

Countering Religious Radicalism: A Systematic Review Of Faith-Based Institutional Strategies And Challenges

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Abstract

Religious-based radicalism has intensified globally, threatening social cohesion and exploiting doctrinal ambiguities across diverse faith traditions. Although faith-based institutions (FBIs) are increasingly recognized as important actors in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), existing studies remain fragmented and context-specific, limiting cross-regional and comparative understanding of their institutional roles and mechanisms. Results reveal that six major domains employed by FBIs, moderation-oriented education, interfaith engagement, social and humanitarian services, internal institutional regulation, policy advocacy, and media-based counter-narratives. However, their effectiveness varies depending on institutional legitimacy, organizational capacity, partnership dynamics, and broader sociopolitical contexts. FBIs play a vital and multifaceted role in preventing religious radicalism across diverse contexts.

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Introduction

Religion-based radicalism has become a significant global concern in the past decade. According to the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economic & Peace, 2024), approximately 63% of terrorist attacks in 2023 were motivated by ideological or religious extremism, resulting in more than 18,000 fatalities. Regions such as the Middle East, South

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Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa continue to experience the escalation of radical group activities, while Europe and Southeast Asia have witnessed a growing trend of online radicalization, particularly among adolescents (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022). Within these dynamics, faith-based institutions (FBIs) hold a strategic position in shaping peaceful, inclusive, and community-grounded religious narratives. However, their effectiveness in addressing radicalism varies considerably across social, political, and cultural contexts.

Religious radicalism threatens not only national security but also social cohesion and the values of pluralism in multicultural societies. Scholars have emphasized that radicalization often emerges from structural injustice, social exclusion, and the exploitation of doctrinal ambiguities by extremist actors (Atran, 2016). Policy studies such as those by the European Commission (2020) further emphasize that effective prevention must integrate community engagement, religious literacy, and spiritual guidance—areas in which religious institutions possess distinctive strengths. As actors deeply embedded within local communities, FBIs serve not only as moral authorities but also as frontline stakeholders capable of identifying early signs of ideological polarization. Failure to involve them meaningfully may enable extremist narratives to spread, particularly in contexts where state capacity or public trust in government institutions is weak.

Empirical studies from various regions illustrate the diverse ways in which religious institutions contribute to countering radicalization. For example, initiatives combining religious education with civic awareness and community support have shown promise in curbing ideological vulnerability in different cultural contexts. Similarly, family- and community-based programs—such as the Mothers’ Schools model in Europe (Women without Borders, 2019)—demonstrate how moral and spiritual authority at the household level can reduce susceptibility to extremist narratives. While these studies offer valuable insights, they often remain context-specific and fragmented, with limited cross-faith or cross-regional integration. Much of the existing literature is composed of localized case studies rather than systematic comparisons.

Despite increasing scholarly and policy attention, no comprehensive synthesis has been undertaken to consolidate what is known about the institutional strategies, roles, challenges, and enabling factors associated with religious engagement in preventing violent extremism. This lack of systematic synthesis creates a significant gap in both academic

understanding and policy development. A more precise mapping of what religious institutions actually do, why specific strategies emerge across contexts, and what barriers they encounter is essential for designing more collaborative and culturally grounded preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives.

The purpose of this study is therefore to examine the strategies, roles, challenges systematically, and proposed solutions adopted by religious institutions to prevent and counter radicalism, drawing on empirical evidence from multiple countries and spiritual traditions. By integrating findings from diverse geographical and denominational contexts, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the institutional mechanisms through which religious actors influence radicalization dynamics. This study also contributes to policy development by offering insights that support more community-based, multi-stakeholder, and spiritually grounded approaches to P/CVE.

Conceptual Framework

Faith-based institutions (FBIs) in this review are understood as formal, structured religious organizations that possess recognized leadership, organizational continuity, and internal governance mechanisms. These institutions include church dioceses and synods, Islamic councils and mosque networks, Buddhist monastic associations, Hindu temple boards, and faith-based schools or universities. Their institutional character distinguishes them from religious movements that are more fluid and loosely organized, as well as from grassroots religious groups that operate at the local community level with limited formal structure. This distinction is crucial because institutional authority—whether doctrinal, moral, or organizational—directly shapes religious actors' capacity to respond effectively to pressures of radicalization.

Within the broader Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) landscape, FBIs hold a unique position due to the convergence of their moral authority, proximity to communities, and control over religious spaces. As guardians of legitimate religious interpretation, they can clarify doctrinal ambiguities that extremist actors frequently exploit. Their embeddedness in everyday community life—through worship services, pastoral care, educational programs, charitable activities, and social networks—provides them with

sustained access to groups that may be vulnerable to radical influences. In many contexts where trust in the state is weak, religious institutions remain among the most credible actors capable of shaping public attitudes toward moderation, tolerance, and coexistence.

The theoretical lens of religious institutionalism offers a valuable way to conceptualize these dynamics. This perspective views religious institutions not merely as spiritual entities but as social and political actors that regulate norms, negotiate authority, and shape collective identities. Through their governance structures—such as sermon oversight, the selection of preachers, the publication of religious materials, and the training of religious educators—FBIs perform an essential gatekeeping function that can either inhibit or enable extremist infiltration. Internal dynamics, such as hierarchical authority, doctrinal orientation, gender norms, and organizational culture, also influence how institutions interpret and respond to the challenges posed by radicalism. This theoretical lens helps explain the varied institutional behaviours observed across different religious and national contexts.

At the same time, social resilience theory situates FBIs as central pillars in strengthening a community's adaptive capacity to resist ideological threats. By cultivating both bonding social capital (internal cohesion among members) and bridging social capital (connections across different groups), FBIs foster relationships, mutual recognition, and trust—elements that reduce the appeal of extremist narratives rooted in exclusion or victimhood. Their social services, humanitarian work, and community engagement further enhance resilience by addressing social vulnerabilities that extremist groups frequently exploit. The moral narratives they disseminate—through sermons, counselling, or interfaith cooperation—shape collective understandings of peace, justice, and coexistence, all of which contribute to stronger societal resistance against violent ideas.

In contemporary P/CVE approaches, which increasingly emphasize multi-stakeholder and whole-of-society strategies, FBIs occupy a hybrid role as both community anchors and non-state governance actors. They often serve as intermediaries between communities and government institutions, translating policy messages into moral and religious language that resonates with local audiences. However, this bridging role is effective only when FBIs maintain their perceived moral autonomy and are not reduced to tools of state securitization—an issue widely discussed in P/CVE scholarship and raised by practitioners concerned about co-optation risks.

Taken together, this conceptual framework positions FBIs as multi-dimensional actors whose authority derives not only from their religious functions but also from their social embeddedness and institutional legitimacy. Their capacity to shape doctrine, regulate religious practices, provide social support, and foster cross-group relationships renders them indispensable partners in countering radicalism. This framework underpins the analytical orientation of this review and informs the interpretation of findings across diverse religious and geographical contexts.

Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine the roles, challenges faced, solutions implemented, and strategies adopted by religious institutions in their efforts to counter radicalism. The implication of this research is to provide strategic recommendations for religious institutions and policymakers to strengthen preventive measures against the spread of radicalism within society.

Methods

Protocol and search strategy

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, as outlined by Kitchenham and Charters (2007), to identify, evaluate, and interpret all relevant studies on a given research topic. The SLR was chosen to ensure systematicity, transparency, and replicability in the process of searching and selecting scientific literature (Kitchenham and Charters, 2007). The PICO framework (Population, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome) was applied to define the scope of the systematic review (Table 1). The search strategy was conducted using leading academic databases, including Scopus and Web of Science. The search string combined keywords ("religious institution" OR "faith-based institution" OR "church" OR "mosque" OR "temple" OR "religious organization") with ("*radicalism*" OR "*extremism*" OR "*fundamentalism*" OR "*terrorism*").

Table 1. PICO framework of the study

Components	Descriptions
P [population]	Religious institutions or faith-based institutions
I [Intervention]	Strategies and roles in countering radicalism
C [comparison]	Cross-context, interfaith, or cross-national studies
O [Outcome]	Effectiveness, challenges, and solutions in addressing radicalization

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

This systematic review exclusively includes empirical articles published within the last 10 years, written in English, and focused on the role of religious institutions in relation to radicalism. The exclusion criteria consisted of review articles – editorials or opinion papers, non-English articles or those without full-text availability, and studies focusing on radicalism without the involvement of religious institutions.

Data collection process

The review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol, as described by Page et al. (2021), comprising four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Methodological quality assessment was conducted using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018, which enables an equitable evaluation of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies (Hong *et al.*, 2018; Page *et al.*, 2021).

The data extracted from the selected articles were then analysed thematically using NVivo 14 software. Thematic analysis enabled the categorization and interpretation of patterns emerging across diverse study contexts.

Results

The literature selection process began with the identification of 1,430 records from the Scopus (1,034) and Web of Science (396) databases. Before screening, 242 duplicates were removed, leaving 1,188 records for initial screening. During this stage, a large number of records were excluded (indicated by arrows pointing to the right) for various reasons, including publications before 2015 (508), non-English language (102), review articles (25), proceedings

(6), conference papers (7), books and book chapters (158), other article types such as editorials and notes (8), and titles and abstracts deemed irrelevant (280), resulting in a total of 1,094 records eliminated. A total of 94 reports were retrieved for full-text review, but 35 were unavailable, leaving 59 for complete eligibility assessment. Finally, 6 additional reports were excluded because their full content did not align with the research questions (RQs), leaving 53 studies included in the review. This diagram clearly illustrates the systematic, rigorous screening process, with arrows to the right indicating exclusion steps at each selection stage (Figure 1).

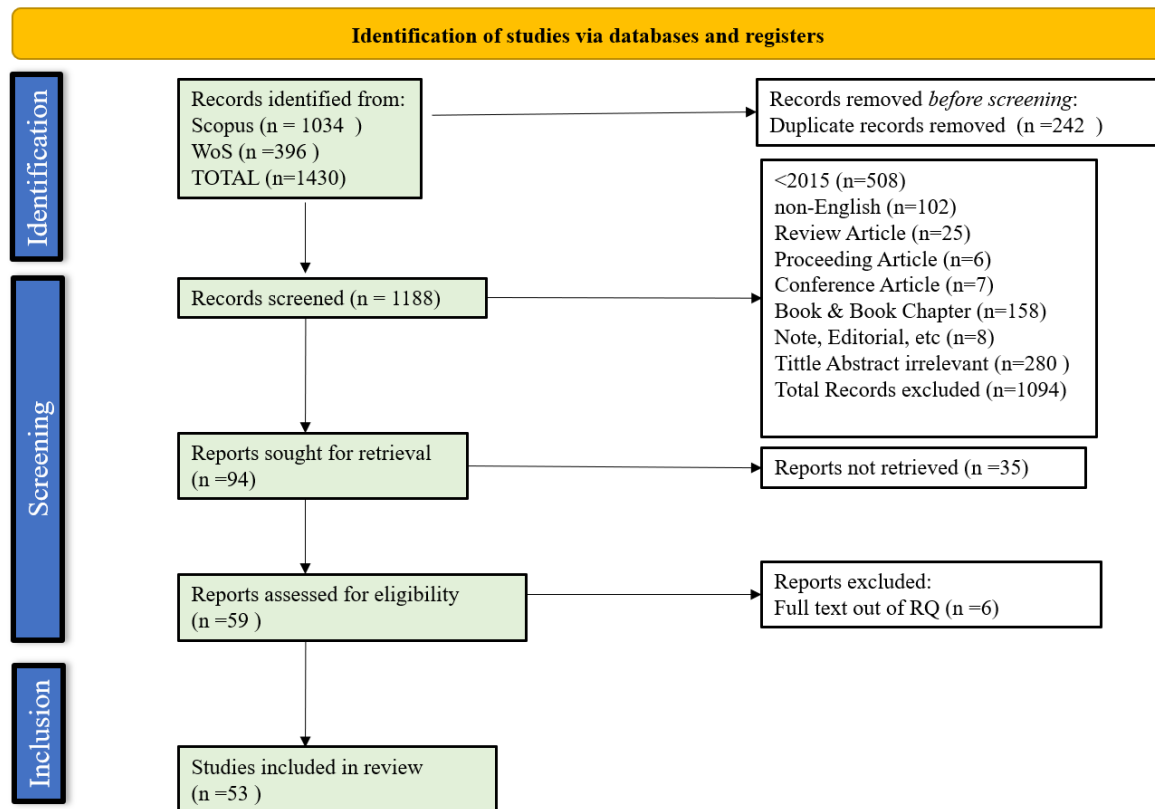


Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram for Literature Selection

