

# RELIGIOUS MODERATION UNVEILED: The Intersection of Textual and Contextual Approaches to Understanding Indonesian Muslims

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**Abstract:** This article examines the concept of religious moderation using an intersectional approach to illustrate the disparity in its interpretation between state policies and societal practice. Prior literature has explored religious moderation from doctrinal and security viewpoints. This study proposes a new perspective to enhance the understanding of religious moderation in the Indonesian context by presenting its interpretation through two distinct lenses. First, it examines the concept of religious moderation within the context of daily interactions among religious communities. Second, this article criticizes the state's intervention in religious moderation campaigns. This article argues that religious moderation is inherently intricate, a complexity that finds resonance in the stance adopted by the state and everyday civil practice. The contention here is that the multifaceted nature of religious moderation is not confined to theoretical discourse; it reverberates through the policies enacted by the state and is interwoven with the actions and routines of individuals within the society.

**Keywords:** religious moderation; intersection; Islam; Indonesia

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## Introduction

The notion of religious moderation has not only been employed by scholars but has also gained widespread acceptance among the public, serving as a proclamation of Islam's intrinsic capacity to harmonize principles with traditions.<sup>1</sup> This concept has particularly taken root in the word of *wasata* in Al-Baqarah verse 143, which describes Muslims as finding a moderate way when facing problems. In Indonesia, a robust lineage of religious moderation thought can be discerned. Here, the idea of 'moderation' has transcended academic discourse, resonating with a broad audience and standing as a testament to religions' potential to reconcile fundamental values with established customs<sup>2</sup>. A compelling tradition of thought promoting the middle path has been woven within this intricate tapestry of cultures. Nevertheless, a question arises as to whether religious moderation in Indonesia genuinely emerged and is embraced by the general populace or if it is a conceptual construct promoted by the intellectuals and state.<sup>3</sup> How can the concept of intersectionality contribute to comprehending and identifying areas of overlap between the existing societal and political projects of the "middle path"?

In Indonesian literature, the tenets of Islamic moderation have transcended not only in scholarly circles but also shaped the collective ethos of the Muslims in this region.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Ainun Najib and Ahmad Khoirul Fata, "Islam Wasatiyah Dan Kontestasi Wacana Moderatisme Islam Di Indonesia," *Jurnal THEOLOGIA* 31, no. 1 (June 26, 2020): 115, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2020.31.1.5764>; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur'anic Principle of Wasatiyyah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Yusuf Qardhawi, *Islam Jalan Tengah: Menjauhi Sikap Berlebihan Dalam Beragama* (Bandung: Mizan, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Abdul Malik and M. Anwar Hindi, "Verbalisasi Moderasi Beragama Dalam Artikel Sarjana PTKIN Indonesia 2016-2020," *Asy-Syari'ah/ : Jurnal Hukum Islam* 7, no. 2 (June 25, 2021): 109–30, <https://doi.org/10.55210/assyariah.v7i2.593>; Muhammad Nasir and Muhammad Khairul Rijal, "Keeping the Middle Path: Mainstreaming Religious Moderation through Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 11, no. 2 (December 8, 2021): 213–41, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i2.213-241>.

<sup>3</sup> R Sukma, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy: The Case of Indonesia," in *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia*, ed. S. J. Lee and J. Melissen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 91–116; A. R Umar, "A Genealogy of Moderate Islam: Governmentality and Discourses of Islam in Indonesia's Foreign Policy," *Studia Islamika* 23, no. 3 (2016): 399–434.

<sup>4</sup> Nur Amali Ibrahim, *Improvisational Islam/ : Indonesian Youth in a Time of Possibility*, 2018; Edi Junaedi, "Inilah Moderasi Beragama Perspektif Kemenag," *Harmoni* 18, no. 2 (December 31, 2019): 182–86, <https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v18i2.414>; Achmad Zainal Abidin, "Nilai-Nilai Moderasi Beragama Dalam Permendikbud No. 37 Tahun 2018," *JIRA: Jurnal Inovasi Dan Riset Akademik* 2, no. 5 (May 8, 2021): 729–36, <https://doi.org/10.47387/jira.v2i5.135>. Tohari, A., & Raya, M., The Meaning of Religious Moderation on The Resilience Of Muslim Minority In Balinese Hindus, *Journal Of Contemporary Islam And Muslim Societies*, 5, 1 (2021), 77-103. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v5i1.8686>

This narrative finds its roots deeply intertwined with the historical and cultural fabric of the region, encompassing the nations of Indonesia.

