

The Role of Professional Ethics of Religious Counselors in Preventing Religious Polarization and Encouraging Moderate Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of professional ethics of religious counselors in preventing religious polarization and promoting moderate religious behavior in society. Using a qualitative field research approach, this study was conducted in the working area of Islamic religious counselors in the Tamalanrea District. Data were collected thru in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, involving religious counselors as key informants, supported by community leaders and the assisted community. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative techniques thru data reduction, data presentation, and inductive conclusion drawing, with data validity ensured thru source and method triangulation. The findings indicate that the consistent application of professional ethics such as honesty, objectivity, inclusivity, social responsibility, and respect for diversity serves as a fundamental basis for religious counseling practices. Professional ethics enable religious counselors to convey religious messages persuasively, dialogically, and contextually, thereby reducing exclusivist narratives and preventing the emergence of religious polarization. Additionally, ethical professionalism strengthens the role of religious counselors as moral exemplars, social mediators, and facilitators of intergroup dialog, significantly contributing to the internalization of moderate religious behavior (wasathiyah). This study concludes that strengthening the professional ethics of religious counselors is a strategic necessity to maintain religious harmony, enhance social cohesion, and improve socio-religious resilience in Indonesia's plural and multicultural society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious counselors have a strategic role in fostering the religious life of the community, particularly in shaping healthy, inclusive, and socially beneficial religious understanding and practices (Azis et al., 2025; Ismail, Ar-Rahman, et al., 2025; Lestari et al., 2025; Ridwan & Karmila, 2025; Setiawan & Karadona, 2025). The presence of religious counselors not only serves as conveyers of religious teachings but also as social agents contributing to maintaining harmony, stability, and social resilience in the community (Ali, 2024; Hasibuan, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). Thru outreach activities, religious values are internalized into social life so that religion is not only understood ritualistically but also manifested in attitudes and behaviors that reflect peace, justice, and brotherhood (Islam, 2025; Karadona et al., 2022; Karadona & Sari, 2025; Puja et al., 2025; Rahma et al., 2024; Susono et al., 2025).

In the contemporary social context, the role of religious counselors faces increasingly complex challenges. Globalization, advancements in information technology, and the massive use of digital media have changed social interaction patterns and the way society understands religious teachings. Religious information can be accessed very easily, but it is not always accompanied by adequate religious literacy. This condition opens up space for the development of narrow, exclusive, and even provocative religious interpretations, which have the potential to trigger religious polarization within society (Halimah et al., 2024; Situmeang & Sagala, 2023).

Religious polarization is characterized by the strengthening of mutual negation attitudes between groups, narrow fanaticism, and extreme tendencies in understanding and expressing religious teachings. This phenomenon not only threatens social harmony but also has the potential to weaken the unity and cohesion of society, especially in the context of Indonesia's plural and multicultural society (Haluti et al., 2025a; Yuniarto et al., 2025). Therefore, religious counseling is required to no longer focus solely on the delivery of normative teachings and rituals, but rather to be directed toward the formation of moderate, dialogical, and contextual religious behavior (Haluti et al., 2025b). In that situation, religious counselors hold a strategic position as actors who interact directly with grassroots communities. The proximity of religious counselors to the communities they serve makes them figures with significant influence in shaping the perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors of the community's religious practices. Religious counselors have the potential to become agents of religious moderation and bridges for dialog between various socio-religious groups. However, this strategic role cannot be optimally carried out without being supported by professionalism and a strong commitment to professional ethics.

