects water resources, biodiversity, and the overall ecosystem. The drying up of rivers and streams, coupled with the reduction of groundwater levels, has made access to water more difficult for both humans and livestock (Shehu, 2023). This scarcity of water exacerbates the competition for resources, leading to conflicts between communities, particularly between farmers and herders.

The environmental challenges in Northeastern Nigeria have far-reaching socio-economic impacts. The loss of arable land and the degradation of natural resources have led to reduced agricultural yields, exacerbating food insecurity in a region already plagued by poverty and conflict. The Boko Haram insurgency, which has destabilized the region since 2009, has further compounded these challenges, as the conflict has displaced millions of people and disrupted traditional agricultural practices. The intersection of environmental degradation and conflict has created a humanitarian crisis, with millions of people in need of urgent assistance (Shehu, 2023).

The region's forests and woodlands, once a source of biodiversity and ecological stability, have been severely depleted due to human activities. The primary drivers of deforestation in the region include the expansion of agricultural land, illegal logging, and the use of wood for fuel (Shehu, 2023). The high dependency on firewood and charcoal for cooking and heating, especially in rural areas, has led to the over-exploitation of forest resources.

The consequences of deforestation are manifold. The loss of tree cover accelerates soil erosion, reduces soil fertility, and disrupts the hydrological cycle. This, in turn, leads to the loss of biodiversity as habitats are destroyed and species are displaced. Moreover, deforestation contributes to the exacerbation of climate change, as forests play a crucial role in carbon sequestration.

The social impact of deforestation is also profound. As forests are depleted, communities that depend on forest resources for their livelihoods, such as those involved in the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and traditional medicine, face economic hardships. Additionally, the loss of forests affects the cultural practices and traditions of indigenous communities who have historically relied on forest ecosystems for their sustenance and spiritual well-being (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024).

Water scarcity is a pressing issue in Northeastern Nigeria, exacerbated by both environmental and human factors. The region's water resources have been severely strained by a combination of reduced rainfall, over-extraction of groundwater, and the shrinking of major water bodies. Lake Chad, once one of the largest freshwater lakes in Africa, has dramatically reduced in size over the past few decades, shrinking by more than 90% since the 1960s (Malik

dkk., 2023). The decline of Lake Chad has had catastrophic consequences for the millions of people who depend on it for fishing, agriculture, and livestock rearing.

The scarcity of water has led to significant challenges for communities in Northeastern Nigeria. Agricultural activities, which are heavily dependent on water availability, have been severely affected, leading to reduced crop yields and increased food insecurity. The lack of water also impacts public health, as access to clean and safe drinking water becomes more difficult, leading to the spread of waterborne diseases such as cholera and diarrhea (Molyneux-Hodgson & Shehu, 2014).

Moreover, water scarcity has heightened competition for water resources, leading to conflicts between different user groups, particularly between farmers and herders. These conflicts are often exacerbated by the effects of climate change, which has made rainfall patterns more unpredictable and increased the frequency of droughts.

Climate change is a cross-cutting issue that amplifies the environmental challenges in Northeastern Nigeria. The region has experienced significant changes in weather patterns, including increased temperatures, irregular rainfall, and more frequent and severe droughts (Malik dkk., 2023). These changes have far-reaching implications for agriculture, water resources, and the overall resilience of communities.

The impacts of climate change are particularly severe for the agricultural sector, which is the backbone of the region's economy. Changes in rainfall patterns have made it difficult for farmers to predict planting and harvesting seasons, leading to crop failures and reduced food production (Sherman dkk., 2022). Additionally, the increased frequency of extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, has further destabilized agricultural activities, exacerbating food insecurity in the region.

Climate change also affects the health and well-being of communities in Northeastern Nigeria. Increased temperatures and changing precipitation patterns have contributed to the spread of diseases such as malaria and meningitis, which are sensitive to climatic conditions (Rees dkk., 2015). Moreover, the impacts of climate change have heightened the vulnerabilities

of already marginalized groups, including women and children, who are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and resource scarcity.

