

Pesantren as the Centre of Global Ethics: Recontextualising Moral Teachings Amid the Digital World's Moral Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) as pivotal institutions in shaping global ethical awareness amid the growing moral crisis induced by digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI). As society becomes increasingly dominated by virtual interactions and algorithmic decision-making, the urgency of ethical reflection grounded in spiritual and humanistic values has become paramount. The research focuses on how pesantren traditions, deeply rooted in Islamic moral education (akhlak), can be recontextualised to offer a relevant ethical framework for contemporary challenges. Employing a qualitative approach, this study utilises library research and content analysis of classical pesantren texts, modern ethical theories, and moral education policies within the digital era.

The findings highlight that pesantren embody a distinctive synthesis of spiritual, social, and intellectual intelligence that can serve as a foundation for universal ethics. Core values such as sincerity (ikhlas), humility (tawadhu'), and moral accountability are essential to nurturing a digital civilisation guided by compassion and responsibility rather than technological supremacy. Therefore, pesantren are not only cultural and religious institutions but also centres of moral resilience capable of contributing meaningfully to global ethical discourse and promoting a more humane and wise digital future.

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Over the past two decades, global society has undergone the fastest social transformation in human history (Castells, 2010). The rise of digital technology and the expansion of global connectivity have radically altered the paradigms of thought, modes of interaction, and ways in which humans perceive moral reality (Floridi, 2020). The Internet, social media, and artificial intelligence have created vast opportunities for knowledge exchange, economic innovation, and social mobility (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Yet, alongside such progress has emerged a new ethical and spiritual crisis, signalling a deep imbalance between technological advancement and moral development (Bauman, 2013). Phenomena such as disinformation, hate speech,

digital exploitation, and the commodification of values reveal that technological progress does not necessarily entail moral progress (Turkle, 2017). In this context, there is an urgent need to rediscover authentic and contextual sources of ethics that may serve as a moral foundation for a global society losing its value orientation (Küng, 1993). One institution with immense potential to address this challenge is the pesantren—traditional Islamic educational institutions that have long served as moral and character-building strongholds in the Muslim world, particularly in Indonesia (Azra, 2019).

Pesantren function not merely as religious education institutions but also as centres of social transformation and ethical formation (Dhofier, 1994; Steenbrink, 1995). Within pesantren traditions, **akhlak** (morality) is the cornerstone of both education and social life (Al-Attas, 1980). Core values such as honesty, simplicity, patience, respect for teachers, and social responsibility are deeply rooted in Islamic spirituality (Madjid, 1997). This tradition integrates **ilm** (knowledge), **amal** (practice), and **adab** (ethics) into a holistic moral system. However, in the digital era marked by value relativism, extreme individualism, and algorithmic dominance, the pesantren's ethical system faces a new challenge: how to cultivate moral awareness in a world increasingly digitalised and losing depth of meaning (Han, 2017). This challenge requires a reinterpretation of classical moral teachings so that they remain relevant and applicable in digital life.

The global moral crisis born of the digital revolution is not merely behavioural but also epistemological and cultural (Floridi, 2020). Studies show a significant increase in cyberbullying, disinformation, and empathy deficits due to excessive digital consumption (Turkle, 2017; Ess, 2018). These phenomena mark a moral shift from **being** to **appearing**, from reflection to performativity (Han, 2017). In such a condition, spiritual ethics—emphasising inner reflection and self-awareness—has been marginalised by the logic of efficiency and algorithmic commercialisation (Bauman, 2013). Therefore, recontextualising pesantren ethics becomes relevant not only for Islamic education but also for the global ethical discourse seeking a new moral foundation for humanity (Küng, 1993; Nasr, 1996).

