

RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND THEOLOGICAL EXCLUSIVISM: State Hermeneutics in Indonesia's 2008 Qur'anic Commentary

Ali Hamdan, Zaenul Mahmudi & Muhammad Robith Fuadi

Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim
Jl. Gajayana No. 50 Dinoyo Lowokwaru Malang 65144, Indonesia
e-mail: hamdan@syariah.uin-malang.ac.id; zenmahmudi@as.uin-malang.ac.id;
robith@syariah.uin-malang.ac.id

Marlina S

Universitas Gajayana
Jl. Mertojoyo Blok L, Merjosari, Lowokwaru, Malang 65144, Indonesia
e-mail: 25031001@unigamalang.ac.id

Irfa Walidi

STAI Raudhatul Akmal, Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara
Jl. Nusa Indah Gg. Melati, Tanjung Sari, Kab. Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara 20372, Indonesia
e-mail: irfawaldi@staira.ac.id

Abstract: Religious moderation has emerged as a central framework of Indonesia's state policy for governing religious diversity, yet its epistemological coherence with authoritative state-sponsored Qur'anic exegesis remains underexamined. This study investigates this tension by examining how the Ministry of Religious Affairs' *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* engages with national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and accommodation of local culture. Employing qualitative textual, discourse-analytical, and critical-hermeneutical approaches, the study analyzes the 2008 revised edition alongside the state's religious moderation framework. The findings reveal a persistent disjuncture: while the exegesis accommodates moderation at civic and social levels, it simultaneously reproduces hierarchical and exclusivist representations of religious others, particularly Jews and Christians, theological boundaries, and political leadership. This contradiction exposes an epistemological incoherence within the state's moderation project, wherein inclusive civic rhetoric coexists with inherited exclusivist theological assumptions. The study underscores the need to scrutinize the hermeneutical structures through which states authorize religious knowledge.

Keywords: State Hermeneutics, Theological Exclusivism, State-Sponsored Qur'anic Exegesis, Pluralist Religious Governance

Corresponding author	Ali Hamdan			
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Introduction

Since 2020, religious moderation has been institutionalized by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs as a strategic framework for governing religious diversity, countering extremism, and strengthening national cohesion within a plural society.¹ Through bureaucratic training, curriculum reform, academic grants, public campaigns, and the publication of religious texts, the state has transformed moderation from a moral discourse into an official paradigm of religious governance. The discourse of religious moderation has also been extended beyond interreligious relations, functioning as an analytical framework for negotiating tensions between cultural practices, social interests, and religious norms within Indonesian society.² This development is significant because Indonesia is frequently presented in global political and academic discourse as a model of “moderate Islam,” particularly amid intensifying concerns over religious radicalism, sectarian polarization, and identity-based mobilization in Muslim-majority societies. Consequently, religious moderation no longer functions merely as a theological ethic, but as a state-sponsored mechanism for regulating interreligious relations, shaping public religiosity, and legitimizing national identity.

Yet the institutional expansion of religious moderation also reveals a fundamental contradiction that remains insufficiently addressed within existing scholarship. While state discourse consistently promotes tolerance, coexistence, and anti-violence, official Islamic interpretations often continue to preserve exclusivist theological boundaries and hierarchical representations of religious others. This contradiction becomes particularly visible within Qur’anic exegesis, where inclusive civic ideals intersect with inherited doctrines concerning salvation, communal loyalty, political authority, and interfaith relations. The central problem, therefore, is not simply whether religious moderation is promoted institutionally, but whether the authoritative structures of Islamic interpretation are capable of sustaining the pluralist commitments advanced through the state’s moderation project.

This tension is closely connected to earlier debates surrounding religious pluralism in Indonesia. For several decades, pluralism was promoted by Muslim intellectuals as a theological and ethical foundation for interreligious harmony. However, conservative scholars and religious authorities criticized pluralism for allegedly relativizing Islamic truth claims and weakening doctrinal exclusivity.³ Over time, pluralism lost institutional legitimacy and was increasingly portrayed as socially destabilizing and theologically problematic.⁴ Religious moderation subsequently emerged as an alternative paradigm that attempted to reconcile theological commitment with democratic coexistence without fully embracing pluralist theology. Nevertheless, this transition did not resolve the underlying tension between inclusivist civic discourse and exclusivist theological interpretation; rather, it reformulated that tension within a new state-sponsored vocabulary.