The professional ethics of religious counselors serve as a moral foundation and normative guidelines in carrying out their counseling duties. The ethics include the principles of honesty in conveying religious messages, justice and non-discrimination, respect for differences in beliefs and social backgrounds, social responsibility, as well as the ability to maintain objectivity and neutrality in facing differences in religious views. The application of professional ethics is key to ensuring that religious counseling does not get caught up in specific interests, does not trigger conflicts, and remains oriented toward the broader welfare of the community (Huriani et al., 2022). When professional ethics are consistently upheld, religious counselors not only serve as religious communicators but also as moral exemplars, social mediators, and dialog facilitators. In that role, religious counselors are able to mitigate potential conflicts, avoid provocations, and foster values of tolerance, togetherness, and brotherhood amidst the diversity of society. Thus, religious counseling can function as a strategic instrument in preventing religious polarization and strengthening moderate religious behavior (Nababan et al., 2024; Widyaningrum & Fatonah, 2025a). However, the implementation of professional ethics in religious counseling practices still faces various challenges, both structural and cultural. Not all religious counselors possess a uniform level of competence, especially in aspects of persuasive public communication, contextual socio-religious literacy, and conflict management skills in the midst of a heterogeneous and dynamic society. The limitations of continuous training and the lack of professional capacity building also affect the quality of field extension practices. In addition, the influence of religious narratives that develop on social media often poses a unique challenge for religious counselors. Provocative, simplistic, and non-contextual religious narratives can quickly influence the way people think (Nurulita, 2021).

In such conditions, religious counselors are required to possess ethical steadfastness, communication skills, and digital literacy capabilities in order to present religious narratives that are soothing, moderate, and oriented toward unity. Based on the aforementioned description, this research becomes important to deeply examine how the professional ethics of religious counselors are implemented in field practices, as well as the extent of their role in preventing religious polarization and promoting the formation of moderate religious behaviors. This study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of professional, ethical, and relevant religious counseling in addressing the challenges of Indonesia's plural and multicultural social life.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a field study design to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the role of professional ethics of religious counselors in preventing religious polarization and encouraging the formation of moderate religious behavior within the community. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research is oriented toward uncovering meanings, subjective experiences, and social practices that occur in religious counseling activities. The focus of the research is directed toward the process of applying the professional ethics of religious counselors, the patterns of interaction and communication with the community, and the social dynamics that influence the effectiveness of counseling in responding to the potential for religious polarization (Jaya, 2020; Winarni, 2021).

The research was conducted in the working area of Islamic religious counselors in the Tamalanrea sub-district, with the research subjects consisting of religious counselors as the main informants, and community leaders and the community being counseled as supporting informants. The selection of informants was conducted purposively, considering the direct involvement of the informants in extension activities, practical experience, and the level of knowledge regarding the phenomenon being studied. Data collection techniques were carried out thru in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Interviews were used to explore the views and experiences of religious counselors regarding professional ethics and counseling strategies, observations were conducted to observe interaction patterns and social situations during counseling activities, while documentation served as supporting data in the form of activity reports, counseling materials, and relevant program notes (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024).

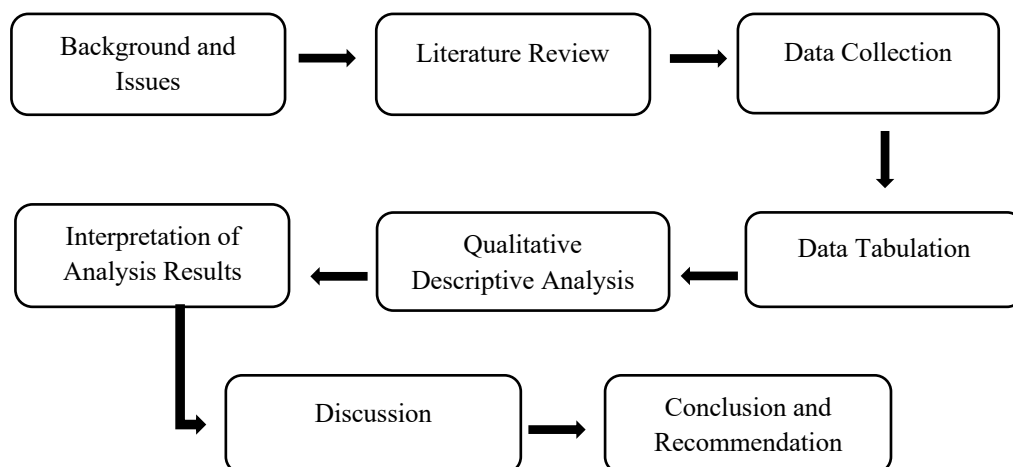


Figure 1. Research steps

The data obtained were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by sorting and focusing on data relevant to the research objectives, which was then presented in the form of thematic narratives according to categories and patterns of findings. Drawing conclusions is done inductively and continuously, taking into account the consistency and interrelation between themes. The validity of the data is maintained through source triangulation and method triangulation, as well as member checking with informants to ensure the alignment between the researcher's interpretation and the empirical reality intended by the informants. Here are the research steps:

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Implementation of Professional Ethics of Religious Counselors in Counseling Practices

Research results show that professional ethics is the main foundation in the execution of the duties of religious counselors amidst the increasingly diverse reality of society, both in terms of religious views, social backgrounds, and cultural orientations. Religious counselors not only serve as conveyors of religious messages but also as social actors with a moral responsibility to maintain order, harmony, and stability in religious life. Therefore, the application of professional ethics is an important prerequisite to ensure that extension activities do not create social tensions or religious polarization. In the practice of counseling, religious counselors are required to uphold the values of honesty, trustworthiness, objectivity, and commitment to national and religious values. Counselors who adhere to professional ethics tend to be cautious in delivering preaching materials, avoiding provocative narratives, hate speech, and the reinforcement of "us versus them" sentiments that have the potential to divide society. This ethical attitude is reflected in the ability of the counselors to choose polite diction, persuasive approaches, and the delivery of religious messages that are soothing and inclusive. A professional religious counselor positions themselves as a facilitator, companion, and mediator for the community, rather than as a sole authority imposing a specific religious interpretation (Makmun & Faizal, 2021). Professional ethics encourage religious counselors to respect the diversity of religious understandings that exist within society, as long as they do not contradict the fundamental principles of religious teachings and humanitarian values (Nabilah & Darmaningrum, 2023; Sihotang et al., 2024; Widyaningrum & Fatonah, 2025b). With this approach, religious counseling becomes a space for dialog and mutual learning, not an arena for rigid and exclusive ideological contests. In addition, the implementation of professional ethics is also evident in the ability of the counselors to read the social context of the target community (Wanto et al., 2024; Widyaningrum & Fatonah, 2025c). Ethical counselors do not present religious material in a textual and ahistorical manner, but rather relate it to social realities, community issues, and the needs faced by the congregation. This contextual approach makes religious counseling more relevant, adaptive, and capable of addressing real societal problems, such as social conflicts, intolerance, and religious disinformation (Nurulita, 2021; Rohman & Nugraha, 2017; Widyaningrum & Fatonah, 2025c).

Research findings also indicate that professional ethics serve as a self-control mechanism for religious counselors to avoid being trapped in practical political interests or transient public opinion currents. Counselors who uphold professional ethics tend to maintain independence, are not easily provoked, and are consistent in voicing the values of justice, peace, and brotherhood. This attitude strengthens the position of religious counselors as figures who are trusted and respected by the community across different groups. Thus, the implementation of professional ethics in counseling practices not only impacts the quality of preaching but also the social legitimacy of the religious counselor themselves. Professional ethics serve as a normative guideline that ensures religious counseling remains within the corridor of humanitarian values, tolerance, and national unity. This

finding emphasizes that the success of religious counseling in a pluralistic society is highly determined by the extent to which counselors can internalize and actualize professional ethics in every aspect of their duties and roles.