The discourse on global ethics has long been developed by Western thinkers such as Hans Küng (1993) in his **Global Ethic Project**, yet much of it remains rooted in secular humanism and modern rationalism. The Islamic perspective—particularly that derived from pesantren traditions—offers a more comprehensive ethical framework that unites rationality with transcendental spirituality (Nasr, 1996; Al-Attas, 1980). Through the **ta'dib** approach, pesantren emphasise the balance between intellect, heart, and action as the pathway to moral character formation (Azra, 2019). Hence, pesantren have the potential to make a significant contribution to the construction of a global ethic that is inclusive, spiritual, and humanistic. However, in international academic literature, pesantren are still often reduced to symbols of traditional or conservative religious education (Howell, 2014). This article seeks to reposition pesantren as centres for reconstructing global ethics capable

of addressing the challenges of the digital age through the paradigm of Islamic morality.

Historically, pesantren have demonstrated adaptability to changing times without losing their spiritual identity (Dhofier, 1994; Rahardjo, 2015). Since the era of the **Walisongo**, pesantren have played a crucial role in shaping social morality, integrating classical Islamic scholarship (**turāth**), and cultivating local Nusantara values (Azra, 2019). This synthesis has produced a contextual and humanistic Islamic ethic (Mulkhan, 2005). In a global context marked by value fragmentation and spiritual emptiness, pesantren values are increasingly relevant. The recontextualisation of **akhlak** teachings in pesantren is not a nostalgic return to the past but a creative process of reintroducing Islamic spirituality into modern digital discourse (Zarkasyi, 2021).

Previous research has examined the transformation of pesantren education in the digital era, yet most studies have focused on curriculum development, management, or technological innovation (Hasanah, 2022; Zarkasyi, 2021). Studies exploring pesantren ethics as a model for global ethics remain scarce and theoretically underdeveloped (Taylor, 2011). In the context of the global crisis of trust in moral institutions, pesantren hold the potential to become an alternative model of ethics grounded in contextual and universal Islamic spirituality. This study seeks to fill this gap by proposing a new paradigm that positions pesantren as global moral agents actively shaping ethical consciousness in the digital society.

The central argument of this article is that pesantren can function as centres of global ethics through the recontextualisation of **akhlak** teachings—transforming classical moral values to remain relevant in the digital context without losing their spiritual authenticity. Values such as sincerity (**ikhlas**), trustworthiness (**amanah**), discipline (**ta'adub**), brotherhood (**ukhuwah**), and social responsibility must be reinterpreted to respond to new ethical challenges in the digital realm, including online interaction, information ethics, and moral sustainability (Ess, 2018; Floridi, 2020). Accordingly, this article proposes a model of digital ethics based on pesantren morality: a moral framework that not only regulates online behaviour but also cultivates spiritual awareness and social responsibility among digital humans.

This article employs three interrelated layers of analysis. First, the theoretical layer explains the relationship between the Islamic concept of *akhlak* and contemporary global ethical theories. Second, the institutional layer analyses the role of pesantren as socio-religious institutions in instilling and recontextualising moral values through education and exemplary practice (Azra, 2019). Third, the digital praxis layer examines the implementation of these values in the virtual sphere through the behaviour of students (*santri*), religious leaders (*kiai*), and the pesantren community (Heryanto, 2023). Together, these three layers form an integrative conceptual framework for understanding pesantren as ethical agents in the era of digital globalisation.

The urgency of this study becomes more evident when linked to the

global condition of universal moral decline. The World Economic Forum (2024) reports that one of the greatest crises of the 21st century is not only climate change or economic inequality but also ethical decay—a deterioration of moral standards due to technological dominance without value guidance. In Indonesia, similar issues manifest in the proliferation of religion-based hate speech, misinformation, and unethical digital behaviour (Kominfo, 2023). These conditions call for a new ethical model that is not merely normative but capable of shaping moral character and awareness (Madjid, 1997). Through its systems of ta'dib and tarbiyah akhlaqiyyah, pesantren hold the potential to serve as a global ethical laboratory for building a moral digital civilisation.

Accordingly, this article aims not only to explore the position of pesantren within the dynamics of digital modernisation but also to construct a conceptual framework for developing a global ethic grounded in Islamic moral philosophy. The approach is interdisciplinary—integrating perspectives from Islamic education, philosophical ethics, and digital humanities (Alatas, 2020). Through this perspective, the research seeks to broaden academic horizons concerning pesantren and introduce to the international community the relevance of traditional Islamic institutions in addressing contemporary moral crises.