Numerous scholars have diligently delved into the realm of Islamic moderation within Indonesian Muslims, aiming to unravel the intricacies of Muslim practices in this distinctive region.<sup>5</sup> Extensive research has been conducted by many scholars on the topic of religious moderation in Indonesia.<sup>6</sup>

The article by A.F. Bakti explores the ideas of religious moderation put forth by Nurcholish Madjid, also known as Cak Nur.<sup>7</sup> Bakti argues that Cak Nur emphasizes the importance of civil society in improving social and political development as the main concept of moderation. According to Bakti's research, Cak Nur promotes peaceful coexistence of different religions and beliefs and has contributed to promoting moderate thinking and interfaith dialogue in Indonesia while preserving religious values in modern times. Irham et al. review the relationship between Islam and the state in Indonesia, focusing on the development of ideas about religious moderation during the New Order and Reform Era.<sup>8</sup>

In another study, Makruf explores the political dynamics of Islam in contemporary Indonesia, focusing on the strategic adaptations made by Islamic political parties.<sup>9</sup> Previous research has discussed the engagement of Islamic political parties in parliamentary politics and their overall impact on Indonesian politics. However, this study fills the gap by examining how these parties have moderated their agendas in response to post-reform political changes. Umar delves into the political construction of the 'Moderate Islam

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<sup>5</sup> Sudirman Yahya, "Slogan 'Torang Samua Ciptaan Tuhan' Dalam Konteks Moderasi Beragama Di Kota Manado," *Dialog* 43, no. 1 (June 29, 2020): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.47655/dialog.v43i1.361>; Muhammad Sadli Mustafa, "Awa Itaba La Awai Assangoatta: Aplikasi Moderasi Beragama Dalam Bingkai Kearifan Lokal To Wotu," *Al-Qalam* 26, no. 2 (November 2, 2020): 307, <https://doi.org/10.31969/alq.v26i2.863>; Aksa Aksa and Nurhayati Nurhayati, "Moderasi Beragama Berbasis Budaya Dan Kearifan Lokal Pada Masyarakat Donggo Di Bima (Tinjauan Sosio-Historis)," *Harmoni* 19, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 338–52, <https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v19i2.449>. Khoirul Anam, Abdul Kadir, and Aunur Rofiq, "Interpretation and Internalization of Moderation Values in Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor," *Miqot*, Vol 47, No 2 (2023): 238-253, <http://dx.doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v47i2.1081>.

<sup>6</sup> Nasir and Rijal, "Keeping the Middle Path: Mainstreaming Religious Moderation through Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia."

<sup>7</sup> A. F Bakti, "Islam and Modernity: Nurcholish Madjid's Interpretation of Civil Society, Pluralism, Secularization, and Democracy," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 33, no. 3 (2005): 486–505.

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Aqil Irham, Idrus Ruslan, and Muhammad Candra Syahputra, "The Idea Of Religious Moderation In Indonesian New Order And The Reform Era," *Ilmu Ushuluddin* 8, no. 1 (August 18, 2021): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.15408/iu.v8i1.19618>.

<sup>9</sup> Jamhari Makruf, "Islam, Democracy, and the Road to Moderatism: Testing the Political Commitment of Indonesian Muslim Activists.," *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 2, no. 3 (2011): 517–28.

Discourse' in contemporary Indonesian foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> The authors argues that the articulation of Islam in Indonesia's foreign policy is influenced by the ideological foundations of each political regime and the hegemonic discourse operating in international politics. Furthermore, the author claims that there have been three discourses of Islam in Indonesia's foreign policy articulated by different political regimes.

Their endeavors shed light on the factors that bestow a distinct visage upon Islam here, setting it apart from its manifestation in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> Islamic moderation, far from being confined to theological realms, encompasses a multifaceted panorama that spans cultural, social, economic, political, and historical dimensions. As a result, comprehending the essence of Islamic moderation within the archipelago remains an intellectual pursuit of paramount significance. While scholarly discourse has extensively engaged with this concept, its study remains an ever-evolving canvas that beckons exploration from fresh vantage points.<sup>12</sup> Prior studies need to be critical as they explore religious moderation at the levels of ideas, politics, and everyday practices, often treating these aspects as separate from one another and neglecting potential intricate connections and influences that may exist among them.<sup>13</sup> The author argues that an approach is necessary to examine the relationships or lack thereof between these levels, to build a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of religious moderation in Indonesia.