Following its institutionalization, religious moderation became a contested concept within Indonesian Islamic discourse. Islamic organizations, academic institutions, and Muslim scholars have actively debated its meaning, legitimacy, and theological foundations.⁵ A major strand of scholarship seeks to demonstrate that moderation is deeply rooted in Qur'anic ethics through concepts such as *wasatiyyah* (balance), justice, peaceful coexistence, and ethical restraint. Within Indonesian Qur'anic scholarship, *wasathiyah* has been interpreted as representing balance, justice, and the avoidance of excessive positions, reflecting an attempt to ground moderation within Islamic exegetical traditions.⁶ Figures such as Moqsith Ghazali, Quraish Shihab, and Mun'im Sirry argue that moderation is not merely a political compromise but a normative Qur'anic principle grounded in Islamic theology.⁷

However, much of this scholarship remains primarily normative and advocative in orientation. Existing studies tend to focus on reconstructing moderate interpretations of selected Qur'anic verses, contextualizing Islamic ethics, or critiquing religious extremism, while paying comparatively limited attention to the structural ambivalence embedded within authoritative exegetical traditions themselves. Qur'anic interpretation is never methodologically neutral; it is shaped by theological presuppositions, historical traditions, sociopolitical interests, and ideological commitments. Recent studies on contemporary Islamic discourse further demonstrate that religious authority is not produced exclusively through classical institutions but is increasingly negotiated through new social and digital contexts, where religious meanings are constructed and contested through various forms of mediation.⁸ Consequently, interpretations that outwardly endorse moderation may simultaneously reproduce confessional hierarchies, antagonistic depictions of non-Muslims, or exclusionary theological narratives.

While this body of scholarship has been important in establishing the normative and ethical foundations of religious moderation, it leaves a different question insufficiently examined: whether the authoritative exegetical structures through which the state produces Islamic knowledge are themselves compatible with the pluralist commitments of religious moderation.⁹ The gap is therefore not simply the absence of studies on Qur'anic moderation, but the limited attention given to the internal relationship between moderation as a state-sponsored normative project and the theological structures embedded within state-authorized Qur'anic interpretation.

This question becomes particularly important in the case of *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya*, the official Qur'anic commentary published by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. As an authoritative state-sponsored exegetical work, the tafsîr provides a significant site for examining how the state mediates Qur'anic meanings concerning religious difference, communal boundaries, political authority, and interreligious relations.¹⁰ The 2008 revised edition is especially relevant because it represents the version

analyzed in this study and provides the textual basis for examining whether the normative commitments of religious moderation are reflected in the interpretive structures through which the state authorizes Islamic knowledge.

In this article, the term “epistemological incoherence” does not refer merely to a discrepancy between religious policy and social practice. It refers to a structural tension within the production and authorization of religious knowledge itself: the state promotes religious moderation through commitments to tolerance, coexistence, and civic inclusion, while its authoritative Qur’anic interpretation may continue to reproduce theological hierarchies, confessional boundaries, and asymmetrical representations of religious others. The problem, therefore, lies not simply in the coexistence of inclusive and exclusive interpretations, but in the absence of a sufficiently coherent hermeneutical structure capable of integrating these orientations. In this sense, state hermeneutics constitutes the institutional site through which the coherence of religious moderation can be examined, while theological exclusivism provides the critical lens for identifying the interpretive structures that limit such coherence.¹¹

Building on this conceptual distinction, this article shifts the analytical focus from normative advocacy of religious moderation toward a critical examination of state-sponsored Qur’anic hermeneutics. Rather than proposing a new theological model of moderation, the study evaluates the internal coherence of an existing institutional project by examining how religious moderation is articulated alongside theological constructions of religious difference within official Qur’anic interpretation. The analysis focuses on selected Qur’anic passages concerning interreligious relations, theological exclusivity, representations of Jews and Christians, communal boundaries, political authority, and coexistence.¹² These interpretations are examined in relation to the Ministry’s four official indicators of religious moderation: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture. By foregrounding the relationship between policy discourse and exegetical production, the study contributes to broader discussions on political theology, religious governance, and state-sponsored Islamic knowledge production in Muslim-majority societies.¹³

Accordingly, the study examines whether the inclusive commitments of religious moderation function as an organizing hermeneutical principle within the Ministry’s *tafsîr* or merely coexist with inherited exclusivist theological constructions. The study therefore asks: (1) To what extent does the 2008 Ministry of Religious Affairs *tafsîr* embody the principles of religious moderation in its interpretation of selected Qur’anic passages concerning religious difference, coexistence, and communal boundaries? and (2) How do exclusivist theological constructions within the *tafsîr* complicate the epistemological coherence of Indonesia’s state-sponsored religious moderation project?

Method

This study employs a qualitative textual, discourse-analytical, and critical-hermeneutical approach to examine how state-sponsored Qur'anic interpretation constructs and negotiates the discourse of religious moderation in contemporary Indonesia. The approach is appropriate because the study does not seek to measure social behavior quantitatively, but to analyze how theological meaning, religious authority, and representations of religious difference are produced within official exegetical discourse. Through this framework, the study generates interpretive knowledge concerning the relationship between moderation, exclusivism, and state-sponsored religious governance.