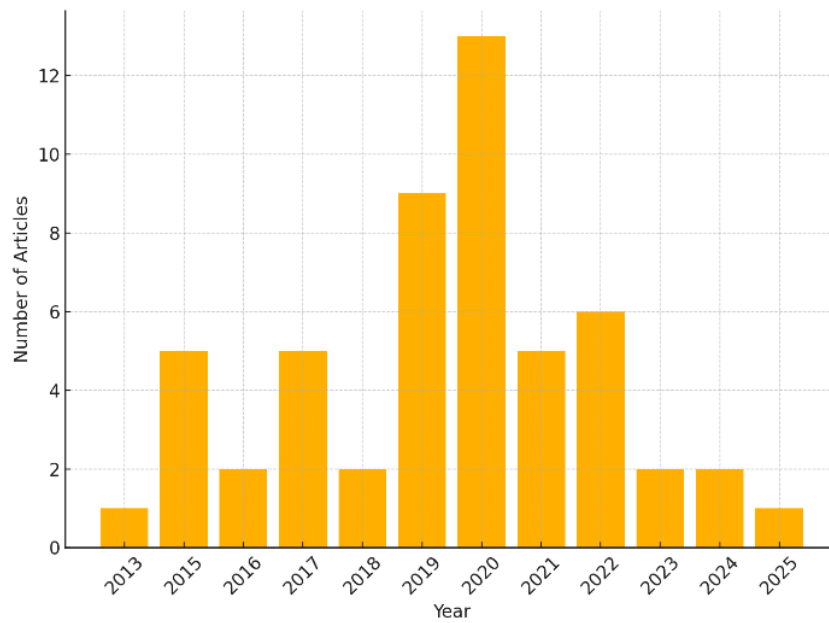


Figure 2. Article distribution per year

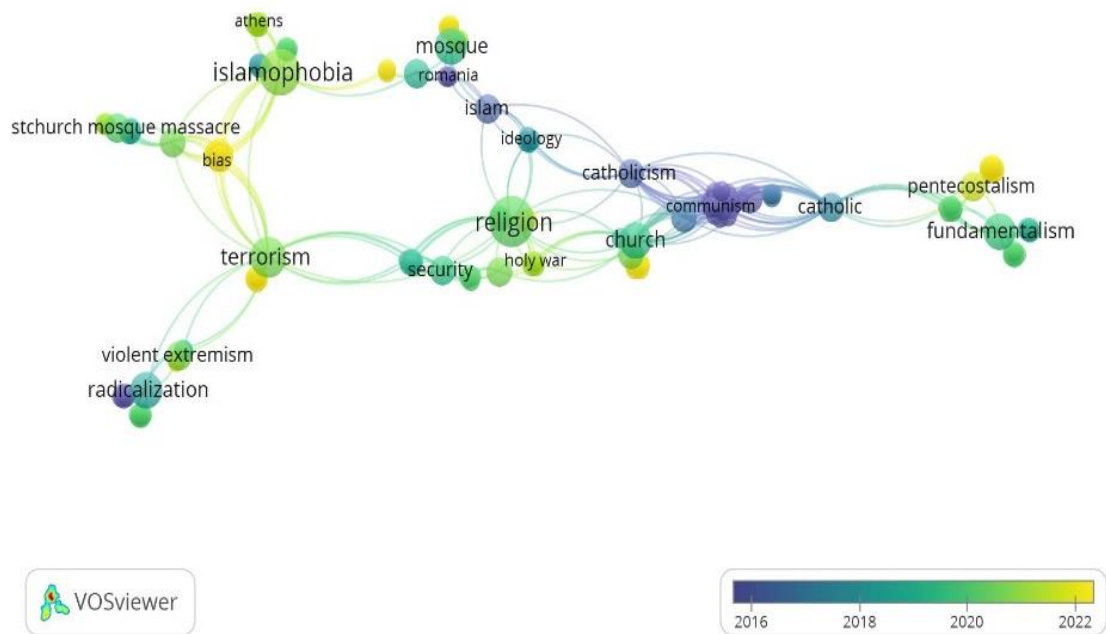


Figure 3. Overlay visualization

Based on the data analysis, the graph of article distribution by year shows variations in the number of publications in the dataset (Figure 2). It can be observed that articles appeared in relatively small numbers in earlier years, with a more notable increase in recent years, particularly in 2021 and 2022, which saw a significant surge compared to previous years. This pattern indicates growing interest in the topic over recent years, likely driven by its rising global relevance. The uneven distribution also suggests that research on this topic has gained momentum only over the past decade, while the academic community paid relatively little attention earlier. In other words, the graph reflects a temporal dynamic, showing a shift in research focus and an increase in scholarly literature production in this field in recent years.

The results of an in-depth exploration reveal that overlay visualization generated by VOSviewer illustrates the network of keywords related to the themes of religion, radicalization, and security, with colour coding based on the average year of publication (2016-2022) (Figure 3). The pattern reveals three main clusters: first, the cluster of "Islamophobia", "terrorism", and "violent extremism", predominantly coloured green-yellow, indicating that these topics have frequently appeared in recent publications (around 2020-2022). Second, the cluster of "religion", "Islam", and "security", which is closely interconnected and displays a mix of green and blue colours, reflects cross-temporal discussions on the intersections of religion and security. Third, the cluster associated with "Catholicism", "church", and "communism", which is primarily blue, shows that these studies were more commonly published during earlier periods (2016-2018). In addition, the nodes "Pentecostalism" and "fundamentalism" emerge as newer topics but remain somewhat detached from the leading network. Overall, this pattern demonstrates that contemporary issues related to Islamophobia, terrorism, and anti-Islam bias have become the dominant focus in recent publications. In contrast, studies associated with Catholicism and communism were more frequently discussed in earlier works, reflecting a shifting research focus in line with global contextual developments.

The Role of Religious Institutions in Countering Radicalism

Religious institutions hold a strategic position in efforts to counter radicalism through various roles that reflect adaptive responses to contemporary social and ideological challenges. These roles include moderating education, facilitating interfaith dialogue,

protecting vulnerable groups, and engaging in social advocacy, collectively demonstrating the active engagement of religious institutions in strengthening social cohesion and reducing the risk of radicalization. The variation and distribution of these roles are presented in Table 2 and Figure 4.

Table 2. The role of religious institutions in countering radicalism

Concepts	The role of religious institutions in countering radicalism	Number of relevant citations	List of citations
Moral and social protection	Providing moral and social protection to individuals and communities, as well as fostering a sense of safe togetherness	2	(Barker and Galliher, 2017)
	Creating safe spaces for religious minority groups to reduce fear and prejudice	3	(Aune, Perfect and Ryan, 2025)
	Promoting tolerance, understanding, and peace through social influence and religious teachings	2	(Muhajir and Latief, 2023)
Protection of vulnerable groups	Providing support and protection to vulnerable groups in the context of religious conflict	2	(Mansour-Ille, 2019)
Moderation, education, and awareness programs	Conducting outreach activities, interfaith dialogue, and education for prisoners and the wider community	2	(Rumyantsev, Shamsunov and Taraso, 2020)
	Teaching moderation and preventing doctrinal exclusivism in religious life	3	(Salu <i>et al.</i> , 2023)
	Prioritizing peace narratives through education and community campaigns	2	(Mujahidin, 2023)
	Strengthening religious identity through mosque-based education and the socialization of inclusive religious values	2	(Sözeri, Kosar Altinyelken and Volman, 2022)
Interfaith dialogue and reconciliation	Facilitating interfaith dialogue and promoting post-conflict reconciliation	2	(Byron, 2016)
	Advocating for strengthened interfaith harmony and peaceful political participation	2	(Boulahnane, 2018)
	Engaging in interreligious cooperation to safeguard human dignity	2	(UNFPA, 2016)

	Utilizing ecumenical forums to promote dialogue and social transformation	2	(Athyal, 2017)
Media dissemination of peace messages	Using media to disseminate messages of peace and interfaith tolerance	2	(Bruce, 2018)
	Building alternative narratives to counter negative stereotypes about religion	2	(Rahman, 2020)
Community identity and independence	Maintaining diaspora identity and negotiating in the face of geopolitical pressures	2	(Öcal and Gökarıksel, 2022)
Interfaith hope and role modelling	Serving as agents of hope through hermeneutical approaches across religious traditions	2	(Harefa, 2021)
Human rights and public morality	Acting as moral guardians of society by reinforcing the principles of human rights	2	(Trajkovic, 2015)
Policy and social advocacy	Advocating for policies and social interventions grounded in moderate religious values	2	(Beaujouan and Rasheed, 2022)
Faith-based social services	Facilitating community engagement in social services as an expression of faith	2	(Gustafson, Scott, 2020)
Mediation of social conflicts	Mediating social conflicts through active participation in community development	2	(Anwar and Sumpter, 2022)