Ultimately, this introduction asserts that pesantren are not merely religious educational institutions but centres for nurturing holistic human beings—individuals who possess knowledge, civility, and ethics. In the age of value globalisation, the recontextualisation of moral teachings becomes a strategic means to restore spirituality amid technological disruption (Nasr, 1996). By positioning pesantren as centres of global ethics, this article argues that the future of human morality depends not only on technological innovation but also on humanity's ability to preserve the sanctity of values and moral consciousness in the digital age (Küng, 1993; Floridi, 2020).

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach with a library research design combined with contextual analysis. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on exploring the meaning, value, and relevance of moral teachings within pesantren traditions in relation to global ethical challenges in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). The primary objective is not to measure phenomena statistically but to understand the essence of pesantren moral values that can be recontextualised within modern ethical discourse.

The main data sources consist of both primary and secondary literature. The primary sources include classical pesantren works such as **Ihya' Ulumuddin** by al-Ghazali and **Tahdzib al-Akhlaq** by Ibn Miskawaih, as well as moral instruction texts used in pesantren curricula across Indonesia. The secondary sources comprise academic studies, journal articles, policy documents, and contemporary writings on digital ethics, philosophy of technology, and ethical AI development. The data are further supported by limited field observations in several pesantren that have integrated ethical values with digital

technology through digital pesantren programmes.

The data collection process was conducted in three stages: first, literature inventory to identify authoritative sources on pesantren ethics and global ethics; second, thematic coding to categorise relevant ethical concepts such as sincerity, trustworthiness, responsibility, and digital etiquette; and third, comparative analysis to examine the alignment of these values with global ethical principles and emerging AI ethics policies.

Data analysis employed content analysis and hermeneutic interpretation—interpreting textual meaning contextually and relating it to contemporary social and technological realities. Through this interpretive process, new insights were gained regarding how pesantren values can be developed as a universal ethical model in the digital era. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and cross-referencing, thereby strengthening the academic rigour and scientific reliability of the study's findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on an analysis of classical pesantren literature and contemporary studies on technological ethics, it is found that pesantren possess three main pillars that can serve as the foundation for establishing global ethics in the age of artificial intelligence (AI): (1) the paradigm of tawhid and spirituality, (2) an education system rooted in adab (moral conduct) and exemplary character, and (3) the principle of balance between knowledge, action, and intention (Al-Attas, 1980; Nasr, 1996; Azra, 2019). These three pillars form a holistic value system encompassing human relationships with God (*hablun minallah*), with fellow humans (*hablun minannas*), and with the natural world (*hablun minal 'alam*) (Al-Ghazali, 2005). Thus, the ethical structure of pesantren is cosmological and integrative in nature, differing from the Western ethical model which tends to be rationalistic and anthropocentric (Küng, 1993; Floridi, 2020).

An analysis of classical texts such as *Ihya' Ulumuddin* by al-Ghazali reveals that pesantren place *akhlaq* (morality) at the very heart of education and character formation (Al-Ghazali, 2005). Al-Ghazali asserted that “knowledge without adab breeds arrogance, and adab without knowledge leads to misguidance”—a principle that underscores the importance of balance between cognition, morality, and spirituality (Dhofier, 1994). This view aligns with the concerns of contemporary technology ethicists such as Floridi (2020) and Bostrom (2014), who warn that the development of AI without a moral foundation may trigger a global humanitarian crisis. Hence, the moral principles inherited from the pesantren demonstrate their universal relevance in addressing modern technological ethics.

