



Pesantren and the Promise of a Peaceful Jihad

Ronald Lukens-Bull¹

Abstract: This article examines Indonesia's pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) as vital institutions that promote tolerance, pluralism, and civic responsibility through what Ronald Lukens-Bull calls a "peaceful jihad." Drawing on anthropological theory and ethnographic research, the paper argues that pesantren's conservatism is not a source of radicalism but the foundation of a moral and inclusive Islam. Rooted in classical scholarship and Sufi mysticism, pesantren integrate spiritual discipline, ethical formation, and community engagement. They reinterpret jihad as moral striving rather than warfare, cultivating pious citizens committed to harmony and social justice. The study traces how pesantren negotiate modernity—integrating national curricula, embracing technology, and engaging in civic activism—while preserving their traditional ethos. Linked to Nahdlatul Ulama and its youth organisation Banser, pesantren extend their values into public life by defending Indonesia's pluralist state ideology, Pancasila. Through this synthesis of tradition, mysticism, and civic service, pesantren demonstrate that Islamic education can sustain faith and foster democracy, offering a compelling model of non-violent religious reform in the contemporary Muslim world.

Keywords: pesantren; peaceful jihad; Indonesia; Nahdlatul Ulama; Sufism; pluralism; Islamic education; modernity; civic Islam; anthropology of Islam

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¹ University of North Florida, United States, e-mail: ronald.lukens-bull@fulbrightmail.org

Introduction

In contemporary debates on Islam, particularly in the wake of global concerns about terrorism and radicalization, few institutions are as widely misunderstood as Indonesia's pesantren. To outside observers, Islamic boarding schools are often portrayed as potential incubators of extremism. This suspicion draws on associations with Pakistani madrasas or Quranic schools in North Africa that have, in some instances, been linked to radical ideologies. Yet such generalizations obscure profound diversity within Muslim educational traditions. In Indonesia—the world's most populous Muslim-majority country—pesantren have long played the opposite role: not fomenting radicalism but cultivating moderation, pluralism, and civic responsibility.

The paradox at the heart of Indonesian pesantren is that their conservatism fosters tolerance. While often dismissed in Western media as archaic, pesantren are simultaneously guardians of classical Islamic tradition and innovators in civic and moral education. Their emphasis on mystical practice, ethical formation, and patient study has produced graduates who are both devout Muslims and defenders of Indonesia's pluralist society. This dynamic is encapsulated in the concept of "peaceful jihad," a term Ronald Lukens-Bull¹ developed to describe how pesantren interpret struggle in God's cause. Far from being violent, jihad in this context is framed as education, discipline, service, and defense of diversity.

The term jihad has been contested globally. In policy circles and the media, it is often conflated with terrorism or "holy war." Yet classical Islamic scholarship distinguished between the greater jihad (*al-jihād al-akbar*), the inner struggle against the self, and the lesser jihad (*al-jihād al-asghar*), the public struggle for justice and community. In pesantren discourse, both dimensions are emphasized, but always in ways that resist violence. The true enemies are selfishness, ignorance, corruption, and injustice, not non-Muslims or other Muslims. The peaceful jihad of pesantren is thus a powerful corrective to reductionist global discourses on Islam.

The anthropology of Islam provides useful theoretical grounding here. Talal Asad's notion of Islam as a "discursive tradition" highlights the ways Islamic practice is continually reinterpreted in relation to changing contexts.² Pesantren exemplify

¹ Ronald Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

² Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986).

this: they are rooted in centuries-old traditions of Sufism and Shāfiī jurisprudence but reinterpret these legacies in response to globalization, modernization, and the Indonesian state. At the same time, an emphasis on “lived religion” reminds us that pesantren are not abstract institutions but communities of practice where values are formed through daily routines, rituals, and relationships. By bringing together textual study, mystical practice, and civic engagement, pesantren show how jihad can be lived as peace rather than violence.

This paper explores pesantren as guardians of tradition, schools of mysticism, negotiators of modernity, bulwarks against radicalism, and defenders of civic responsibility. In doing so, it argues that pesantren embody a coherent vision of peaceful jihad that has significance not only for Indonesia but also for global conversations about Islam, pluralism, and the contested meaning of jihad itself.