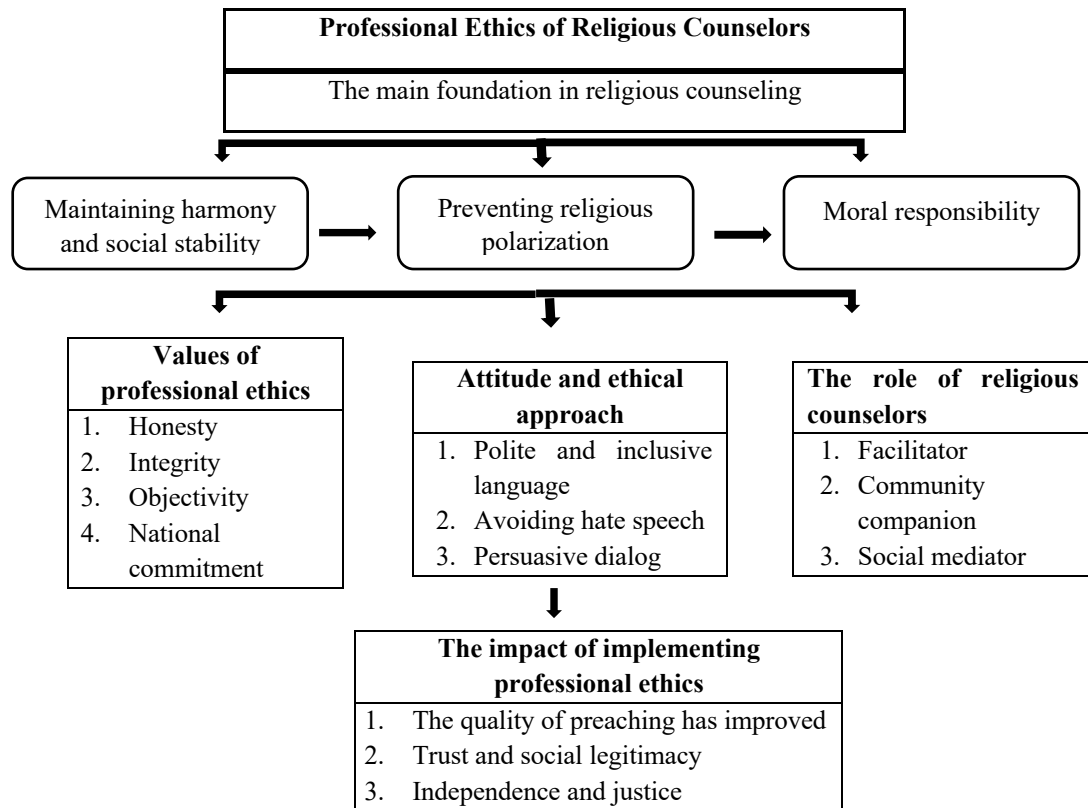


Figure 2. Professional ethics chart for religious counselors

3.2. The Role of Professional Ethics in Preventing Religious Polarization

Research findings indicate that religious polarization in society is often triggered by the delivery of religious messages that are simplistic, black-and-white, and unilateral truth claims that negate the legitimacy of other groups. Such patterns of religious communication not only narrow the space for dialog but also strengthen social fragmentation and deepen the psychological distance between religious groups. In this context, the professional ethics of religious counselors play a strategic role as an instrument to prevent the emergence and development of religious polarization at the grassroots level. Religious counselors who uphold professional ethics tend to prioritize the principles of prudence, tabayyun, and empathy in addressing differences in religious views. Counselors do not immediately provide normative judgments that are judgmental, but rather strive to understand the social, cultural, and theological backgrounds of those differences. This approach encourages the creation of a healthy and constructive dialog space, so that differences are not perceived as threats, but rather as social realities that need to be managed wisely. In extension practice, professional ethics are reflected in the attitude of the extension worker who does not exploit religious forums to foster exclusivist sentiments or the "us versus them" dichotomy. On the contrary, religious counselors strive to instill the awareness that the diversity of religious expressions and understandings is an unavoidable necessity in a pluralistic society. With inclusive and soothing narratives, religious counselors help the community develop attitudes of mutual respect and avoid negative prejudices against other groups (Widyaningrum & Fatonah, 2025a). This study also found that ethical religious counselors often play the role of social mediators when tensions or differing