The study of religious moderation often lacks an intersectional approach that compares state policies with community practices. This approach offers a more comprehensive view of the complex nature of religious moderation, which involves multiple factors, including state and community elements. Examining religious moderation from an intersectional perspective entails recognizing the crucial role of the state in shaping and influencing religious practices. For instance, in Indonesia, the government has implemented various policy measures to promote religious moderation as part of its strategy to maintain social stability and counter religious extremism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Umar, "A Genealogy of Moderate Islam: Governmentality and Discourses of Islam in Indonesia's Foreign Policy."

<sup>11</sup> Fathurrahman Muhtar, "Toward Religious Moderation: Mohammed Arkoun's and Hasan Hanafi's Perspectives on Indonesian Wasatiyah Islam," *Miqot*, Vol 47, No 2 (2023): 204-221, <http://dx.doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v47i2.1119>.

<sup>12</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, ed., *Conservative Turn: Islam Indonesia Dalam Ancaman Fundamentalisme* (Bandung: Mizan, 2014); Muhammad Alwi HS, "Islam Nusantara Sebagai Upaya Kontekstualisasi Ajaran Islam Dalam Menciptakan Moderasi Beragama," *Al-Adyan: Jurnal Studi Lintas Agama* 16, no. 1 (July 30, 2021): 75-94, <https://doi.org/10.24042/ajsla.v16i1.8569>.

<sup>13</sup> Muhamad Ali, "Between Faith and Social Relations: The Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama's Fatwas and Ideas on Non Muslims and Interreligious Relations," *The Muslim World* 110, no. 4 (September 27, 2020): 458-80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12363>.

<sup>14</sup> Kamaruddin Amin, "Sambutan Direktur Jenderal Pendidikan Islam.," in *Moderasi Beragama; Dari Indonesia Untuk Dunia* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2019).

These measures include public campaigns, educational programs, and regulations addressing religious issues. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that intersectionality prompts us not to focus solely on the state's role. Rather, we should also consider community practices that impact religious moderation. Communities play a significant role in shaping the culture of moderation, everyday religious practices, and interfaith dynamics. This involves community initiatives to celebrate differences, engage in dialogue, and promote interfaith harmony.

This article uses Hurd's theory to explore novel avenues of inquiry, offering a critical examination of existing methodologies employed to comprehend religious moderation in the Indonesian context.<sup>15</sup> In "Beyond Religious Freedom," Hurd argues religious interpretation project is promoted by the state as the institutionalization of religion.<sup>16</sup> As a result, it may lead to a conflict with the practice in the community due to the ongoing evolution of religious practices and knowledge within society. Rather than confining the scope to conventional interpretations, this article endeavors to transcend established paradigms, scrutinizing and potentially challenging prevalent approaches. It is important to emphasize that the concept of Islamic moderation is not narrowly confined within the contours of social practice or limited to doctrinal texts stemming from divine revelation. This article advocates for an academic exploration of Islamic moderation, a perspective that facilitates a deeper, more analytical, and substantive appreciation of this phenomenon. The central objective here is to pave the way for a scholarly discourse that transcends conventional boundaries, inviting a more rigorous and comprehensive examination of Islamic moderation among Indonesian Muslims. By broadening the lens through intersectionality, this paper aspires to enhance our understanding, stimulate critical insights, and foster a more nuanced perspective on the intricate interplay of factors shaping Islamic moderation in this unique region.

## Methods

This article adopts intersectionality as a methodology. Intersectionality is an approach that examines the intersection between texts on religious moderation in Indonesia and social practices within the community. Although intersectionality originated in black feminist legal studies, it has been applied across the social sciences, including religious studies (Harris & Bartlow, 2015).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Hurd.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, A., & Bartlow, S. (2015). Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Class. In DeLamater, J., & Plante, R. (Eds.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Sexualities*. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research. Cham: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-17341-2\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-17341-2_15).