Tradition as Foundation

The origins of pesantren are deeply entwined with the spread of Islam in Java during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The legendary Wali Songo, or Nine Saints, are remembered not as conquerors but as cultural innovators. They spread Islam through accommodation, adapting Javanese cultural forms such as wayang (shadow puppetry), gamelan (percussion orchestras), and slametan (communal meals) to convey Islamic teachings.³ Instead of suppressing local traditions, they reinterpreted them within Islamic frameworks, allowing Islam to become indigenized in the Javanese context. This legacy of cultural synthesis remains central to pesantren identity.

At their intellectual heart, pesantren are anchored by the *kitab kuning* (“yellow books”), a corpus of classical texts covering jurisprudence, mysticism, ethics, grammar, and Qur’anic exegesis. Predominantly rooted in the Shāfiī school of law, these texts link Indonesian Muslims to global Islamic scholarship while grounding them in conservative interpretive traditions. The pedagogy emphasizes patience, humility, and discipline: students spend years memorizing, reciting, and interpreting texts under the close supervision of the kyai.

³ Ronald Lukens-Bull, “The Traditions of Pluralism, Accommodation, and Anti-Radicalism in the Pesantren Community,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2008.2.1.1-15>.

The figure of the *kyai* is crucial. Unlike imams in other contexts, who often have primarily ritual roles, *kyai* embody both scholarly authority and charismatic spiritual leadership.⁴ Their legitimacy derives not only from mastery of texts but also from *barakah* (spiritual blessing) believed to flow from their piety and genealogical connections to the Wali Songo. The *kyai* are often seen as living links between the present and the sacred past, embodying continuity and authority.

The daily life of *pesantren* reflects this traditional ethos. Students live in simple dormitories (*pondok*), share meals, and follow structured routines of prayer, Qur'an recitation, and classical text study. Instruction occurs through methods like *sorogan*, in which individual students recite texts and receive corrections, and *bandongan*, where the *kyai* lectures to groups. These practices cultivate discipline, humility, and attentiveness. Even when *pesantren* integrate modern classrooms and curricula, the ethos of simplicity and moral formation remains paramount.⁵

Tradition in *pesantren* is not static. The oft-quoted maxim *al-muhāfazatu 'ala al-qadīm al-sālih wa al-akhdhu bi al-jadīd al-aslah*—"to preserve the old that is good and adopt the new that is better"—captures their philosophy. Tradition is a resource to be preserved and reinterpreted, not a relic to be frozen in time.⁶ In this sense, *pesantren* exemplify the anthropology of continuity and change: conserving the intellectual and spiritual legacies of Islam while integrating innovations that serve new needs.

Mysticism and Pluralism

If jurisprudence anchors *pesantren* intellectually, mysticism shapes their spiritual ethos. From their earliest history, *pesantren* have been intertwined with Sufi orders (*tarekat*). As Lukens-Bull⁷ notes, Islam came to Indonesia during a period when Sufism was integral to Islamic identity. Mystical practices—*zikir* (remembrance of God), *istighāṣah* (intercessory prayers), and pilgrimages to saints' tombs (*ziyārah*)—

⁴ Ronald Lukens-Bull, "Pesantren Education and Religious Harmony: Background, Visits, and Impressions," in *Religious Harmony: Problems, Practice and Education in Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: CRCS-UGM, 2004), 311–12.

⁵ Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*, 25–30.

⁶ Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*, 9.

⁷ Ronald Lukens-Bull, "The Traditions of Pluralism, Accommodation, and Anti-Radicalism in the Pesantren Community," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2008.2.1.1-15>.

remain embedded in pesantren life. These practices emphasize humility, discipline, and inward transformation.