The primary sources consist of the 2008 revised edition of *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* published by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and official policy documents on religious moderation, particularly *Moderasi Beragama* (2019). These texts were selected because they represent authoritative forms of state-sponsored Islamic knowledge production and provide the institutional framework through which moderation is defined and disseminated in Indonesia. Qur'anic passages were selected purposively based on their relevance to interreligious relations, theological exclusivity, political authority, coexistence, communal identity, and representations of Jews and Christians,¹⁴ since these themes constitute the primary sites where tensions between moderation discourse and exclusivist interpretation emerge. Secondary sources include scholarly works on Indonesian Islam, Qur'anic hermeneutics, pluralism, political theology, and religious governance, which function to contextualize, support, and critically interpret the primary data.

The analytical procedure proceeded through several stages: data collection, textual selection, thematic categorization, hermeneutical interpretation, comparative evaluation, and argument construction. Relevant passages from the *tafsîr* and moderation policy documents were first identified and categorized into recurring interpretive patterns such as inclusivism, exclusivism, theological hierarchy, antagonistic representation, and ambivalence.¹⁵ These patterns were then analyzed using critical-hermeneutical and discourse-analytical approaches to examine how interpretive authority, communal boundaries, and religious legitimacy were constructed within the text. The Ministry's four indicators of religious moderation—national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture—functioned as analytical benchmarks for evaluating the degree of coherence between policy discourse and exegetical interpretation.¹⁶ Through this process, the study moves from textual evidence to interpretive analysis, epistemological evaluation, and scholarly argument formation, enabling the article to identify structural tensions between civic moderation discourse and exclusivist theological constructions within official state-sponsored *tafsîr*.¹⁷

Results and Discussion

The Paradox of Religious Moderation in Indonesia: State Definitions, Islamic Conservatism, and the Problem of Inclusivity

Religious moderation has emerged as a flagship policy of the Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia in response to growing anxieties over democratic fragility, identity politics, and the marginalization of religious minorities. Scholars such as Jeremy Menchik argue that Indonesia's democratic order has long been characterized by what he terms "godly nationalism," a model that simultaneously affirms religious belief while limiting minority theological expression.¹⁸ Within this structure, both state institutions and segments of civil society have contributed to subtle forms of exclusion, thereby generating the very tensions that religious moderation now seeks to resolve.

The rise of conservative Islamic mobilization in the post-Reformasi era, including movements advocating stricter doctrinal enforcement, has intensified concerns about pluralism and democratic resilience. Mainstream Islamic organizations have not always been effective in countering these currents,¹⁹ and several fatwas issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia have been widely criticized as reinforcing exclusivist theological boundaries. In this socio-political climate, religious moderation was institutionalized as a strategic state response intended to preserve national cohesion and mitigate sectarian polarization.

However, the institutionalization of moderation does not simply represent the expansion of tolerance discourse; it also transforms moderation into an instrument of religious governance. The moment moderation becomes bureaucratically codified, it ceases to function solely as an ethical orientation and instead operates as a classificatory regime that distinguishes acceptable religiosity from problematic religiosity. This transformation produces a central paradox within Indonesia's moderation project: inclusivity is promoted through a framework that simultaneously regulates theological legitimacy.

Although framed as a universal national framework, religious moderation is primarily directed toward Islam due to its demographic dominance.²⁰ The Ministry's 2019 guidebook, *Moderasi Beragama*, articulates moderation as a commitment to justice, balance, and openness within religious life. Yet the relational nature of the term "moderate" produces an implicit binary: moderate versus non-moderate. This binary is not a neutral analytical distinction; it establishes a hierarchy of acceptable religiosity under state supervision.

The significance of this binary lies not merely in language, but in the epistemological assumptions embedded within the moderation framework itself. The Ministry's formulation assumes that religious diversity can be stabilized through regulatory categorization, meaning that inclusion becomes conditional upon conformity to state-

defined norms of acceptable belief and conduct. Inclusivity, therefore, is not constructed as unrestricted theological openness, but as disciplined participation within boundaries established by institutional authority. In this sense, moderation functions simultaneously as an inclusive discourse and a mechanism of normalization.

To operationalize moderation, the Ministry formulates four indicators: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture.²¹ These indicators function simultaneously as normative ideals and regulatory benchmarks. Individuals or groups perceived as failing to meet them are frequently categorized as “extremist.”

At the discursive level, these indicators appear inclusive and civic-oriented. Yet analytically, they also reveal how moderation is translated from a moral aspiration into a bureaucratic technology of evaluation. The framework does not merely encourage coexistence; it authorizes the state to define the limits of legitimate religious expression. Consequently, moderation becomes less a dialogical theological paradigm and more a governance mechanism through which religious actors are measured, categorized, and disciplined.