This approach not only focuses on documents that are influential in building an understanding of religious moderation in Indonesia but also looks at people's lived religious experiences, particularly through life narratives.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, the authors use two data sources. First, there are data sources from documents such as the book "Moderasi Beragama" and "Kompilasi Kebijakan dan Peraturan Perundang-Undangan Kerukunan Umat Beragama" issued by the Balitbang Kementerian Agama RI (the Ministry of Religious Affairs). Secondly, data sources from empirical research experiences conducted by researchers in Penyengat Village, Siak Regency, Riau and Aceh Singkil, Aceh. As an additional supplement, the authors use literature related to religious moderation written by scholars from the backgrounds of sociology, politics, and anthropology. The application of the intersectionality method in this study also includes data analysis, where this study emphasizes the intersection between defining religious moderation in text and context. Data validation uses reliability techniques, which means that data testing refers to how consistent the findings obtained by the authors are with the concepts used.

## Religious Moderation in State Agenda

The state's approach to promoting religious moderation demonstrates the potential of religious institutions to adapt and evolve while steadfastly committing to guiding and enriching the lives of individuals and society. The implementation of moderation as a strategic approach to religious knowledge reflects a profound understanding of the dynamic relationship between faith, society, and progress. By adopting "*moderasi beragama*," the Indonesian government not only ensures the continued relevance of religious practices and knowledge but also contributes to the promotion of social harmony, inclusivity, and sustainable development.<sup>19</sup> This section examines how religious moderation in the context of Indonesia is strategically applied by the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) to effectively disseminate and apply religious knowledge. The emphasis on moderation reflects a balanced and inclusive approach that recognizes the evolving nature of religious practices and knowledge within society.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) plays a pivotal role in facilitating the strategic implementation of religious knowledge through moderation.<sup>20</sup> The concept of

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<sup>18</sup> Narayan, A., Purkayastha, B., & Khan, K. (2021). Intersectionality. In A. Day, M. S. Fowler, & S. Whitehead (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (2nd ed., p. 16). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003222491>.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, Anthony L. (2000). Indonesia's Foreign Policy under Abdurrahman Wahid: Radical or Status Quo State? *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 22(3), 498–526.

<sup>20</sup> Hosterey, James. "Rebranding Islam: Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, and the Making of 'Moderate Islam,'" *Contending Modernities*, April 20, 2016, accessed July 31, 2024, <https://blogs.nd.edu/contendingmodernities/2016/04/20/aci-indonesia-rebranding-islam-public-diplomacy-soft-power-and-the-making-of-moderate-islam/>.

moderation, as articulated in manuals published by MoRA, signifies the delicate balance between preserving traditional religious values and accommodating the demands of modern society<sup>21</sup>. This approach acknowledges that as society advances, new issues and challenges emerge, necessitating a nuanced understanding of religious principles. By encouraging scholars, clerics, and educators to engage in thoughtful reinterpretation of religious texts, MoRA promotes a contextual approach that harmonizes timeless values with contemporary realities. The incorporation of moderation into governmental strategies signifies a proactive stance in harmonizing religious teachings with societal progress. This aligns with a broader objective of fostering a cohesive and inclusive society. The intentional engagement of scholars and religious leaders in reinterpreting religious texts signifies a commitment to maintaining the core principles of faith while ensuring their applicability in a changing social landscape. As a result, the promotion of moderation by MoRA exemplifies a constructive effort to bridge tradition and modernity, guiding the nation towards a future where religious understanding is inclusive, adaptive, and contributive to the greater societal good.

However, there exists a notable discrepancy between the values of inclusivity and tolerance advocated at the rhetorical level and the actual implementation of religious management policies.<sup>22</sup> Despite the government's efforts to promote interfaith harmony, practical experiences on the ground reveal challenges that need to be addressed to realize a more consistent and effective moderation.<sup>23</sup> A more holistic and coordinated approach is required to ensure that the values of religious moderation are consistently realized across the entire spectrum of religious policies. The primary argument in this context is that while the Indonesian government embraces the concept of religious moderation that values inclusivity and tolerance at the ideological level, significant differences emerge when this concept is applied to religious management policies. Several examples illustrate these disparities, including regulations on the establishment of places of worship, interfaith marriages, and the push to incorporate followers of local beliefs.