Mysticism reframes jihad as an inner struggle. Students are taught that the true enemy is the ego (*nafs*), not external foes. Through ascetic practices, repetition of divine names, and obedience to spiritual mentors, they cultivate humility and discipline. This inward orientation deflects religious zeal away from militancy. As Lukens-Bull⁸ observes, mysticism “naturally breeds tolerance.” If one’s greatest battle is with one’s own vices, then others—whether non-Muslims or Muslims of different traditions—are not enemies but companions on parallel paths.

This ethos fosters both internal and external pluralism. Internally, pesantren accommodate diverse practices: loyalty to the Shafi’i madhhab is balanced with tolerance for local customs such as slametan and saint veneration. Though reformist critics have condemned these as bid’a (illegitimate innovations), pesantren affirm them as valid expressions of piety.⁹ Externally, mysticism encourages engagement with other religions. At a 2004 conference on religious harmony in Yogyakarta, pesantren students demonstrated eagerness to dialogue with Christians and Buddhists. Observers remarked on their openness, linking it to mystical training that emphasizes humility before God.¹⁰

The role of the kyai as mystical guide reinforces this ethos. Many kyai are affiliated with Sufi orders and are believed to have esoteric knowledge. Students approach them not only for textual learning but also for spiritual guidance, sometimes physically bowing or kissing their hand. This discipleship model cultivates obedience and spiritual depth, anchoring mystical practice in lived relationships. Mysticism thus becomes both personal discipline and communal ethos, shaping pesantren into spaces where tolerance is not abstract but embodied.

Negotiating Modernity

While rooted in tradition and mysticism, pesantren are also sites of negotiation with modernity. Modernization has often been imagined ambivalently within pesantren

⁸ Lukens-Bull, “The Traditions of Pluralism, Accommodation, and Anti-Radicalism in the Pesantren Community,” 2-3.

⁹ Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*, 12-15.

¹⁰ Lukens-Bull, “Pesantren Education and Religious Harmony: Background, Visits, and Impressions,” 311-12.

discourse: both as a danger that brings moral decay and as a malleable tool that can be shaped by religious values. This dual perspective captures the complexity of pesantren's engagement with change.

Colonialism, the nationalist struggle, and Indonesia's independence profoundly shaped pesantren. In the late colonial period, Dutch schools began offering secular curricula in competition with pesantren. After independence, government policies encouraged standardization and integration of national curricula. To remain relevant, many pesantren incorporated mathematics, science, and civics alongside kitab kuning.¹¹ By the late twentieth century, pesantren had become hybrid institutions, combining classical Islamic sciences with modern education.

A striking example is Pesantren Al-Hikam in Malang, founded by Hasyim Muzadi. Unlike traditional pesantren that serve adolescents, Al-Hikam targeted university students enrolled in secular majors. These students lived in pesantren dormitories, followed routines of prayer and zikir, and studied classical texts, while simultaneously pursuing degrees in law, business, or agriculture. This model allowed young Muslims to participate in globalization while maintaining religious discipline.¹²

Pesantren discourse often highlights modernity's dangers. Western consumerism, Hollywood media, and global capitalism are portrayed as threats to moral integrity. Teachers lament that Indonesia's decline stems from abandoning the "values of 1945"—the ideals of sincerity, independence, and simplicity associated with independence-era leaders.¹³ Yet modernity is also framed as flexible: science and technology can be embraced if infused with Islamic ethics. The maxim "preserve the old that is good, adopt the new that is better" guides this approach.

Central to this negotiation are values: *ikhhlās* (sincerity), *kemandirian* (independence), *kesederhanaan* (simplicity), and *barākah* (blessing). These values moralize modernity, ensuring that new tools are used for just ends. Graduates are expected not only to succeed professionally but to embody ethical commitments. A business leader should pursue fairness, not exploitation; a lawyer should defend justice, not corruption. Education is framed not just as knowledge acquisition but as character formation.¹⁴

¹¹ Lukens-Bull, "Pesantren Education and Religious Harmony: Background, Visits, and Impressions," 310-11.

¹² Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*, 25-30.

¹³ Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*, 9-10.

¹⁴ Lukens-Bull, *A Peaceful Jihad*, 7-8.