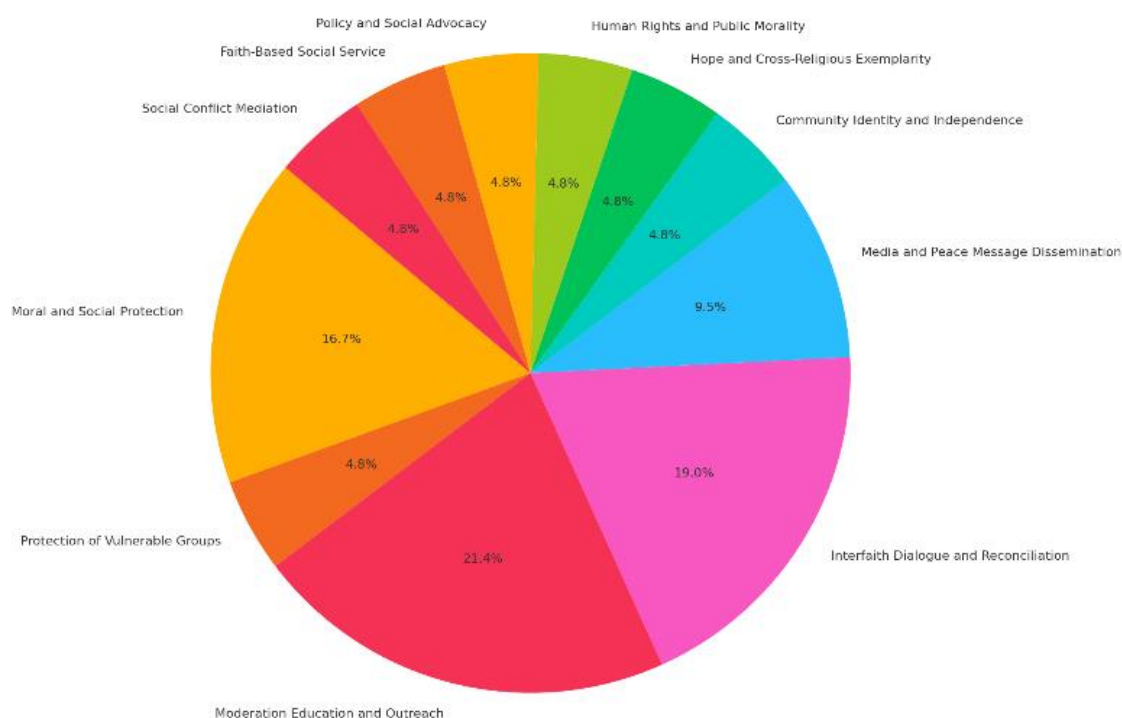


Figure 4. Distribution of the roles of religious institutions in countering radicalism

The roles of religious institutions in countering radicalism highlight the diverse contributions of faith-based institutions across various social and cultural contexts. The data indicate that, of the 20 identified roles, 11 key concepts underpin the strategies of religious institutions for addressing radicalism. Proportionally, the idea of *Moderation Education and Outreach* dominates with nine relevant citations (24.3% of the total), followed by *Interfaith Dialogue and Reconciliation* with 8 (21.6%), and then *Moral and Social Protection* with 7 (18.9%). Other concepts appear in smaller proportions, such as *Media and Peace Message Dissemination* (4 citations, 10.8%), with the remainder accounting for about two citations each (approximately 5.4%).

The distribution captured in the pie chart represents a paradigm shift in the roles of religious institutions in the contemporary era. The strong emphasis on moderation, education, and outreach indicates that these institutions are actively shaping tolerant religious understandings through ongoing public education, outreach to prisoners, and education within internal religious communities. This is consistent with the findings of Rumyantsev, Shamsunov, and Taraso (2020), who stress the urgency of religious institutions in designing

outreach programs and anti-radicalism ideological education based on moderate values (Rumyantsev, Shamsunov and Taraso, 2020).

The concept of *Interfaith Dialogue and Reconciliation* reflects recognition of the importance of interreligious dialogue as a mechanism for conflict prevention and the strengthening of social cohesion. In a global context marked by religious polarization, these institutions not only provide spaces for interaction but also serve as mediators that build bridges across groups (Boulahnane, 2018). Meanwhile, contributions in the domain of *Moral and Social Protection* underscore the traditional role of religious institutions in providing safe, supportive, and morally grounded environments, especially for minority communities and vulnerable groups that are often targeted by radical narratives (Aune, Perfect and Ryan, 2025).

Other concepts listed in the table, though not quantitatively dominant, remain relevant to the comprehensive efforts of religious institutions to counter radicalism. *Media and Peace Message Dissemination*, for instance, underscores the media's crucial role in shaping public discourse and collective perceptions of interreligious relations. Bruce (2017) demonstrates that media use by religious leaders can serve as an effective channel for contrasting radical narratives with peace narratives. Similarly, *Faith-Based Social Service* and *Social Conflict Mediation* illustrate the practical engagement of religious institutions: they not only articulate values of peace but also act as on-the-ground agents directly intervening in social conflicts and providing social services for marginalized communities (Bruce, 2018; Gustafson, Scott, 2020).

A key finding from this analysis is that religious institutions prioritize moderation education and public outreach as their main strategies for countering radicalism, followed by strengthening interfaith dialogue as an integral method of managing social harmony. Traditional roles in providing moral protection remain significant but are now expanded to include contributions in social policy advocacy and media engagement. This points to the transformation of religious institutions from primarily spiritual entities into socio-political actors actively engaged in maintaining social order and fostering community-based peacebuilding. These varied approaches also demonstrate how religious institutions adapt to their local contexts, employing not a single strategy but rather an intersectoral approach encompassing education, policy, social services, and public communication.

Theoretical synthesis of these findings can be framed within the religious peacebuilding theory, which posits that religious institutions are not merely providers of spirituality but also key actors in community-based peacebuilding. This aligns with Appleby's (2000) notion of the "ambivalent" capacity of religion—as both a potential source of conflict and a means of conflict resolution—depending on how religious values are articulated and implemented. The role of religious institutions in moderation education and public outreach represents a concrete realization of religion's function as a moral and normative force in society (Trajkovic, 2015). Meanwhile, interfaith dialogue as a dominant strategy underscores the importance of interreligious engagement in modern multicultural contexts, which requires not only passive tolerance but also active participation in building bridges of dialogue.

Additionally, the multitrack diplomacy approach is relevant to explaining these findings, as religious institutions operate as one of the non-state diplomatic tracks that contribute to conflict resolution and the prevention of radicalism. These institutions function as independent mediators and providers of safe spaces, roles that are relevant not only within narrow religious spheres but also in public policy, education, and social development.