Despite the government's overarching commitment to fostering an environment of religious harmony and peaceful coexistence, practical challenges on the ground demand

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<sup>21</sup> Kementerian Agama RI, *MODERASI BERAGAMA* (Jakarta: Balitbang Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Sukma, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy: The Case of Indonesia."

<sup>23</sup> Heru Nugroho, "Demokrasi Dan Demokratisasi: Sebuah Kerangka Konseptual Untuk Memahami Dinamika Sosial-Politik Di Indonesia," *Jurnal Pemikiran Sosiologi* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–15; Rumadi, *Islamic Post-Traditionalism in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute., 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid: Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President; A View from the Inside*. (Honolulu: Hawaii Press., 2002); Martin van Bruinessen, "Traditionalist and Islamist Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia," in *The Madrasa in Asia*, ed. Farish A Noor, Yoginder Sikand, and Martin van Bruinessen (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 217–46, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048501380-010>.

a comprehensive and systematic reevaluation of policy implementation. This necessitates a multifaceted approach that not only underscores the importance of inclusive principles but also places a robust emphasis on their consistent and practical application. The divergence between the theoretical ideals of moderation and the actual policies at play underscores the critical need for policy reform. A collaborative effort involving government bodies, religious leaders, community representatives, and scholars should be employed to bridge this gap. This collective endeavor would strive to align policy implementations more closely with the core values of religious moderation, thereby enhancing their impact and fostering a more harmonious societal fabric. Engaging in open dialogues, formulating inclusive guidelines, and amending existing regulations can collectively contribute to a more coherent and effective manifestation of religious moderation within the realm of religious management policies.

When examining the intricacies of religious moderation, it is crucial to consider various factors that influence this concept in the Indonesian context. A significant amount of literature has discussed religious moderation from a doctrinal and security standpoint, viewing it as a means of countering religious extremism and associated activities.<sup>24</sup> There has been an increase in optimism about the religious moderation program in Indonesia due to the new Presidential Regulation Number 58 of 2023. This regulation has a strong focus on strengthening religious moderation, which shows the government's commitment to promoting religious moderation. The government aims to achieve this by improving laws, enhancing coordination between institutions, and building capabilities. It's important to note that promoting religious moderation should be the responsibility of all parts of society, not just a specific sector. The goal is to integrate religious moderation deeply into the minds of the citizens, which will foster a harmonious, inclusive, and prosperous religious environment. So far, there have been positive signs that religious moderation is helping maintain religious harmony in Indonesia.

The Ministry of Religion is dedicated to enhancing religious moderation through various means, such as improving organizational structures. As part of this commitment, the Ministry has established the Religious Moderation Agency. This new agency is responsible for coordinating the efforts of different ministries, institutions, and regional governments to ensure the effective implementation of religious moderation while also engaging the community. The Ministry of Religion is leading these efforts through its management of the Religious Moderation Secretariat.

To ensure the effective implementation of religious moderation, the Sekretarian Bersama (joint secretariat) holds three main responsibilities: coordinating, monitoring,

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<sup>25</sup> Abdu Rokhman is Expert Staff to the Minister of Religious Affairs.

<sup>26</sup> <https://balitbangdiklat.kemenag.go.id/berita/kebijakan-moderasi-beragama-itu-living-policy>

<sup>27</sup> <https://balitbangdiklat.kemenag.go.id/berita/kebijakan-moderasi-beragama-itu-living-policy>



and evaluating the strengthening of religious moderation across various government levels; reporting progress and evaluations to the president; and publicizing the successes of the religious moderation program. Moreover, the Ministry of Religion is actively working to enhance skills by providing diverse training and educational programs, such as *'Master Of Training Penguatan Moderasi Beragama'* (religious moderation master training). This initiative aims to equip policymakers with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively and comprehensively implement religious moderation.

Based on our perspective, the Ministry of Religion has implemented policy changes and institutional transformations toward the approach of “religious moderation”. This highlights the state’s vision to promote this policy within society. We also saw this initiative in Rokhman<sup>25</sup> statement. He said that this policy is a “living policy” that expects “religious moderation” to be adaptable to the continually developing social, political, and cultural dynamics.<sup>26</sup> According to Abu Rokhmad’s opinion, religious moderation as a policy emphasizes the importance of being flexible and responsive to challenges that arise in complex and diverse public spaces. The concept of religious moderation as a policy means that changes in the needs and aspirations of society should be accommodated as they continue to evolve. Yaquut Cholil shares this view and advocates for “religious moderation” to develop in tandem with information technology and globalization, which he has expressed in various speeches.<sup>27</sup> It’s not surprising that religious moderation has had to adapt to changing circumstances since this policy was introduced. The increasing diversity of different religions and beliefs, as well as external challenges such as radicalization and extremism, have all played a role in this.