The environmental challenges in Northeastern Nigeria have profound social and economic implications for the region's communities. The degradation of natural resources, coupled with the impacts of climate change, has exacerbated poverty, food insecurity, and social inequality. As agricultural productivity declines, many households are unable to meet their basic needs, leading to increased poverty levels and dependence on humanitarian assistance.

The loss of livelihoods in rural areas has also led to increased migration to urban centers, where the influx of people has put pressure on already strained urban infrastructure and services. This rural-urban migration has contributed to the growth of informal settlements and the rise of urban poverty, creating new challenges for urban governance and social stability (Molyneux-Hodgson & Shehu, 2014).

Furthermore, the environmental challenges in Northeastern Nigeria have contributed to the rise of conflicts over natural resources. As competition for land, water, and other resources intensifies, communities are increasingly embroiled in disputes, leading to violence and insecurity. These conflicts are often compounded by ethnic and religious tensions, further destabilizing the region.

The environmental challenges facing Northeastern Nigeria are complex and multifaceted, with far-reaching implications for the region's communities. Desertification, deforestation, water scarcity, and climate change are not only ecological problems but also social and economic issues that threaten the livelihoods and well-being of millions of people.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates environmental management with social and economic development, as well as conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It is imperative for the Nigerian government, in collaboration with local communities, international organizations, and civil society, to develop and implement

strategies that promote sustainable resource management, climate resilience, and social cohesion in the region.

Religion plays a central role in the lives of the people of Northeastern Nigeria, shaping their worldview, values, and practices. Islam, which is the dominant religion in the region, provides a framework for ethical conduct, including the stewardship of the environment. The Qur'an and Hadith contain numerous teachings that emphasize the importance of preserving the natural world and avoiding wastefulness. For instance, the concept of *Khilafah* (stewardship) in Islam underscores the responsibility of humans to care for the earth as trustees of God's creation. Similarly, the principle of *'Adl* (justice) in Islamic jurisprudence calls for fairness in the use of natural resources, ensuring that they are preserved for future generations (Ma'arif dkk., 2023).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the potential of religious moderation as a tool for addressing environmental challenges in Northeastern Nigeria. Religious moderation, which advocates for a balanced approach to religious practices and beliefs, can play a crucial role in promoting environmental sustainability. By encouraging communities to adopt a moderate and balanced approach to resource use, religious leaders can help mitigate the environmental degradation that threatens the region. This paper will examine the theological foundations of environmental stewardship in Islam, the role of religious leaders in promoting sustainable practices, and the challenges and opportunities of integrating religious moderation into environmental governance in Northeastern Nigeria.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

The study will be conducted in Northeastern Nigeria, specifically in the states of Borno, Yobe, Gombe, Adamawa, Bauchi, and Taraba, which face both environmental issues and religious diversity. In order to collect data, a mixed-methods approach was used, which combines quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews, focus group discussions) methods. The study will target: Religious leaders (both Islamic and Christian), Community leaders, environmental experts, and Citizens, particularly youth affected by environmental challenges. Focus group discussions were used to

interact with community members and learn about their opinions on how religion may contribute to environmental solutions. Regarding Data Analysis: In order to identify links between religious teachings and environmental concerns, a survey of religious texts and environmental reports will be conducted, and interviews and group discussions will be assessed for recurring themes pertaining to religion and environmental protection. Throughout the study, participants' confidentiality will be maintained, and they will provide their informed permission. It is crucial to be sensitive to religious and cultural traditions. It is anticipated that the study will demonstrate how religious moderation can support environmental sustainability in Northeastern Nigeria and offer recommendations for how religious organizations might be instrumental in tackling environmental issues. This concise methodology focuses on understanding how religion influences attitudes towards the environment in the region and how religious leaders and teachings can be part of the solution.

## **C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Religious moderation is a concept that has gained significant attention in contemporary discourse, particularly in regions marked by religious diversity and tension. The term “moderation” in the religious context refers to the balance and avoidance of extremes in beliefs and practices. It is a principle that encourages tolerance, understanding, and coexistence among individuals of different faiths and within the same religious community. In Islam, the concept of moderation is deeply rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith, where it is referred to as *Wasatiyyah*, which translates to the “middle way” or “balanced path”. This essay explores the concept of religious moderation, its components, and its significance in fostering peaceful coexistence and addressing contemporary challenges.