Pesantren as Bulwarks of Civic Pluralism

The suspicion that pesantren might harbor radicals intensified after the Bali bombings in 2002 and global discourses linking madrasas to terrorism. Yet ethnographic and historical evidence points in the opposite direction. Pesantren have long served as stabilizing institutions, transmitting conservative classical Islam that resists radical reinterpretations. Their emphasis on patient scholarship and mystical discipline inoculates students against simplistic radical slogans.¹⁵

Pesantren are closely tied to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organization. NU was founded in 1926 by pesantren leaders to defend traditional Islam against Wahhabi reformism and colonial policies. Today, NU's ideology of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah—defined by adherence to a madhhab, Sufism, and consensus—anchors pesantren in moderation.¹⁶ Through NU, pesantren have consistently defended Pancasila, Indonesia's pluralist state ideology, against Islamist attempts to legislate shari'ah.

The civic ethos of pesantren is embodied in Banser, NU's youth militia. Banser openly identifies as pro-NKRI (Unitary Republic of Indonesia) and pro-Pancasila, explicitly rejecting transnational Islamist movements and the idea of a caliphate.¹⁷ Its most visible actions include guarding churches during Christmas services and protecting minority Muslim groups such as Shi'a and Ahmadiyah. These acts carry risks, often bringing Banser into conflict with hardline groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). Yet Banser persists, framing its defense of pluralism as both civic duty and religious obligation.

Critics sometimes dismiss Banser as vigilantes, but such comparisons ignore crucial differences. Unlike unregulated militias, Banser operates under NU's authority and pesantren values. Their training emphasizes obedience, humility, and civic responsibility. Their activism is framed not as sectarian militancy but as peaceful jihad: guarding diversity and unity through disciplined service.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ronald Lukens-Bull, "The Traditions of Pluralism, Accommodation, and Anti-Radicalism in the Pesantren Community," 1-3.

¹⁶ Ronald Lukens-Bull, "The Traditions of Pluralism, Accommodation, and Anti-Radicalism in the Pesantren Community," 2-4.

¹⁷ Ronald Lukens-Bull, "Defenders of Diversity? The Legacy of the 1965–66 Massacres for a Muslim Youth Organization in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 30, no. 1 (2023): 1–38, <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v30i1.21638>

¹⁸ Lukens-Bull, "Defenders of Diversity?," 16.

Conclusion

Pesantren embody a distinctive vision of Islam in Indonesia. By grounding themselves in classical scholarship and mystical practice, they conserve tradition while simultaneously negotiating modernity. Their ethos of discipline and humility deflects zeal away from militancy and toward service. Through NU and Banser, they extend their influence into civic life, defending Pancasila and protecting diversity. Taken together, these dimensions form a coherent vision of peaceful jihad: a struggle not to conquer others but to cultivate moral individuals and plural societies.

This peaceful jihad is not abstract but lived. It is found in classrooms where students memorize Qur'an alongside mathematics, in dormitories where humility is taught through shared meals, in village squares where Banser members guard churches, and in public discourse where pesantren leaders defend pluralism. The result is an Islam that is both traditional and tolerant, conservative and progressive. In a global context where jihad is too often equated with violence, pesantren remind us that the truest struggle in God's cause is to live humbly, to learn diligently, and to protect diversity.

The global relevance of pesantren lies in their demonstration that conservatism can foster pluralism and that fidelity to tradition can ground democracy. For policymakers, they suggest that supporting traditional religious institutions may be a more effective strategy for countering extremism than promoting abstract liberal reforms. For scholars, they offer a reminder of the importance of studying Islam in its local lived contexts. For Muslims worldwide, they exemplify how jihad can mean peace, education, and civic duty.

Challenges remain. Digital Islam spreads new radical ideologies, economic inequalities limit pesantren resources, and misperceptions persist both among hardliners and Western analysts. Yet pesantren's greatest strength lies in their vision: a commitment to peaceful jihad grounded in tradition, mysticism, and civic responsibility. As long as they sustain this vision, pesantren will remain vital institutions in Indonesia's pluralist democracy and significant voices in global conversations about Islam.

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