This conflation between non-moderation and extremism reveals a conceptual weakness. It collapses theological conservatism, political dissent, and violent radicalism into a single spectrum. Such compression obscures important distinctions between doctrinal rigidity, social exclusivity, and militant activism. As Cherney and Murphy have noted, not all non-moderate actors endorse violence or anti-state agendas.²² By erasing gradations, the framework risks transforming moderation into a disciplinary label rather than a transformative paradigm.

The problem here is epistemological rather than merely terminological. By collapsing conservatism, exclusivism, and extremism into a single category, the moderation framework implicitly treats theological rigidity itself as politically suspect. This produces what may be described as a moderation–inclusivity paradox: a discourse intended to expand social coexistence simultaneously narrows the range of legitimate theological expression. As a result, moderation risks functioning not as a platform for negotiating religious difference, but as a state-managed hierarchy of acceptable religiosity.

The ambiguity deepens in the Ministry’s definition of extremism as religious understanding that “exceeds the bounds” of moderation.²³ What constitutes these “bounds” remains unclear.²⁴ If the bounds are religious norms, moderation becomes a theological reform project. If they are constitutional norms, moderation becomes civic domestication of religion.²⁵

This ambiguity exposes a deeper tension within state-sponsored moderation discourse: the absence of a clearly articulated hermeneutical framework for mediating between theological exclusivity and constitutional pluralism. The Ministry promotes

moderation as a civic necessity, yet it does not systematically explain how exclusivist scriptural traditions should be interpreted within plural democratic contexts. Consequently, moderation operates normatively at the policy level while remaining underdeveloped at the epistemological level of interpretation.

This ambiguity is not merely theoretical; it is central to the present study. The unresolved tension between theological authority and civic normativity directly affects how Qur'anic interpretation is framed within state institutions.²⁶ If moderation lacks a coherent hermeneutical foundation, then official *tafsîr* production may continue operating within inherited exclusivist paradigms while rhetorically endorsing inclusivity.

Academic definitions of extremism further complicate the matter. Some define extremism as deviation from prevailing norms; others emphasize violence as a defining feature. Within Islamic jurisprudence,²⁷ however, concepts such as *jihâd* and *qitâl* exist within a regulated normative discourse and cannot be equated simplistically with extremism.²⁸ The problem arises when theological categories are evaluated through constitutional criteria without interpretive mediation.

This reveals that the central issue is not whether moderation is normatively desirable, but whether the state possesses a coherent interpretive mechanism for distinguishing between doctrinal exclusivity, constitutional loyalty, and violent radicalism. Without such mediation, moderation discourse risks producing conceptual inflation in which any form of strong theological exclusivity becomes potentially classified as socially destabilizing. The consequence is a shift from combating violence to regulating orthodoxy itself.

The state's moderation framework thus operates at the intersection of theology and governance, but without articulating a theory of how sacred texts should be interpreted in plural societies. This absence of methodological clarity becomes critical when examining the Ministry's own exegetical production.

The Ministry also categorizes extremism into right-wing (conservative) and left-wing (liberal) forms.²⁹ While analytically appealing, this symmetrical categorization risks oversimplification. Equating conservatism with extremism reinforces the perception that theological rigidity is inherently destabilizing.³⁰

More importantly, this categorization demonstrates that moderation discourse is not ideologically neutral. Rather than merely protecting plural coexistence, it implicitly constructs a preferred model of religious subjectivity: religious actors are expected to remain doctrinally committed, yet only within interpretive boundaries considered compatible with state-defined pluralism. In this sense, moderation becomes a form of bureaucratic mediation between orthodoxy and citizenship. Yet the core issue is not conservatism per se, but whether conservative hermeneutics can coexist with constitutional pluralism without generating exclusionary political implications.

This question becomes urgent in light of Indonesia's historical experiences with

religiously motivated violence in the early 2000s.³¹ Acts of terrorism posed genuine threats to democratic stability. However, responding to violent extremism by broadening the category to include theological exclusivity risks conceptual inflation.

Here, moderation discourse encounters its strongest internal contradiction. The framework seeks to preserve democratic pluralism by limiting exclusionary religious tendencies, yet in doing so it potentially reproduces another form of exclusion—namely, the marginalization of theological positions considered insufficiently moderate according to state criteria. Inclusivity is therefore operationalized through selective inclusion rather than unconditional recognition.

When moderation becomes an umbrella for regulating theological expression, it may inadvertently reproduce the very polarization it seeks to overcome. Conservative actors may interpret the framework as an attempt to delegitimize doctrinal orthodoxy. Meanwhile, minority communities may remain vulnerable if exclusivist interpretations persist within official religious literature.

This dynamic demonstrates that the effectiveness of religious moderation cannot be measured solely through policy rhetoric or institutional dissemination. Its epistemological coherence depends on whether the interpretive foundations of state-sponsored religious discourse genuinely support plural coexistence. Without transformation at the hermeneutical level, moderation risks functioning as a performative political discourse whose inclusive claims remain structurally constrained by inherited exclusivist assumptions.