### **1. Religious Moderation (*Wasatiyyah*)**

Religious moderation, or *Wasatiyyah*, is derived from the Arabic root word “wasat”, which means middle, moderate, or balanced. It is a concept that emphasizes the importance of avoiding extremism in



religious beliefs and practices (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024). In Islam, moderation is considered a defining characteristic of the Muslim community, as highlighted in the Qur'an: *"And thus We have made you a just (moderate) community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you..."* (Qur'an, 2:143).

This verse underscores the importance of balance in religious life, where Muslims are encouraged to uphold justice, avoid excesses, and maintain a moderate stance in all aspects of life. Therefore, the concept of Wasatiyyah is not limited to religious practices alone; it extends to all facets of life, including social, political, and economic dimensions. It advocates for a balanced approach to life, where individuals and communities strive to achieve harmony between their spiritual and worldly obligations. In this context, Wasatiyyah serves as a guiding principle for Muslims to navigate the complexities of modern life while staying true to their religious values.

## **2. Components of Religious Moderation**

Religious moderation is a multifaceted concept that encompasses several key components, including balance, tolerance, justice, and mercy. These components are interrelated and collectively contribute to the overall understanding and practice of moderation in religion.

### **a) Balance (*Tawazun*)**

Balance, or *Tawazun*, is a fundamental component of religious moderation. It refers to the ability to maintain equilibrium in one's beliefs, actions, and interactions with others. In the context of Islam, balance is reflected in the way Muslims are encouraged to fulfill their religious obligations without neglecting their responsibilities towards their families, communities, and society at large (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasized the importance of balance, stating that: *"Your body has a right over you, your eyes have a right over you, and your wife has a right over you"*.

This Hadith highlights the need to balance one's spiritual and physical needs, ensuring that neither is neglected. Therefore, Balance also extends to the way Muslims engage with the world around them.

It encourages a balanced approach to worldly affairs, where one does not become overly attached to material possessions or excessively detached from them. This balanced outlook helps individuals avoid the extremes of asceticism and materialism, fostering a more harmonious and fulfilling life.

b) Tolerance (*Tasamah*).

Tolerance, or *Tasamah*, is another critical component of religious moderation. It refers to the willingness to accept and respect the beliefs, practices, and rights of others, even when they differ from one's own. In Islam, tolerance is a key virtue that is encouraged in both interfaith and intra-faith relations. The Qur'an states: "*There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong*" (Qur'an, 2:256).

This verse emphasizes the importance of respecting individual choice in matters of faith, promoting a culture of tolerance and coexistence. Therefore, tolerance in religious moderation also involves recognizing the diversity within the Muslim community itself. Islam is a global religion with followers from various cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Religious moderation calls for the acceptance of this diversity and the rejection of sectarianism and division. By fostering an inclusive environment, religious moderation helps to strengthen the unity of the *Muslim Ummah* (community) and promotes peaceful coexistence with people of other faiths.

c) Justice (*‘Adl*).

Justice or *‘Adl* is a cornerstone of religious moderation. It refers to the fair and equitable treatment of all individuals, regardless of their background or beliefs (Umar Fauzan, 2023). In Islam, justice is a divine command, as the Qur'an states, "Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice" (Qur'an, 4:58).

According to this verse, justice is not limited to legal or judicial matters; it extends to all aspects of life, including social, economic, and political spheres. Therefore, religious moderation emphasizes the

importance of justice in maintaining social harmony and preventing conflicts. In the context of governance, it calls for leaders to rule with fairness and integrity, ensuring that the rights of all citizens are protected. In personal interactions, it encourages individuals to treat others with fairness and to avoid prejudice or discrimination. By upholding justice, religious moderation helps to create a society where peace and stability can thrive.

d) Mercy (*Rahmah*).