views arise within the community. Thru a dialogical and consultative approach, the counselor strives to bridge different interests and perceptions without exacerbating conflicts. This mediative role demonstrates that professional ethics not only function at the normative level but also have practical implications in maintaining social stability and cohesion. Moreover, amidst the overwhelming flow of digital information often laden with provocative narratives and religious disinformation, professional ethics become an important guideline for religious counselors in managing information (Alza et al., 2024; Sundari et al., 2025). Ethical religious counselors are less likely to get caught up in the dissemination of divisive religious discourse and strive to correct the understanding of the community thru educational and argumentative approaches. This attitude significantly contributes to reducing the escalation of polarization originating from digital spaces and social media. This discussion reinforces the findings of various studies that state the presence of professional and ethical religious counselors can function as agents of social-religious conflict resolution. By making professional ethics the foundation of their work, religious counselors serve as a cooling system in society, especially amidst the increasing contestation of identity, politicization of religion, and social fragmentation. Therefore, strengthening the professional ethics of religious counselors has become an urgent need in efforts to maintain harmony and prevent ongoing religious polarization.

3.3. The Professional Ethics of Religious Counselors in Promoting Moderate Behavior

The research results indicate that the professional ethics of religious counselors play a significant role in encouraging the formation of moderate behavior (*wasathiyah*) within society. Religious counselors who understand and internalize professional ethics do not only focus on the textual delivery of religious doctrines but also relate them to the values of justice, balance, and social welfare. This approach helps the community understand religion as a system of values that is relevant to a dynamic and plural social life. Professional ethics encourage religious counselors to place moderation as the main principle in preaching and counseling. Ethical counselors tend to avoid religious narratives that are extreme, whether in the form of rigid radicalism or excessive liberalism that blurs the normative boundaries of religious teachings. On the contrary, the counselors prioritize a proportional, argumentative, and contextual approach in explaining religious teachings, so that the community does not get trapped in narrow or reactive understandings of differences. This study also found that the exemplary attitude of religious counselors is an important factor in the internalization of moderate behavior. Preachers who can maintain consistency between words and actions, and demonstrate open, fair, and non-discriminatory attitudes, indirectly become role models for the community. This exemplary behavior strengthens the message of religious moderation, as the values conveyed are not only understood cognitively but also experienced in real interactions in daily social life. In addition to lectures and religious guidance, ethical religious counselors also promote moderate behavior thru dialogical and participatory approaches. Religious counselors provide space for the community to express their views, questions, and even criticisms related to religious practices. This approach creates an inclusive and reflective learning atmosphere, so that the community becomes accustomed to addressing differences with an open and non-reactive attitude. In this context, professional ethics serve as a guideline to ensure that dialog remains within the corridors of mutual respect and upholding humanitarian values (Abdullah et al., 2026; Alda et al., 2025; Arqam et al., 2026; Fitriani et al., 2025; Ismail, Ammar, et al., 2025; Ismail, Putra, et al., 2025; Ismail, Ramadhan, et al., 2025; Munawarah et al., 2025; Pahmi et al., 2025; Rohani et al., 2025). Furthermore, research shows that the professional ethics of religious counselors contribute to shaping a collective awareness that religious moderation is not a compromise of religious teachings, but rather a manifestation of religious maturity. The counselor emphasizes that commitment to religious teachings must go hand in hand with respect for the law, national values, and the social rights of other citizens. This narrative

reinforces the public's understanding that moderate behavior is an integral part of substantive religious practice. (Makmun & Faizal, 2021; Nabilah & Darmaningrum, 2023; Nurulita, 2021; Sihotang et al., 2024). This discussion aligns with the concept of religious moderation, which emphasizes the balance between individual piety and social responsibility. The professional ethics of religious counselors serve as the main foundation in internalizing the values of religious moderation in a sustainable and contextual manner. By making professional ethics a work guideline, religious counselors not only function as messengers of religious messages but also as agents of social transformation that promote the creation of a peaceful, inclusive, and civilized religious life.