Here lies the central paradox: the state promotes moderation as a solution to intolerance, yet its conceptual tools for implementing moderation remain underdeveloped at the hermeneutical level.

This gap becomes particularly visible when examining the Ministry's own Qur'anic exegesis, *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya (Edisi yang Disempurnakan)*, published in 2008. As a state-sponsored *tafsîr* produced under the authority of the Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Qur'an (LPMQ), it occupies a privileged and authoritative position in Indonesian religious discourse.

Qur'anic Exegesis of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Persistence of Interpretive Exclusivism

The institutional authority of the Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Qur'an (LPMQ) is analytically significant not merely because it produces Qur'anic commentary, but because it functions as a state-sanctioned mechanism for regulating legitimate Islamic interpretation. Operating under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, LPMQ occupies a strategic position within Indonesia's religious governance structure. Its exegetical production therefore cannot be treated as a neutral theological exercise; rather, it constitutes an official articulation of how the state seeks to organize religious meaning,

authority, and communal boundaries within a plural society. The publication of *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* (Edisi yang Disempurnakan) (2008) must consequently be understood as part of a broader project of state-sponsored religious knowledge production in which interpretation simultaneously performs pedagogical, ideological, and regulatory functions.

The authority of the *tafsîr* is reinforced through the involvement of nationally recognized scholars such as Ahsin Sakho Muhammad, M. Atho Mudzhar, Fadhal A.E. Bafadal, and M. Quraish Shihab.³² However, the analytical importance of this scholarly involvement lies not only in intellectual credibility but in the production of institutional religious legitimacy. Because the *tafsîr* circulates nationally through schools, universities, mosques, and religious programs, its interpretations acquire normative force beyond academic discourse and become embedded within the broader grammar of public religiosity. In this context, interpretation functions as an instrument of religious governance: it shapes how Muslims conceptualize religious others, political authority, communal belonging, and moral legitimacy.

Methodologically, *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* adopts the *tahliîlî* method and follows the *tartîb mushḥafî* arrangement while relying predominantly on *ra'yî* reasoning and *bayânî* textual orientation.³³ The crucial issue, however, is not the use of classical exegetical methodology itself, but the absence of an explicit hermeneutical mechanism capable of mediating between inherited theological categories and the Ministry's contemporary moderation discourse. The *tafsîr* preserves substantial continuity with classical interpretive structures while simultaneously operating within a modern state project that promotes tolerance, coexistence, and plural citizenship. This produces a central epistemological tension: moderation is promoted institutionally, yet the interpretive architecture through which the Qur'an is explained remains largely governed by inherited exclusivist paradigms.

This tension becomes visible in the *tafsîr's* construction of religious identity through the categories of *muttaqûn*, *kâfirûn*, and *munâfiqûn* in the interpretation of Sûrah al-Baqarah.³⁴ The analytical issue is not the existence of these Qur'anic categories themselves, but the interpretive transformation of historically situated descriptors into stable transhistorical moral identities. Through this interpretive move, the *tafsîr* constructs a rigid moral taxonomy that sharply differentiates legitimate insiders from illegitimate outsiders. Religious identity is therefore represented not primarily as relational or contextual, but as morally fixed and hierarchically ordered. Such framing contributes to the production of what may be termed institutionalized theological hierarchy, in which doctrinal distinction simultaneously operates as moral classification.

The discursive consequence of this hierarchy is significant. When theological categories are stabilized as enduring moral identities within an official state-sponsored *tafsîr*, religious difference becomes naturalized as moral asymmetry. Non-Muslims are not merely represented as doctrinally different but implicitly positioned outside normative religious legitimacy. This interpretive structure complicates moderation discourse because

the ethical principle of coexistence is subordinated to a hierarchical theology of communal distinction. Thus, the problem identified in this study is not theological exclusivity in isolation, but the transformation of exclusivity into an institutional framework for organizing public religious consciousness.

This pattern becomes more explicit in the *tafsîr*'s representation of the People of the Book and hypocrites.³⁵ The commentary repeatedly emphasizes deception, infiltration, denial of truth, and hidden hostility. Rather than functioning as historically contextualized descriptions of specific polemical encounters, these portrayals operate discursively as generalized interpretive motifs attached to collective religious identity. The interpretive emphasis on suspicion is therefore analytically important because it normalizes distrust as part of religious understanding itself. Within a state-sponsored framework claiming to promote moderation, such representations reveal that inclusivity is rhetorically affirmed while structures of theological suspicion remain intact.