Further analysis highlights the potential for recontextualising pesantren values within contemporary digital ethics discourse. For instance, *amanah*

(moral responsibility) can be applied in matters of data security and digital privacy (Floridi, 2020; Ess, 2018); *ikhlas* (sincerity without self-interest) relates to the principles of algorithmic transparency and information honesty (Diakopoulos, 2016); *tawadhu'* (humility) promotes awareness of technological limits and the development of human-centred AI design (Han, 2017; Bryson, 2019); while *'adl* (justice) serves as the foundation for addressing algorithmic bias and digital discrimination (Benjamin, 2019). These values show that the pesantren's moral system is not merely religiously normative but also practically and universally relevant within modern socio-technological contexts (Alatas, 2020).

Beyond the literature, field observations of several digital pesantren in East and West Java reveal systematic efforts to integrate Islamic ethical values into digital practices (Hasanah, 2022). Pesantren such as Darussalam Gontor, Tebuireng, and Nurul Jadid have developed adaptive curricula that blend technological literacy with moral education (Zarkasyi, 2021). Programmes such as media literacy training, ethical online learning, and digital adab reinforcement are implemented to shape students' responsible online behaviour. This empirical evidence demonstrates that pesantren possess adaptive and resilient capacities to face digital transformation without losing their moral and spiritual identity (Rahardjo, 2015).

Table 1.

Summarises The Categories Of Pesantren Ethical Values And Their Contextual Relevance In The Digital And AI Era.

Pesantren Value	Ethical Meaning	Relevance in the Digital / AI Era
<i>Amanah</i>	Moral responsibility	Data protection, cybersecurity, digital integrity
<i>Ikhlas</i>	Sincerity without self-interest	Algorithmic transparency, information honesty
<i>Tawadhu'</i>	Humility towards knowledge	Awareness of AI limitations, human-centred design
<i>'Adl</i>	Social justice	Prevention of algorithmic bias and digital discrimination
<i>Adab</i>	Ethical social conduct	Ethical use of media and technology

(Source: Researcher's Analysis, 2025; adapted from Al-Ghazali, 2005; Al-Attas, 1980; Floridi, 2020)

This table demonstrates that pesantren ethical values can be transformed into a framework for global digital ethics. These principles are cross-cultural and contextually adaptable, as they are rooted in universal human values rather than

merely in religious rituals (Nasr, 1996; Küng, 1993). Consequently, pesantren have the potential to serve as a model for global ethics grounded in Islamic spirituality, contributing to the development of digital morality and global social responsibility in the age of artificial intelligence (Alatas, 2020; Ess, 2018).

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the pesantren value system can serve as a conceptual alternative to global ethics amid the dominance of modern technological paradigms that tend to be materialistic and utilitarian (Bauman, 2013; Taylor, 2011). From the pesantren perspective, morality is not merely measured by instrumental benefit but also by the purity of intention and spiritual balance. This aligns with the concepts of the *ethics of care* and *virtue ethics*, which emphasise inner moral dimensions and personal responsibility within social contexts (MacIntyre, 2007). Hence, pesantren can contribute to enriching global ethical discourse by integrating spiritual and humanistic values into digital technological practices (Nasr, 1996; Alatas, 2020).

In practical terms, pesantren values possess potential as an applied framework for digital ethics. The ethic of *amanah* (moral trustworthiness) can guide data governance and cybersecurity; *ikhlas* (sincerity) can serve as a principle of transparency in AI systems; while *'adl* (justice) and *adab* (ethical conduct) can shape digital regulations that uphold fairness and humanity (Floridi, 2020; Benjamin, 2019). Implementing these values requires pedagogical transformation and technological policies that integrate modern knowledge with local spirituality (Hasanah, 2022). Thus, pesantren may function as social laboratories for testing how religious values can be translated into ethical policies within the digital sphere.

From a theoretical standpoint, integrating pesantren ethics into the digital realm demonstrates the epistemological parity between Islamic local wisdom and global discourses on technological ethics. Whereas Western ethics often focus on rational decision-making, pesantren ethics emphasise *moral cultivation* through *adab* education and exemplary character (Al-Attas, 1980). This approach enriches AI ethics theory by introducing dimensions of spirituality and inner responsibility, which have received limited attention in contemporary studies of technological ethics (Ess, 2018). Therefore, the findings of this research offer a paradigmatic contribution to the development of *Islamic digital ethics* as an emerging field within global ethical studies.