In the context of globalization and complex contemporary dynamics, this analysis demonstrates that religious institutions worldwide are no longer confined to internal doctrinal matters but are proactively responding to global challenges of radicalism and religion-based violence through inclusive, participatory, and cross-sectoral strategies. This reinforces the argument that strengthening the capacity of religious institutions as agents of peacebuilding is one of the key pillars in a sustainable framework for preventing radicalism (Bruce, 2018).

Challenges Faced and Solutions Adopted by Religious Institutions in Countering Radicalism

Religious institutions play a pivotal role in countering radicalism; however, they face a range of complex internal and external challenges, spanning from doctrinal exclusivism to social and media stigma. To address these challenges, they adopt adaptive solutions such as strengthening internal capacities, promoting moderation education, and engaging actively in interfaith dialogue. A comprehensive analysis of these challenges and corresponding solutions is presented in Table 3.

The patterns of challenges and solutions encountered by religious institutions in countering radicalism vary across regions and contexts. From the ten cases summarized, it is

evident that the challenges can be categorized into two main dimensions: internal (originating within religious communities themselves) and external (arising from the social, political, and legal environment).

Internal challenges include high levels of fanaticism, theological exclusivism, resistance to inclusive interpretations, weak pedagogical and human resource capacities, and fragmentation of understanding within religious communities (Mathieson and Flipse, 2021; Salu *et al.*, 2023). Exclusivism and the inability to accept diverse interpretations stand out as major obstacles to promoting discourses of moderation. This situation is further exacerbated by a value gap between religious institutions and the norms prevailing in modern pluralistic societies (Sözeri, Kosar and Volman, 2022).

Table 3. Result of Challenges Faced and Solutions Adopted by Religious Institutions in Countering Radicalism

Challenges faced	Solutions adopted	Number of relevant citations	List of citations
High fanaticism, rejection of differing opinions, lack of staff understanding of religious norms	Involvement of religious organizations in individual dialogue, prison policy reform	2	(Rumyantsev, Shamsunov and Taraso, 2020)
Social opposition to certain religious practices (halal, animal slaughter), weak civil society	Peaceful dialogue, petitions, and public education based on moderate teachings	2	(Byron, 2016)
Public distrust, exclusive internal church views, resistance to cross-interpretation	Religious moderation education, interfaith dialogue, and approaches grounded in Pancasila culture	2	(Salu <i>et al.</i> , 2023)
Fragmentation between political and religious institutions, internal corruption related to rehabilitation funds	Involvement of religious leaders in conflict mediation, rehabilitation support for ex-militants	2	(Beaujouan and Rasheed, 2022)
Weak pedagogical training of imams, value gaps with the national curriculum	Improved religious teacher training, inclusive tolerance-based curriculum	2	(Sözeri, Kosar and Volman, 2022)
Biased media portrayals and	Active participation of	1	(Bruce, 2018)

religious stigmatization	religious institutions in media for counter-narratives			
Intra-community tensions regarding evangelization vs. social justice	Focus on social activities: shelters, human rights advocacy, fundraising	1	(Aune, Perfect and Ryan, 2025)	
Lack of interfaith cooperation, resistance to inclusive interpretations	Promotion of interfaith dialogue based on moderate hermeneutics	1	(Regoli, 2025)	
Legal and political challenges: stigma against Islam, lack of official recognition	Enhanced imam training, civic values pacts, dialogue with the government	2	(Alicino, 2022)	
Internal: conflict between modernity and orthodoxy	Alternative Christian strengthening theology education: universities, classical	2	(Mathieson and Flipse, 2021)	

External challenges are primarily linked to structural bias in the media, stigmatization of certain religious groups, lack of public trust, legal and political barriers to accommodating diversity, and weak support from civil society (Bruce, 2018; Alicino, 2022). The negative portrayal of religious institutions in the public sphere often hampers their ability to take active roles in promoting peace and tolerance (Bruce, 2018).

In addressing these challenges, religious institutions tend to adopt a multidimensional approach. Strategies involve internal reforms such as strengthening pedagogical capacity and tolerance-based curricula (Sözeri, Kosar and Volman, 2022), filtering extremist religious speakers (Salu, *et al.*, 2023), and renewing religious education materials to reinforce national and democratic values (Huda, *et al.*, 2021). External solutions include the active participation of religious institutions in interfaith dialogue forums. (Regoli, 2025), community engagement through personalized dialogical approaches (Rumyantsev, Shamsunov and Taraso, 2020), and advocacy for more inclusive public policy reforms (Alicino, 2022).

Another key feature of the identified solutions is the tendency of religious institutions to establish collaborations with state actors and civil society organizations. In several cases, religious institutions not only serve as providers of spiritual services but also transform into key actors in conflict mediation, support for vulnerable groups, and rehabilitation of former militants (Beaujouan and Rasheed, 2022). This reflects a shift in the role of religious

institutions from purely spiritual entities to active social actors engaged in maintaining order and peace.

Overall, the patterns of solutions highlight religious institutions' awareness of the need to move beyond their internal community boundaries and proactively engage in broader public discourse. They demonstrate adaptive capacity by combining traditional approaches, such as strengthening religious studies, with modern strategies including media engagement, policy advocacy, and cross-cultural education.

Nevertheless, systemic barriers such as social resistance, media stigma, and legal and political constraints remain unresolved. These challenges indicate that the efforts of religious institutions are not entirely autonomous but are profoundly shaped by broader socio-political dynamics.

The main findings of this analysis suggest that religious institutions face a complex spectrum of both internal and external challenges in countering radicalism. Internal obstacles are rooted in doctrinal exclusivism, resistance to moderate interpretations, and weak pedagogical capacity within religious education. External obstacles arise from media stigmatization, public distrust, legal bias, and fragmented cooperation among political and religious actors. Even so, the solutions adopted include strengthening internal capacity, engaging in interfaith dialogue, promoting democratic values education, and advocating for inclusive policy frameworks. Religious institutions thus function not only as providers of spiritual services but also as social actors that play crucial roles in peacebuilding and enhancing societal resilience against extremism and violence (Beaujouan and Rasheed, 2022; Regoli, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be understood through the lens of religious institutionalism, which emphasizes the role of religious institutions as social agents that not only produce doctrine but also manage social values in response to contemporary challenges. This framework underscores that the ability of religious institutions to counter radicalism depends on their capacity to integrate spiritual values with universal principles such as human rights, democracy, and pluralism (Höllinger, 2020). In addition, social resilience theory is also relevant, viewing religious institutions as key pillars in strengthening social cohesion amid the pressures of globalization, secularization, and identity-based conflicts (Anwar and Sumpter, 2022).

This synthesis affirms that radicalism is not solely a phenomenon of religious interpretation but is also deeply intertwined with broader social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics. Consequently, effective solutions require religious institutions not only to strengthen their internal capacities but also to establish symbiotic relationships with the state, media, civil society, and legal structures. Their ability to adapt to these dynamics is a critical indicator of their success or failure in fulfilling their dual roles as guardians of public morality and peacebuilding agents in plural societies.