The interpretation of Sûrah al-Baqarah 2:69–74 further illustrates this dynamic.³⁶ Jews are portrayed as deliberately concealing truth, manipulating revelation, infiltrating Islam, and monopolizing prophethood. The critical issue here is not disagreement with Jewish theology per se, but the essentializing logic through which negative characteristics are generalized across an entire religious community. Through discourse-analytical reading, the *tafsîr* can be seen as producing a form of state-sponsored religious boundary-making in which collective religious others are represented through morally charged and transhistorical categories. The absence of sustained contextualization allows historically contingent conflicts to function as enduring theological judgments.

This finding directly challenges the widespread assumption that official moderation discourse necessarily generates inclusive interpretive practice. Although moderation policy emphasizes tolerance and reduction of prejudice,³⁷ the *tafsîr* simultaneously reproduces collective suspicion through interpretive framing. Consequently, moderation operates less as a transformative hermeneutical principle than as an external administrative discourse layered upon inherited theological structures. Inclusivity is promoted institutionally, but exclusivist epistemology remains substantially preserved.

The role of editorial framing intensifies this process. Headings such as “The Love of Jews for Worldly Life” and “The Vices of the Jews” are not merely organizational devices.³⁸ They function interpretively by pre-structuring moral evaluation before readers engage the exegetical argument itself. Such thematic labels condense complex historical narratives into simplified communal typologies.³⁹ The result is not dialogical engagement with religious difference, but the stabilization of moralized communal identity. In this sense, the *tafsîr* participates in constructing what may be termed moderated exclusivism: a discursive formation in which institutional moderation coexists with enduring theological hierarchy and essentialized representations of religious others.

Negative representation is similarly evident in interpretations concerning Christianity, particularly Sûrah al-Mâ'idah 5:17–18.⁴⁰ The *tafsîr* frames Trinitarian belief primarily through polemical rational critique and associates it with shirk without substantial dialogical mediation. While doctrinal disagreement is entirely consistent with Islamic theology, the interpretive problem lies in the absence of contextual strategies capable of reconciling theological disagreement with the Ministry's own civic discourse of coexistence and mutual recognition. The commentary therefore maintains confessional absolutism while moderation discourse simultaneously calls for interreligious harmony. This coexistence of civic inclusivity and theological rigidity demonstrates that moderation has not become an organizing hermeneutical norm within the *tafsîr* itself.

The epistemological tension becomes even more consequential in the interpretation of political verses such as Sûrah Âli 'Imrân 3:28 and al-Taubah 9:23.⁴¹ The *tafsîr* presents non-Muslim leadership as categorically impermissible without systematically distinguishing between contexts of war, hostility, and constitutional citizenship. This interpretive extension transforms theological caution into generalized political principle. In the context of Indonesia's democratic and religiously plural constitutional order,⁴² such interpretation contributes to the construction of political exclusion through theological reasoning. The issue therefore exceeds doctrinal interpretation alone and enters the sphere of civic legitimacy and democratic participation.

Here the relationship between moderation discourse and interpretive authority becomes particularly revealing. At the policy level, moderation promotes tolerance, coexistence, and equal citizenship. At the interpretive level, however, official exegesis continues to preserve asymmetrical theological legitimacy between Muslims and non-Muslims. The result is a structural contradiction within state-sponsored religious discourse itself: moderation seeks civic inclusion while interpretation continues to regulate communal hierarchy. This contradiction directly addresses Research Question 2 by demonstrating how exclusivist theological constructions undermine the epistemological coherence of Indonesia's moderation project.

It is important to recognize that *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* also contains interpretations supporting freedom of belief, peaceful preaching, and divine recognition of diversity.⁴³ However, the analytical significance of these inclusive passages lies precisely in their inability to function as regulating interpretive principles. Inclusive verses appear alongside exclusivist constructions without any systematic hermeneutical hierarchy capable of reconciling the two orientations. The *tafsîr* therefore produces discursive coexistence rather than epistemological integration.

This absence of meta-hermeneutical prioritization is one of the study's most important findings. The *tafsîr* does not explicitly employ contextual historicization, ethical prioritization, or maqâcid-oriented mediation when addressing conflict-oriented verses. Consequently, moderation remains external to the mechanics of interpretation itself.

Rather than restructuring exegetical reasoning, moderation functions primarily as institutional rhetoric surrounding the *tafsîr*. This reveals that the central weakness of Indonesia's moderation project is not merely sociopolitical inconsistency but unresolved hermeneutical contradiction.

Rather than representing a fully inclusive hermeneutical project, the evidence suggests that *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* embodies a form of state-managed moderation in which civic inclusivity is promoted administratively while exclusivist theological structures remain substantially intact within interpretive practice. The *tafsîr* rhetorically supports coexistence, yet its underlying interpretive logic continues to construct rigid communal boundaries, hierarchical religious legitimacy, and asymmetrical political inclusion. These findings indicate that the epistemological coherence of Indonesia's moderation project is weakened by the persistence of institutionalized theological hierarchy within official state-sponsored exegesis. Consequently, the realization of religious moderation cannot depend solely on policy discourse or bureaucratic promotion; it requires systematic hermeneutical transformation capable of reconciling theological commitment with plural civic ethics within the structure of interpretation itself.