Religious moderation is a living policy that emphasizes inclusivity, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue as its main pillars. It requires continuous evaluation and adjustment and should be open to feedback from the community and empirical data to achieve its goals. Regular evaluation and strategic adjustments must be an integral part of the religious moderation policy cycle. Additionally, adaptive and inclusive decision-making is also important for implementing this policy effectively.<sup>28</sup> In a society that is becoming more diverse, policies that promote religious moderation must consider a range of different perspectives, interests, and values. This necessitates a collaborative approach that involves multiple stakeholders, such as religious leaders, civil society, and minority groups, in creating, executing, and assessing the policy.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://balitbangdiklat.kemenag.go.id/berita/kebijakan-moderasi-beragama-itu-living-policy>

<sup>29</sup> Gabriel Facal, “Islamic Defenders Front Militia (Front Pembela Islam) and Its Impact on Growing Religious Intolerance in Indonesia.,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 2019, 1–22.

<sup>30</sup> Muhammad Ansor and Laila Sari Masyhur, “Satu Kampung Enam Iman: Penguatan Integrasi Sosial Melalui Perayaan Tujuh Liku Pada Suku Asli Anak Rawa Di Siak, Riau,”

For instance, the presence of various religious houses of worship in Indonesia demonstrates religious communities' efforts to coexist peacefully despite occasional inter-religious tensions. This illustrates how religious moderation can manifest in everyday social interactions. The complexity of religious moderation is not limited to theoretical discourse alone; it also affects state policies and individual actions in society. The theoretical conception of religious moderation has a close connection with its implementation in state policy and individual behavior. This connection underscores the intricate relationship between the theoretical construct of religious moderation and its manifestation in people's daily lives. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research have significant implications for comprehending religious moderation in Indonesia.

### **Religious Moderation in grassroots**

This section examines the role of religious moderation within grassroots communities, focusing on its impact on public norms and the cultivation of social spirituality. The intricate interplay between religious beliefs, community practices, and societal values underscores the importance of understanding how religious moderation shapes the dynamics of local religious engagement. The empirical data collected during fieldwork in Aceh Singkil and Penyengat, Riau, provide robust support for the central role of religious moderation in shaping public norms and cultivating social spirituality at the grassroots level. The observed outcomes, including increased tolerance, interfaith collaboration, and effective conflict resolution, underscore the transformative potential of religious moderation in building cohesive and resilient communities. The findings from this study reinforce the significance of religious moderation as an integral component of community development efforts, emphasizing the need for continued exploration and support of this concept in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

At the grassroots level, religious moderation plays a pivotal role in shaping public norms. It serves as a guiding principle that encourages mutual respect and understanding among diverse religious groups within a community.<sup>29</sup> By promoting dialogue and cooperation, religious moderation contributes to the establishment of shared norms that foster coexistence, mitigate conflicts, and create a harmonious environment for interfaith interactions.

Social spirituality, rooted in the collective consciousness of a community, is significantly influenced by religious moderation. This form of spirituality transcends

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*Connection: Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat* 3, no. 1 (2023): 1–16, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32505/connection.v3v1.6242>.

individual practices and extends to communal activities, emphasizing the ethical and moral dimensions of religious beliefs. Religious moderation encourages a balanced approach to spiritual engagement, inspiring individuals to actively contribute to the betterment of society while upholding their faith-based values.

Penyengat Village is a fascinating case study of religious harmony amidst diversity, which we will analyse using the theoretical frameworks of living religion and pluralism from grass root. A notable feature of the village is its diverse places of worship, which reflect the individual beliefs of each community while also symbolizing inclusion within the larger community. Joint celebrations of religious holidays and families with members of different faiths also demonstrate the grassroots pluralism approach of seeking common ground and peaceful coexistence. The village government's provision of social assistance to all religious followers, including those of the indigenous Ugamo Malim faith, further promotes equality among religious communities. Open cemeteries for all religions and beliefs also reflect a grassroots pluralism approach to supporting differences in religious and spiritual aspects.