Strategies of Religious Institutions in Countering Radicalism

The strategies of religious institutions in countering radicalism represent a crucial focus in efforts to maintain social stability and strengthen the resilience of multicultural societies. The approaches adopted by religious institutions are not limited to internal measures, such as enhancing moderation-based education and monitoring religious activities, but also extend to external efforts through interfaith dialogue, socio-humanitarian roles, policy advocacy, and the use of media to construct peaceful narratives. To understand the tendencies and distribution of these strategies in a structured manner, the following analysis presents findings based on the categorization of concepts and the intensity of relevant citations, as illustrated in Table 4 and Figure 5.

Table 4. Strategies of religious institutions in countering radicalism

Concept	Strategies	Number of relevant citations	List of citations
Moderation and Education	Strengthening religious moderation through education, re-education, dissemination of tolerance values, and deradicalization programs	5	(Ragab, 2016; Preljević, 2017; Huda, H. Syamsul <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Beaujouan, Juline and Rasheed, Amjed, 2022; Rante Salu <i>et al.</i> , 2023)
Dialogue and Interfaith Engagement	Active involvement in interfaith dialogue and building cross-community social networks	4	(Amini, 2019; Rahman, 2020; Muhammad Saekul Mujahidin, 2023; Regoli, 2025)
Social and Humanitarian Roles	Strengthening social and humanitarian roles: public services, social assistance, and	4	(Ibrahim, Mesard and Hunt-Hendrix, 2015; Mansour-Ille, 2019; Gustafson, Scott,

	empowerment of vulnerable communities		2020; Aune, Perfect and Ryan, 2025)
Internal Control	Monitoring, mentoring, and internal control of religious activities vulnerable to radical infiltration	3	(Preljević, 2017; Huda, H. Syamsul <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Sözeri, Kosar Altinyelken and Volman, 2022)
Advocacy and Collaboration	Policy advocacy and collaboration with the state for the prevention of extremism	3	(Alicino, 2022; Beaujouan, Juline and Rasheed, Amjed, 2022; Rante Salu <i>et al.</i> , 2023)
Narratives and Media	Providing counter-narratives to radicalism through communication media and religious platforms	4	(Bruce, 2018; Rahman, 2020; Huda, H. Syamsul <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Mathieson and Flipse, 2021)

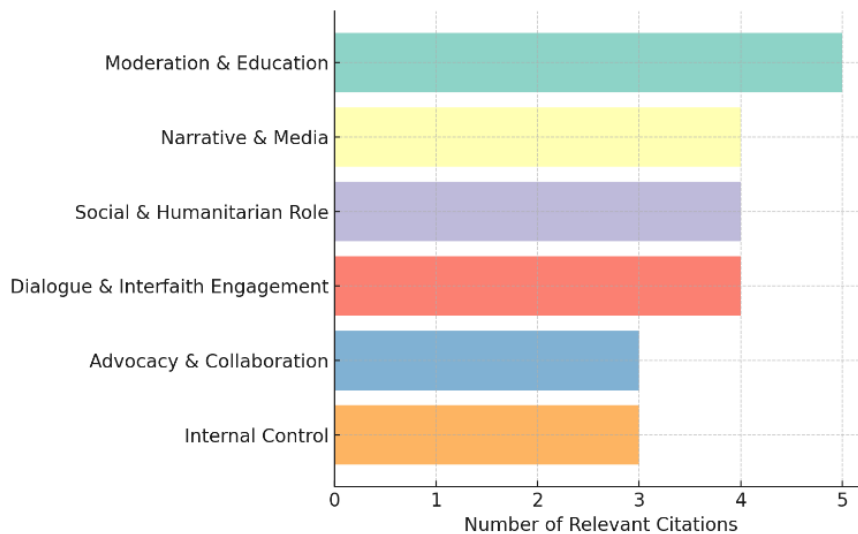


Figure 5. Relevant citations

The data presented in Table 4 and Figure 5 illustrate the diversity of strategies employed by religious institutions in countering radicalism, categorized into six main concepts: moderation and education; dialogue and interfaith engagement; social and humanitarian roles; internal control; advocacy and collaboration; and narrative and media. Based on the number of relevant citations, the concept of moderation and education ranks highest with five citations. This indicates that educational efforts to instil values of religious moderation constitute the most emphasized strategy in both literature and contemporary institutional practices. Education in this context is not only formal but also encompasses

awareness-raising through study forums, training programs, and the development of materials that incorporate the values of tolerance (Huda, H. Syamsul *et al.*, 2021; Rante Salu *et al.*, 2023).

The concept of dialogue and interfaith engagement received four relevant citations, highlighting interreligious dialogue as an essential and effective strategy for fostering mutual understanding and reducing potential frictions between religious groups (Muhammad Saekul Mujahidin, 2023; Regoli, 2025). Such dialogue is carried out not only at the level of religious elites but also at the community level by involving local interfaith leaders. This strategy has become increasingly relevant in multicultural societies vulnerable to polarization caused by religious stereotypes.

Another significant strategy is the social and humanitarian role, also with four relevant citations. This includes social activities aimed at strengthening community resilience, such as social assistance, health services, advocacy for vulnerable groups, and the reinforcement of social solidarity (Mansour-Ille, 2019; Gustafson, Scott, 2020). Social services provided by religious institutions serve a dual purpose: as acts of religious charity and as instruments of social reconciliation to prevent the marginalization of groups vulnerable to radical ideologies. The concept of narrative and media also gained four relevant citations, reflecting the growing adoption of counter-narratives to radical ideology through public communication channels and social media (Bruce, 2018; Rahman, 2020). This strategy is particularly effective in the digital age, where radicalism often spreads through online platforms. Accordingly, religious institutions seek to produce content that promotes peaceful and inclusive discourse.

Meanwhile, internal control received three relevant citations, reflecting the crucial role of religious institutions in monitoring internal religious activities that radical groups may exploit. This includes the selection of preachers, the curation of sermon materials, and restricting access to extremist organizations within the institutional structure (Huda, H. Syamsul *et al.*, 2021; Sözeri, Kosar Altinyelken and Volman, 2022). This strategy emphasizes the gatekeeping function that religious institutions must perform.

The concept of advocacy and collaboration also recorded three relevant citations, underscoring the growing practice of cooperation between religious institutions and governments in formulating counter-radicalism policies (Alicino, 2022; Beaujouan, Juline and Rasheed, Amjed, 2022). In this context, religious institutions act as critical partners to the

state, articulating the aspirations of religious communities and contributing to the design of community-based deradicalization policies.

Analysis of the horizontal chart shows that moderation and education rank first, followed by four other concepts with nearly equal citations (3–4), suggesting a relatively balanced distribution after educational strategies. This indicates that religious institutions adopt a multi-strategic approach, combining education, dialogue, social services, internal monitoring, policy advocacy, and media engagement. It also reflects an understanding that radicalism is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires comprehensive and integrated responses.