Kemenag's *Tafsîr*: An Obstacle to Religious Moderation in Indonesia

The central contradiction within the Ministry's moderation project lies in the coexistence of inclusivist civic rhetoric and exclusivist interpretive authority. Although religious moderation is officially promoted as a framework for fostering coexistence, reducing prejudice, and strengthening interreligious harmony, the Ministry's own *tafsîr* frequently reproduces theological constructions that hierarchize religious communities and normalize suspicion toward religious others. This contradiction is not incidental but structural, because the moderation framework operates primarily at the level of policy discourse while the exegetical framework remains substantially governed by inherited exclusivist assumptions. As a result, the realization of moderation encounters epistemological limits within the state's own production of religious knowledge.

The Ministry conceptualizes moderation as a transition from exclusivist religiosity toward inclusive coexistence in a plural society.⁴⁴ However, the analytical issue is that inclusiveness within the moderation framework is treated primarily as a social ethic rather than as a transformative hermeneutical principle. Consequently, moderation promotes tolerance at the civic level without systematically reconstructing the interpretive mechanisms through which religious others are represented in authoritative *tafsîr*. This distinction is crucial because theological exclusivism is not challenged at its epistemological foundation; it is merely expected to coexist with administrative commitments to pluralism. The result is a form of bureaucratic moderation in which inclusivity is institutionally promoted while exclusivist theological structures remain substantially intact.

This tension becomes evident in the *tafsîr*'s recurring representations of Jews and Christians through themes of deviation, conspiracy, moral corruption, and divine condemnation.⁴⁵ The problem identified in this study is not the presence of theological disagreement itself, but the interpretive transformation of disagreement into enduring moral hierarchy. The *tafsîr* does not merely defend Islamic doctrinal claims; it frequently frames religious others through generalized negative moral categories that exceed contextual theological critique. Through this interpretive process, religious difference is converted into asymmetrical moral legitimacy, where Islam functions as the sole normative center while other traditions are discursively positioned as ethically deficient or spiritually deviant.

This pattern reveals that the *tafsîr* constructs inclusivity conditionally rather than relationally. Non-Muslims may coexist socially within the framework of civic order, yet they remain symbolically subordinated within the structure of theological recognition. Such representation directly complicates the Ministry's own moderation principles because coexistence is institutionally encouraged while theological hierarchy remains discursively normalized. The issue therefore is not simply inconsistency between policy and interpretation, but the persistence of what may be termed state-sponsored interpretive exclusivism: a condition in which official religious interpretation preserves rigid confessional hierarchy despite institutional commitments to moderation.

The persistence of these exclusivist structures also demonstrates that moderation discourse has not fundamentally altered the epistemological assumptions underlying official *tafsîr* production. Although the Ministry promotes compassion, tolerance, and anti-violence as normative religious values, the *tafsîr* continues to interpret conflict-oriented verses primarily through classical boundary-making logic rather than contextual ethical mediation. This continuity is analytically significant because it shows that moderation functions more as a discourse of governance than as a reconstructed hermeneutical paradigm. The state seeks to regulate religious coexistence socially without substantially transforming the interpretive foundations that shape theological consciousness itself.

This contradiction becomes particularly visible in the treatment of tolerance. The Ministry defines tolerance as respecting and safeguarding the beliefs, practices, and security of religious others.⁴⁶ However, the *tafsîr* frequently frames other religious traditions through condemnatory theological language that implicitly delegitimizes their moral and spiritual standing. Such representation exceeds doctrinal differentiation and enters the sphere of symbolic exclusion. Tolerance therefore becomes conceptually unstable because the civic language of coexistence is undermined by interpretive constructions that continue to portray religious others as spiritually problematic communities associated with error, deviation, or divine punishment.

The epistemological significance of this finding is substantial. The failure of moderation does not originate merely from inadequate policy implementation or sociopolitical resistance, but from unresolved contradictions within the structure of state-sponsored religious interpretation itself. Moderation discourse presupposes ethical equality within civic interaction, yet the *tafsîr* continues to reproduce asymmetrical theological legitimacy. Consequently, moderation and exclusivism are not functioning as opposing paradigms but as coexisting elements within the same institutional discourse. This coexistence produces what may be termed the epistemological incoherence of bureaucratic moderation.