During our ethnographic visit, we interviewed the Village Head, who highlighted the strong social cohesion and mutual assistance traditions ingrained in the village society. All residents, regardless of their religious affiliations, come together to provide aid to one another, creating deep social bonds and minimizing potential inter-religious conflicts. The village government's fair approach to providing equal access to social assistance and resources also fosters a sense of equality among religious communities and prevents conflicts arising from feelings of inequality.

Ansor et al.'s research in Penyengat, Siak-Riau province, highlights tradition as a significant factor that strengthens relationships between religious communities.<sup>30</sup> Despite the presence of socio-religious fragmentation in Penyengat village, no religious-based conflicts have happened. Initially, most community members followed local religions or traditional beliefs, but later, many converted to official state religions such as Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, or Catholicism, which, if not handled carefully, could potentially disrupt social cohesion and even lead to conflict. To strengthen the socio-cultural identity of the Anak Rawa Indigenous People, efforts were made to revive the Tujuh Liku traditional tradition, to increase community participation in these traditional celebrations, and to reinforce their role in promoting social integration. The community service results showed that this strategy of revitalizing cultural identity was well received and helped strengthen integration amid religious fragmentation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ansor and Masyhur.

<sup>32</sup> Umarwan Sutopo, "Toleransi Beragama (Toleransi Masyarakat Muslim Dan Budha Di Dusun Sodong Perspektif Islam)," *Al-Syakhsiyah Journal of Law and Family Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021): 48–82.

Religious moderation is not just a simple idea but an endeavor that demands a deep understanding and strong collaboration among various groups. Literature that explores the dynamics and practices of religious tolerance in Indonesia has documented many successful community initiatives. Since the concept of religious moderation was introduced, Islamic researchers in Indonesia have considered various factors like social, cultural, political, and local wisdom when studying moderation practices within society. One such study highlights how the people of Sodong can practice religious tolerance intensely, showcasing it as a successful example of preserving national diversity.<sup>32</sup> This tolerance is not solely rooted in religion but is also influenced by social, cultural, and political elements. This underscores the importance of reinforcing tolerance practices, particularly in social contexts.

A review of the Puja Mandala in Bali highlights the importance of understanding the concept of mature tolerance.<sup>33</sup> The research suggests a transformational approach that moves away from permissive and dominative tolerance towards mutualistic tolerance and mutual respect between majority and minority groups. By considering local wisdom and examining real-life examples of tolerance, this research offers a comprehensive model of tolerance. Furthermore, a study of Kedahe in North Sulawesi demonstrates that despite Islam being a minority in the area, tolerance is still well maintained.<sup>34</sup> Although tensions exist between formal Islam and Masade's local religion, mutual respect between ethnicities, races, and religions keeps Kedahe a safe border area.<sup>35</sup> However, the destruction of a church in Aceh Singkil serves as a reminder of the challenges in achieving religious tolerance.

While adhering to regulations like the IMB (Building Permit) is necessary, this research underscores the importance of local wisdom in fostering religious harmony. This suggests that while following rules is crucial, incorporating local wisdom is also essential to maintain peace amidst religious diversity.

Our research conducted in Aceh Singkil provides a detailed insight into why the community in Sibody-body Village feels a strong urge to protect the Ugamo Malim belief.

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<sup>33</sup> Muhammad Nur Prabowo Setyabudi, "PENGUATAN TOLERANSI BAGI PEMAJUAN BUDAYA KEAGAMAAN: STUDI ATAS PRAKTIK TOLERANSI AGAMA DI PUJA MANDALA BALI," *HARMONI* 19, no. 274–296 (2020).

<sup>34</sup> Sunandar Macpal and Donald Qomaidiasyah Tungkagi, "Tradisi Minoritas Muslim Dan Toleransi Di Lingkungan Kristen: Konstruksi Identitas Muslim Kendahe Di Perbatasan Indonesia-Filipina," *Jurnal Bimas Islam* 15, no. 2 (2022): 237–72.

<sup>35</sup> Macpal and Tungkagi.