The main findings of this analysis indicate that the most dominant strategy used by religious institutions in countering radicalism is religious moderation education, integrated into re-education programs and the promotion of tolerance values. This strategy is further reinforced through interfaith dialogue, social services, the strengthening of peace narratives in the media, and internal control over religious activities vulnerable to radical infiltration. The relatively balanced distribution across other concepts suggests that religious institutions recognize the need for a holistic approach—one that addresses internal dimensions while also building synergy with external factors such as government, civil society, and the media. This underscores that counter-radicalism strategies cannot be carried out in isolation but must be rooted in cross-sectoral and integrated collaboration (Rahman, 2020; Huda, H. Syamsul *et al.*, 2021).

The theoretical synthesis of these findings demonstrates that the strategies of religious institutions in countering radicalism align with the framework of social resilience, which emphasizes the importance of community capacity-building in responding to social disruptions, including radicalism (Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013). Religious moderation, education, and interfaith dialogue reflect the application of inclusivity and social sustainability principles, aiming to build social capital that bridges communities of diverse backgrounds. The social and humanitarian roles undertaken by religious institutions resonate with Amartya Sen's capability approach, in which they expand community capabilities to withstand the threat of radicalism. Meanwhile, internal control and policy advocacy illustrate the strengthening of institutional governance, serving as a safeguard against radical infiltration from within. Thus, the strategies of religious institutions are not merely reactive

measures against extremism but proactive efforts to reinforce the social structures that sustain peace and social justice in multicultural societies.

These six strategic domains reveal a diverse yet interconnected range of institutional approaches employed by faith-based institutions to address religious radicalism. While the findings provide a comprehensive mapping of what religious institutions do across different regions and traditions, they also highlight variations in emphasis, implementation, and institutional capacity. To understand the broader significance of these patterns, it is essential to interpret them through relevant theoretical lenses and consider the mechanisms, contextual factors, and operational dynamics that shape their effectiveness. The following discussion therefore examines how these strategies function, why they differ across institutional and geographical contexts, and what implications they hold for theory, practice, and future policy design.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review highlight that faith-based institutions (FBIs) employ a multidimensional set of strategies to prevent and counter religious radicalism. While moderation-oriented education emerges as the most prominent approach, it operates alongside interfaith engagement, social and humanitarian programs, internal institutional control, policy advocacy, and media-based counter-narratives. Taken together, these strategies reflect the expanding role of FBIs beyond their traditional spiritual functions toward becoming hybrid socio-religious, community-based, and occasionally political actors engaged in shaping social resilience against extremist ideology. These patterns confirm that FBIs function not merely as doctrinal authorities but as multi-layered institutions that negotiate religious, social, and political pressures in complex environments.

A key analytical insight emerging from this review concerns how and why these strategies work differently across contexts. Moderation education, for example, is widely deployed because FBIs possess epistemic authority to correct doctrinal distortions and because religious education structures are already embedded in community life. However, its effectiveness depends on who delivers the teaching, the institutional hierarchy, and the degree of alignment between religious curricula and national civic values. Studies involving mosque-

based or church-based education emphasize that pedagogical capacity, teacher training, and consistent governance significantly determine whether moderation becomes transformative or merely symbolic (e.g., Huda et al., 2021; Sözeri, Kosar Altinyelken & Volman, 2022). Thus, the mechanism is not simply “teaching moderation,” but *institutional capability to regulate religious interpretation and embed alternative narratives at scale*.

Interfaith dialogue likewise operates through different pathways depending on institutional type. Formal institutions—such as national Islamic councils or church synods—tend to use dialogue for elite-level coordination, norm signalling, and public messaging. In contrast, grassroots organizations employ dialogue as everyday peacebuilding through shared community practices. This distinction has been underexplored in previous literature but becomes clear through cross-case comparison: formal bodies hold symbolic legitimacy, while grassroots actors benefit from relational trust. The effectiveness of dialogue initiatives is therefore contingent on the interaction among institutional legitimacy, local authority structures, and the socio-historical relationships among religious groups.

The review also identifies the growing significance of social and humanitarian roles—including social assistance, youth empowerment, and protection of vulnerable groups—as mechanisms that indirectly reduce susceptibility to radicalization. These activities strengthen bonding and bridging social capital, which aligns with social resilience theory (Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013). Importantly, social services serve as a platform through which FBIs gain moral credibility and sustained community presence, making them particularly influential in contexts where state institutions lack legitimacy or reach (Mansour-Ille, 2019; Aune, Perfect and Ryan, 2025).

Another notable finding concerns the internal governance of religious institutions, including sermon monitoring, preacher selection, and restricting extremist actors’ access to religious spaces. These practices reflect the gatekeeping role theorized in religious institutionalism, where institutions regulate normative boundaries and maintain doctrinal coherence. While only a subset of studies explicitly references such governance mechanisms (Preljević, 2017; Huda, H. Syamsul *et al.*, 2021), they are crucial in understanding how FBIs prevent radical infiltration. Challenges such as doctrinal fragmentation, leadership disputes, and resistance to inclusive interpretations illustrate that institutional effectiveness is shaped as much by internal dynamics as by external pressures.

Policy advocacy and collaboration represent a relatively newer dimension identified in this review. In several contexts, FBIs engage in dialogue with governments to influence policy frameworks on deradicalization and social cohesion (Alicino, 2022; Beaujouan, Juline and Rasheed, Amjed, 2022). While these institutions rarely possess formal political power, their moral legitimacy and grassroots ties amplify their policy influence. This trend demonstrates that FBIs are increasingly positioned as governance partners rather than peripheral observers. However, this role carries risks: co-optation by state actors may undermine institutional credibility, while adversarial state–religion relations may hinder collaboration. Future P/CVE policies must therefore carefully balance partnership with respect for institutional autonomy.

A further shift observed in recent literature is the strategic use of media and digital platforms to disseminate counter-narratives. This reflects an adaptive response to the expanding digital ecosystem of radicalization, challenging earlier assumptions that religious institutions are technologically passive (Bruce, 2018; Rahman, 2020). The capacity of FBIs to shape online discourse varies considerably: some institutions use structured media campaigns, while others rely on individual clerics or smaller online communities. Despite emerging successes, sustained evaluation of digital interventions remains limited, suggesting a research gap.

These findings contribute theoretically by reinforcing and extending the framework of religious institutionalism. The evidence shows that FBIs operate simultaneously as moral-normative authorities, community resilience builders, governance actors, and political negotiators—roles that existing theories often treat separately. This synthesis also enhances social resilience theory by demonstrating how religious institutions strengthen both bonding and bridging capital through education, humanitarian outreach, and cross-faith collaboration, thus shaping the community’s capacity to withstand ideological disruption. Additionally, the findings highlight an emerging model of institutional multifunctionality, where FBIs combine spiritual, social, political, and communicative strategies within a single institutional domain.