Mercy, or *Rahmah*, is a central component of religious moderation. It refers to compassion, kindness, and empathy towards others. In Islam, mercy is considered one of the most important attributes of God, as reflected in the Qur'an, where God is frequently described as: "*The Most Merciful, The Most Compassionate*" (Qur'an, 1:1). In this verse, Muslims are encouraged to embody this attribute in their interactions with others, regardless of their faith or background.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) exemplified mercy in his conduct, as demonstrated by his treatment of both his followers and his adversaries. He said, "*Whoever is not merciful to others will not be treated mercifully*". This Hadith highlights the reciprocal nature of mercy and its importance in building a compassionate and caring society.

Therefore, mercy in religious moderation also involves forgiveness and leniency. It encourages individuals to forgive others for their mistakes and to show leniency in judgment. By promoting mercy, religious moderation helps to prevent the escalation of conflicts and fosters a culture of peace and reconciliation.

### **3. The Significance of Religious Moderation**

Religious moderation plays a vital role in addressing the challenges of extremism, intolerance, and conflict in contemporary society. In a world where religious differences are often exploited to justify violence and division, the principles of moderation offer a pathway to peaceful coexistence and mutual respect (Cholil, 2023). By promoting balance, tolerance, justice, and mercy, religious moderation helps to create an

environment where individuals of different faiths can live together in harmony.

In the context of Northeastern Nigeria, where religious tensions and conflicts have caused significant social and economic disruptions, religious moderation offers a framework for reconciliation and peacebuilding. By encouraging dialogue and understanding between different religious communities, it helps to reduce the risk of conflict and promotes social cohesion. Moreover, religious moderation provides a counter-narrative to the ideologies of extremism and radicalism, offering an alternative vision of religion that is based on compassion, inclusivity, and respect for human dignity.

#### **4. Religious Perspectives on Environmental Stewardship**

The data would likely show that religious institutions, such as mosques, churches, and religious organizations, have the potential to play a crucial role in raising awareness about environmental challenges. Religious leaders often serve as moral guides in these communities, and their involvement in promoting environmental consciousness can influence positive behavior among their followers. The study's interviews and focus groups with religious leaders are likely to reveal that both Islamic and Christian teachings in Northeastern Nigeria emphasize environmental care and stewardship. Religious moderation, as opposed to extremism, emphasizes a balanced approach to life that includes taking care of the environment. The study would draw attention to the necessity of religious organizations taking a more active role in environmental campaigns and projects.

#### **5. Public Attitudes toward the Environment and its Challenges in Northeastern Nigeria**

Questionnaire responses would probably show that a sizable section of the populace believes that their religious convictions and how they handle environmental concerns are related. Many respondents can say that their faith motivates them to abstain from destructive behaviors like waste, pollution, and deforestation. The results may also indicate that there is still a lack of awareness regarding environmental issues, with

some people being unaware of the severity of environmental deterioration in their area.

Key environmental issues in the area, including water scarcity, deforestation, and desertification, will be documented by the study. It might show that although religious communities acknowledge these issues, more organized interventions are required to connect religious teachings with workable environmental solutions, such as waste management, water conservation, and tree planting.

The study might also draw attention to obstacles that keep religious communities from properly tackling environmental issues, like a lack of knowledge, a lack of funding, and unstable political environments. More deliberate education and sensitization are needed since some religious leaders may believe that environmental issues are less important than other urgent social or religious issues.

In order to address the environmental disaster in Northeastern Nigeria, the study's conclusions are likely to suggest increased cooperation between government organizations, religious institutions, and environmental organizations. Promoting sustainable habits may be accomplished through incorporating religion teachings into community projects and environmental regulations.

The study's findings highlight the beneficial influence of religious moderation on environmental attitudes, but further concerted efforts are required to fully realize this potential in order to address the region's urgent environmental issues.

## **D. CONCLUSION**

The concept of religious moderation is a powerful tool for fostering peace, tolerance, and understanding in a world marked by religious diversity and tension. By emphasizing the principles of balance, tolerance, justice, and mercy, religious moderation provides a framework for individuals and communities to navigate the complexities of modern life while staying true to their religious values. In regions like Northeastern Nigeria, where religious

tensions have led to conflict and instability, the promotion of religious moderation is essential for building a peaceful and cohesive society.

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