3.4. Implications of Professional Ethics on Religious Social Resilience

The research results show that the application of professional ethics by religious counselors not only impacts the attitude changes of individuals and target groups of counseling but also has broader implications for the religious social resilience of the community. Religious counselors who carry out their duties based on professional ethics principles such as honesty, moral responsibility, objectivity, and an inclusive attitude—are able to strengthen social cohesion in a pluralistic society. Professional ethics serve as a foundation for building harmonious social relations and preventing social fragmentation due to differences in religious understanding and expression. The implications of professional ethics are also evident in the increasing level of public trust toward religious counselors and religious institutions. Preachers who are consistent between their preaching messages and daily behavior tend to be perceived as credible and trustworthy figures. This trust becomes an important social capital in maintaining religious social stability, as the community is more open to receiving soothing and constructive religious messages. In the context of social resilience, public trust serves as a social glue capable of dampening potential conflicts and tensions between religious groups (Nabilah & Darmaningrum, 2023; Sundari et al., 2025; Wanto et al., 2024; Widyaningrum & Fatonah, 2025c). Furthermore, the professional ethics of religious counselors imply the creation of a healthy and sustainable space for religious dialog. Ethical religious counselors encourage open, dialogical, and participatory communication, so that differences in religious views can be discussed maturely without causing conflict. This dialog space becomes an important social mechanism in maintaining religious resilience, as it allows society to manage differences constructively and based on the value of mutual respect. In the long term, the application of professional ethics by religious counselors contributes to the creation of a harmonious and civilized religious life. Religious counselors not only serve as conveyors of religious teachings but also as guardians of the values of togetherness, tolerance, and social peace. With an ethical and moderate approach, religious counselors are able to build a collective awareness that religion functions as a source of unifying values, not as a tool for legitimizing conflict or group exclusivism (Makmun & Faizal, 2021; Nurulita, 2021). This study also shows that the social-religious resilience built thru the professional ethics of religious counselors has relatively strong resistance to the negative influences of globalization and uncontrolled digital information flows. Ethical counselors serve as clarifiers of religious information and moral references for the community in addressing sensitive issues that have the potential to divide. Thus, professional ethics become a mechanism for strengthening social resilience in the face of misinformation, hate speech, and the politicization of religion. Based on these findings, it can be asserted that strengthening the professional ethics of religious counselors is a strategic necessity in maintaining and enhancing religious social resilience in the contemporary era. Professional ethics are not only normative but also have practical functions as instruments for conflict prevention, strengthening religious moderation, and maintaining social harmony. Therefore, efforts to enhance the capacity of religious counselors thru training in professional ethics and religious

moderation are important steps to ensure the sustainability of a peaceful, inclusive, and civilized religious life..

4. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that professional ethics play a very important role in shaping the effectiveness of religious counselors in responding to the challenges of religious polarization and in promoting the formation of moderate religious behavior within society. The application of ethical principles, such as integrity, justice, objectivity, inclusivity, and respect for diversity, ensures that religious counseling activities remain oriented toward social harmony and public welfare, rather than ideological contestation or sectarian interests. Research findings indicate that religious counselors who consistently uphold professional ethics have a stronger position to serve not only as conveyers of religious teachings but also as trusted moral agents, mediators, and facilitators of dialog in a pluralistic social context. Professionalism based on ethics allows religious counselors to convey religious messages calmly, contextually, and persuasively, thereby preventing the development of exclusive, provocative, and divisive religious narratives, both in face-to-face interactions and in the digital space. Additionally, professional ethics significantly contribute to the process of internalizing moderate religious behavior by strengthening balanced, tolerant, and dialogical attitudes within the community. Thru ethical behavior and consistent exemplary conduct, religious counselors present themselves as role models who represent moderation, both in discourse and in religious practice, thereby strengthening public trust and enhancing socio-religious resilience. Based on these findings, this research emphasizes the importance of strengthening the professional ethics and competencies of religious counselors sustainably thru structured training, ethical capacity development, and the reinforcement of a framework oriented toward religious moderation. This effort becomes a strategic step to ensure that religious counseling continues to function as an important instrument in preventing religious polarization and maintaining a harmonious, inclusive, and civilized religious life in contemporary Indonesian society.

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