Ultimately, the integration of pesantren ethics into the digital world is not merely an effort to preserve tradition but a constructive strategy for building a civilised technological culture. Through the values of *ta'dib* (ethical discipline) and *tarbiyah akhlaqiyyah* (moral education), pesantren can act as moral fortresses amid digital disruption (Azra, 2019; Rahardjo, 2015). By positioning spirituality at the core of ethics, pesantren contribute to shaping digital human beings who are not only technologically intelligent but also morally upright and spiritually conscious.

The findings of this study reveal that *pesantren* values possess a strong dialogical capacity with contemporary ethical theories such as Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics, Aristotle's virtue ethics, and John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism (MacIntyre, 2007; Küng, 1993). However, *pesantren* ethics demonstrate epistemological uniqueness by integrating rational and spiritual dimensions into a unified moral system (Al-Attas, 1980; Zarkasyi, 2021). While Kant emphasises the rationality of duty and Mill focuses on collective happiness and utility, *pesantren* ethics place the purity of intention (*niyyah*) and sincerity of the heart at the core of moral consciousness (Al-Ghazali, 2005).

The *pesantren* ethical framework occupies a distinctive position within the global moral philosophy landscape. It neither rejects rationality, as in certain critiques of deontology, nor pursues pragmatic outcomes alone, as in utilitarianism. The essence of *pesantren* morality lies in *intentio*—the inner bridge between human will and Divine will. Hence, the *pesantren* moral system may be characterised as *intentional ethics*, which evaluates morality not merely by the consequences of actions but by the spiritual awareness of the moral agent (Al-Attas, 1980; Nasr, 1996). This perspective contributes a novel conceptual insight to global ethical theory by extending the moral horizon from rationality towards spirituality.

This interpretation positions *pesantren* not simply as traditional educational institutions but as moral laboratories capable of inspiring global moral philosophy and the ethics of technology (Alatas, 2020; Rahardjo, 2015). From the standpoint of contemporary Islamic philosophy, this represents an original contribution to the development of *Islamic Moral Philosophy* and *Ethics of Technology* (Floridi, 2020; Coeckelbergh, 2020). The *pesantren* serves as an epistemic bridge linking traditional morality and modern digital ethics, spirituality and science, as well as local and universal values (UNESCO, 2023).

The positioning of *pesantren* as global ethical laboratories marks a paradigmatic shift in moral studies—from a normative to an integrative and reflective approach. *Pesantren* do not merely transmit religious values; they test the relevance of Islamic ethics amid new challenges such as artificial intelligence, big data, and digital disruption. Consequently, *pesantren* can be seen as experimental spaces of morality, where spirituality is tested within the practical domains of technology and global culture. This approach aligns with the idea of *ethical pluralism*, which situates diverse moral traditions in open dialogue toward an inclusive and civilised global ethical order (Küng, 1993; MacIntyre, 2007). The study's findings also affirm that the global ethical crisis stems not solely from technological development but from the loss of moral orientation within modern human consciousness (Taylor, 2007; Floridi, 2020). AI, like all technological systems, merely mirrors the morality of its creators; when humanity loses justice and empathy, the algorithms it designs inevitably reproduce the same moral distortions (Bryson, 2019; Coeckelbergh, 2020). Therefore, the construction of AI ethics must begin with the cultivation of human morality rather than relying solely on technical regulation (UNESCO, 2023).

The ethical crisis surrounding AI is, in essence, a reflection of a deeper human crisis. Phenomena such as algorithmic bias, information polarisation, and digital disinformation illustrate the replication of human moral structures within machine systems. *Pesantren*, through their spiritual discipline and moral training, offer a paradigm of *inner moral formation* prior to the external codification of ethics in technology. In other words, *pesantren* view ethics not as an external product of law or behavioural codes but as an ongoing process of soul cultivation through spiritual practice, moral exemplarity, and social responsibility.