From an operational perspective, the review offers insights relevant to practitioners. The effectiveness of P/CVE initiatives appears to depend heavily on enabling conditions such as institutional autonomy, quality of religious education, community trust, and collaborative partnerships with state and civil-society actors. Grassroots organizations often excel in trust-

building and local responsiveness, while formal institutions contribute structure, doctrinal legitimacy, and policy leverage. Successful interventions, therefore, require aligning these complementary strengths rather than relying exclusively on one type of actor. Practitioners designing programs should also consider the negotiation processes through which religious leaders navigate risks of stigma, securitization, and political pressure—factors that strongly shape implementation.

Despite its strengths, this review identifies several evidence gaps. First, the literature remains geographically uneven, with limited representation from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Second, gender and youth dimensions are significantly underexamined, even though these groups are central both as potential targets and as agents of prevention. Third, empirical assessment of digital counter-narratives remains scarce despite their rising prominence. Finally, many studies offer descriptive accounts rather than rigorous evaluations, underscoring the need for more substantial methodological diversity and comparative designs.

Overall, the findings indicate that religious institutions are evolving into multidimensional actors in peacebuilding and P/CVE ecosystems. Their strategies reflect adaptive, context-sensitive, and increasingly collaborative approaches that respond to shifting ideological and technological landscapes. Understanding the complexity of their roles, mechanisms, and constraints is essential for developing more effective, inclusive, and community-grounded approaches to preventing violent extremism.

Policy Implications

The findings of this review offer several policy-relevant insights for governments, civil society actors, and international organizations working in the P/CVE field. First, the evidence underscores the importance of supporting institutional autonomy for faith-based institutions. Partnerships between states and FBIs are most effective when they avoid instrumentalization and maintain the institution's moral legitimacy within its own community. Policies that frame religious actors merely as extensions of national security can undermine community trust and reduce the long-term sustainability of prevention efforts.

Second, the review shows that effective FBI-led interventions require capacity-building in religious education, pedagogical methods, and curriculum development. Governments and development partners should therefore prioritize long-term investments in teacher training, development of contextualized moderation curricula, and mechanisms for quality assurance within religious schools and community education settings. These efforts should be designed collaboratively rather than imposed externally, ensuring that local theological authority and cultural nuance remain central.

Third, policies should foster multi-layered partnership models that leverage the complementary strengths of different types of religious actors. Formal institutions provide organizational structure, doctrinal authority, and policy leverage, while grassroots religious groups offer relational trust, community responsiveness, and early detection of vulnerabilities. P/CVE programs are most effective when these actors work in parallel rather than in isolation. Policymakers should therefore develop coordination platforms that enable shared decision-making, resource exchange, and collective evaluation of prevention strategies.

Fourth, given the increasing role of digital platforms in radicalization pathways, governments and international agencies should invest in digital literacy and communication training for religious leaders and institutions. Support for ethical, media-savvy counter-narrative production—along with safeguards against online harassment—can enhance the visibility and effectiveness of FBI voices in the digital sphere. Such programs should be sensitive to local contexts and avoid homogenizing religious messaging across diverse communities.

Fifth, the review reveals that structural vulnerabilities such as poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to social services continue to create openings for extremist recruitment. Policies that integrate FBIs into broader social welfare strategies—such as community support programs, youth empowerment initiatives, and humanitarian outreach—can strengthen social resilience while addressing root causes of radicalization. Engagement should be framed not solely as P/CVE interventions, but as part of a holistic community development approach.

Finally, policymakers should encourage regular monitoring and evaluation of FBI-led initiatives. Given that many reviewed studies remain descriptive and lack rigorous assessment, future policies must include support for evidence-based program design, outcome

measurement, and participatory evaluation involving religious leaders, community members, and practitioners. This will strengthen accountability, improve program quality, and contribute to a more robust global knowledge base on what works in religious-led P/CVE.

Future Research Directions

Future research should expand the geographical scope of existing studies, particularly in underrepresented regions such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, where faith-based institutions play central yet understudied roles in prevention efforts. Scholars should also pay greater attention to the gendered and generational dimensions of radicalization, as women and youth remain both key stakeholders and disproportionately overlooked actors in FBI-led interventions.

In addition, longitudinal and comparative studies are needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of strategies such as moderation education, interfaith engagement, and digital counter-narratives, especially in rapidly evolving online environments. More research is also required to understand the distinct contributions of formal religious institutions versus grassroots religious organizations, given the differences in their legitimacy, resources, and community reach.

Finally, interdisciplinary approaches—combining theology, sociology, political science, communication studies, and public policy—would provide a more holistic understanding of how religious institutions collaborate with state and civil society actors to build sustainable social resilience. Such approaches could help illuminate the institutional, relational, and structural mechanisms that shape successful faith-based P/CVE initiatives across diverse multicultural contexts.

Conclusion

This systematic review demonstrates that faith-based institutions play a multifaceted and increasingly indispensable role in preventing and countering religious radicalism. Across diverse regions and religious traditions, FBIs employ a range of strategies—including moderation-oriented education, interfaith engagement, social and humanitarian outreach,

internal institutional regulation, policy advocacy, and media-based counter-narratives—that collectively strengthen community resilience against extremist ideology. These strategies reveal the hybrid nature of FBIs as moral authorities, social anchors, governance actors, and intermediaries between communities and state institutions.

Beyond mapping existing practices, this review provides analytical insight into the mechanisms through which these strategies operate. The findings highlight that effectiveness depends not only on the content of interventions but also on institutional attributes such as legitimacy, organizational capacity, theological orientation, and the quality of partnerships with government and civil society. By integrating the lenses of religious institutionalism and social resilience theory, the review contributes conceptually by showing how FBIs negotiate doctrinal, social, and political pressures while shaping both bonding and bridging social capital in their communities.

At the practical level, the review underscores the need for policymaking that supports institutional autonomy, strengthens pedagogical capacity, enhances digital communication skills, and promotes multi-layered collaboration among formal and grassroots religious actors. These insights can guide the development of more inclusive, context-sensitive, and community-grounded P/CVE strategies.

Finally, the review identifies several gaps in the current evidence base, including uneven geographical representation, limited gender and youth perspectives, and a lack of longitudinal and comparative studies. Addressing these gaps will be essential for refining future models of faith-based engagement in radicalism prevention.

In conclusion, faith-based institutions remain critical and irreplaceable partners in global efforts to counter religious radicalism. Their embeddedness in community life, combined with their moral authority and institutional capacity, positions them as key actors in building sustainable peace and resilience. Strengthening their role through informed, respectful collaboration will be vital to addressing the evolving challenges of radicalization in increasingly complex sociocultural and digital landscapes.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

KFE were responsible for conceptualization, methodology, quality assessment, and supervision; HP were responsible for literature search, screening eligibility, and quality assessment; SZN and MK were responsible for literature search, screening eligibility, and data extraction; ZU were responsible for writing, data extraction, and quality assessment. Discussions and validations among researchers were conducted at each stage to ensure accuracy and reliability, consistent with the thematic analysis and synthesis of findings.

Artificial Intelligence Statement

The authors acknowledge the use of generative artificial intelligence tools for language refinement, clarity, and editorial support during the manuscript's revision process. All substantive intellectual contributions, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final responsibility for the content remain solely with the authors.

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