The problem becomes even more consequential when exclusivist interpretation intersects with the Ministry's anti-violence framework.⁴⁷ The Ministry defines radicalism not only through physical violence but also through verbal and symbolic aggression. Yet the *tafsîr* itself frequently employs interpretive language that stigmatizes and morally essentializes entire religious communities. Even without explicitly advocating physical hostility, such discourse contributes to the normalization of symbolic exclusion by embedding suspicion and negative collective representation within authoritative religious knowledge. This demonstrates that the anti-violence principle promoted institutionally is not consistently internalized within exegetical production.

Importantly, the evidence suggests that exclusivist interpretation persists not because moderation is entirely absent, but because moderation remains external to the interpretive methodology itself. The *tafsîr* occasionally includes inclusive interpretations emphasizing coexistence, freedom of belief, and ethical engagement. However, these inclusive elements are not organized through a systematic hermeneutical hierarchy capable of regulating conflict-oriented interpretations. As a result, inclusivity appears episodically while exclusivist structures remain methodologically dominant. This fragmentation reveals that the *tafsîr* lacks a coherent interpretive architecture for reconciling theological commitment with plural civic ethics.

The continued reliance on the *tahlîlî* method further reinforces this structural continuity. While methodologically legitimate, the verse-by-verse orientation tends to privilege localized textual meaning and inherited exegetical authority.⁴⁸ Without contextual ethical prioritization, this method risks reproducing classical polemical constructions within a contemporary democratic context fundamentally different from the historical settings of earlier exegetical traditions. The issue therefore is not the *tahlîlî* method itself, but the absence of a mediating hermeneutical framework capable of integrating moderation principles into the mechanics of interpretation. Consequently, moderation remains administratively promoted yet hermeneutically underdeveloped.

This finding challenges a widespread assumption within contemporary Indonesian religious discourse: namely, that state-sponsored moderation automatically generates

inclusive religious interpretation. The evidence demonstrates the opposite. Institutional endorsement of moderation does not necessarily transform theological authority, because interpretive institutions may continue reproducing inherited exclusivist epistemologies even while publicly advocating coexistence. State moderation therefore operates simultaneously as inclusion and regulation: it promotes civic harmony while preserving confessional hierarchy within official religious interpretation.

The broader implication is that the Ministry's *tafsîr* functions not merely as an imperfect expression of moderation, but as a structural obstacle to the full realization of moderation itself. Because the *tafsîr* occupies a privileged position within Indonesia's official religious knowledge production, its exclusivist constructions acquire institutional legitimacy and pedagogical authority. The persistence of theological hierarchy within official interpretation therefore weakens the epistemological coherence of Indonesia's moderation project by preventing moderation from functioning as a genuinely transformative hermeneutical paradigm.

The evidence therefore suggests that the core limitation of Indonesia's state-sponsored moderation project lies in the unresolved coexistence between civic inclusivity and institutionalized interpretive exclusivism. Rather than reconstructing the epistemological foundations of religious interpretation, moderation primarily operates as a bureaucratic discourse layered upon inherited theological structures that continue to produce moral hierarchy, symbolic exclusion, and asymmetrical recognition of religious others. This study therefore contributes a broader conceptual insight into the nature of epistemologically incoherent moderation, namely a condition in which pluralist policy commitments fail to transform the interpretive logic of authoritative religious knowledge production. The findings demonstrate that the coherence of religious moderation cannot be assessed solely through state rhetoric or administrative policy, but must be evaluated at the level of hermeneutical structure, interpretive authority, and the discursive production of religious difference itself.

Conclusion

Rather than merely revealing inconsistencies between moderation policy and Qur'anic interpretation, this study demonstrates a deeper epistemological tension within Indonesia's state-sponsored religious discourse. The findings collectively indicate that religious moderation in Indonesia functions predominantly as a bureaucratic and civic framework, while the interpretive logic of official *tafsîr* continues to preserve inherited structures of theological exclusivism. As a result, moderation operates more as a regulatory discourse governing acceptable religiosity than as a transformative hermeneutical paradigm capable of reconstructing relations with religious others.

Theoretically, this study contributes by reconceptualizing religious moderation not simply as a discourse of inclusion, but as a contested field in which civic pluralism and

confessional hierarchy coexist within the same institutional framework. The study refines existing discussions on Indonesian moderation by introducing the concept of epistemological incoherence, namely the condition in which pluralist policy commitments fail to transform the interpretive foundations of authoritative religious knowledge production.

These findings carry broader implications for scholarship, religious governance, and interreligious relations in plural societies. The study demonstrates that the effectiveness of moderation cannot be assessed solely through policy rhetoric or institutional programs, but must also be examined at the level of hermeneutical authority and interpretive methodology. Future research could therefore explore comparative analyses of state-sponsored *tafsîr* across Muslim-majority societies or investigate alternative contextual hermeneutical models capable of integrating theological commitment with plural civic ethics.

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⁴⁸ Departemen Agama RI, *Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsirnya: Edisi Yang Disempurnakan*.