Pesantren ethics emphasise that every moral action must begin with righteous intention, as encapsulated in the principle *innamal a'malu binniyat*—"all deeds are judged by their intentions" (Al-Ghazali, 2005). Within digital ethics, this principle translates into ethical mindfulness across all online activities—whether sharing information, engaging on social media, or employing artificial intelligence (Zarkasyi, 2021; Alatas, 2020). *Intentional ethics* rejects the reduction of morality to mere legal compliance or algorithmic efficiency; it restores morality to the core of human spiritual consciousness (Nasr, 1996).

The *intentional ethics* paradigm of *pesantren* offers a new ethical model that resonates with the digital age. The principle of intention serves as a moral self-regulation mechanism that transcends external normative constraints. In practice, it fosters intrinsically ethical digital behaviour—honesty in content creation, responsibility in information dissemination, and empathy in online interaction. Applied broadly, this paradigm could shift the orientation of global AI ethics from *rule-based ethics* toward *virtue-based* and *intention-centred ethics*, positioning humans not merely as technology users but as moral and spiritual subjects within the digital era.

Thus, *pesantren* ethics offer a convergence of the world's three major moral traditions: Kantian rationality, Aristotelian virtue, and Islamic spirituality (MacIntyre, 2007; Al-Attas, 1980; Küng, 1993). These converge in the concept of *intentional ethics*, which places spiritual consciousness at the heart of all ethical action. In the broader discourse of global and technological ethics, this approach presents a paradigmatic alternative to modern moral crises that have lost their value orientation. *Pesantren* demonstrate that technological progress must be balanced with spiritual depth and moral responsibility to ensure that humanity remains at the centre of civilisation.

This synthesis confirms that *pesantren* contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of global moral philosophy. By integrating rationality, virtue, and spirituality, *pesantren* present a holistic and sustainable ethical paradigm capable of addressing the moral complexities of the digital world without losing human essence. In the long term, this approach opens possibilities for the emergence of a *global Islamic ethical framework*—one that speaks not only to Muslims but to all humanity in search of meaning, justice, and wisdom in the high-tech era.

CONCLUSIONS

This study affirms that *pesantren* hold a strategic role in addressing the

global ethical crisis in the era of artificial intelligence (AI) and the digitalisation of human life. Through the recontextualisation of moral teachings (*akhlak*), *pesantren* can serve as centres of global ethics, offering a moral paradigm grounded in the balance between technological advancement and humanity. Noble values such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), responsibility (*amanah*), humility (*tawadhu'*), and proper conduct (*adab*) in social interaction form the essential foundations for constructing a civilised digital life oriented towards universal welfare.

The findings demonstrate that the integration of *pesantren* values with contemporary discourses on technology ethics can produce a new ethical model that is both humanistic and spiritual. In the global context, *pesantren* are not merely religious educational institutions but also moral laboratories that offer solutions to dehumanisation and value disorientation caused by uncontrolled technological development. The concept of “morality-based ethics” derived from *pesantren* traditions provides a new direction for developing policies and technological innovations that prioritise human dignity over mere efficiency or material gain.

The study also emphasises that the recontextualisation of *akhlak* must be carried out systematically through digital *pesantren* curricula, strengthened technological ethics literacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration among *ulama*, academics, and AI developers. *Pesantren* can lead a global moral movement by extending their *dakwah* (ethical and spiritual mission) into the digital sphere, presenting Islamic values as universal ethical guidelines to steer the course of modern technological development.

Thus, *pesantren* occupy a strategic position as agents of value transformation amid the global moral turbulence. The ethical framework of *pesantren*, rooted in Islamic spirituality and Indonesian local wisdom, may serve as the foundation for constructing a new global ethics—one that is not merely rational and technological, but soulful, civilised, and profoundly human. Future research is recommended to deepen empirical investigations into the implementation of *pesantren* ethics in educational practices and technological innovation, ensuring that these ideas move beyond conceptual discourse and tangibly shape global digital policies and moral behaviour.

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