<sup>36</sup> Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "Peacebuilding in Indonesia: Christian–Muslim Alliances in Ambon Island," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 24, no. 3 (July 2013): 349–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2013.785091>; Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "Grassroots Peacebuilding in Contemporary Indonesia," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Peace* (Wiley,

One of the primary reasons for this protection is to defend the rights of the Ugamo Malim group, who are closely related to the rest of the village community. This blood relationship strengthens the bond between the community and the Ugamo Malim belief, making the community feel responsible for preserving this belief.

Our findings are consistent with previous research, which identified family ties as crucial in fostering harmonious inter-religious relationships. This confirms that in contexts of religious diversity, family ties are not just helpful but are essential in maintaining peace and harmony among different religious groups.<sup>36</sup> By reinforcing family bonds, society becomes more open and responsive to religious diversity and better equipped to manage potential conflicts arising from belief differences. Our research highlights the significance of recognizing and strengthening family connections in the context of religious tolerance. Understanding the deep ties between the community and local beliefs, which are still held by families, helps build a solid foundation for respectful and peaceful inter-religious relationships. Thus, promoting religious tolerance becomes more effective and sustainable when it is rooted in the active involvement and commitment of local communities to preserve harmony among religious groups.

The village's approach to external intervention also plays a significant role in maintaining interfaith harmony. Religious and social values are the responsibility of the community itself, and although they collaborate with external organizations on economic development and infrastructure projects, the village consistently emphasizes the importance of upholding social and religious values within the community. This approach preserves the harmony built over the years by maintaining control over the village's own social and religious dynamics. This interview provided valuable insights into how social solidarity, social policies, and non-intervention by external parties contribute to maintaining interfaith harmony in Penyengat Village. It is a concrete example of how local communities can design and sustain strong harmony amidst religious diversity.

Religious moderation occupies a central position in grassroots communities, influencing public norms and shaping social spirituality. Its role in fostering tolerance, inclusivity, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding highlights its transformative potential in nurturing cohesive and resilient societies.

As grassroots-level actors embrace and uphold the principles of religious moderation,

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2022), 112–23, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119424420.ch9>.

<sup>37</sup> Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*.

<sup>38</sup> Hurd.

<sup>39</sup> Hurd.

they actively contribute to the development of communities that celebrate diversity, honor shared values, and promote interfaith collaboration.

## **Complexity of Religious Moderation in Indonesian Policy**

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd's theory on religious moderation provides valuable insights into the intricacies of religious moderation in Indonesia.<sup>37</sup> According to Hurd, the state often takes the lead in dictating religious interpretation to control and manage religious practices. In Indonesia, the government promotes moderation as a means of preventing extremism and maintaining inter-religious harmony. However, such a view raises concerns about state dominance in regulating religious moderation and the possibility of marginalizing existing cultural potentials.

Hurd emphasizes the importance of an inclusive approach that recognizes the diversity of religious practices and beliefs in society.<sup>38</sup> In Indonesia, this means acknowledging and respecting different religious traditions and promoting inter-community dialogue to gain a better understanding of both differences and similarities. Additionally, Hurd's views also prompt critical reflection on how moderation efforts can better accommodate existing cultural potentials.<sup>39</sup> A more holistic approach that involves all elements of society, including religious communities, the state, and cultural complexities, is necessary to promote inter-religious harmony.

Discussions on the complexity of religious moderation, including criticisms that may arise, can deconstruct, and challenge the conventional understanding of religious moderation in Indonesia. Such discussions can highlight the inadequacy of the government's approach to accommodating all religious communities and may lead to feelings of inequality and conflict. Furthermore, such discussions can undermine efforts to build harmony by reducing dialogue and understanding between religions. Therefore, it is necessary to have a thorough discussion of the intricacies of religious moderation as a basis for developing a more inclusive approach in Indonesia. Such an approach should acknowledge the complex relationships between theoretical understanding, policy, and everyday practice in a diverse society.

The concept of religious harmony was introduced in 1967 to promote interfaith dialogue through government initiatives.<sup>40</sup> However, it is often seen as a form of "harmonization" imposed from above, which tends to favor majority groups and

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<sup>40</sup> Suhadi Cholil, "Freedom of Religion amid Polarization and Religious Moderation Policy," *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 6, no. 2 (March 30, 2023): 196–204, <https://doi.org/10.1558/isit.24603>.

<sup>41</sup> Zainal Abidin Bagir et al., *Pembatasan Hak Untuk Kebebasan Beragama Atau Berkeyakinan Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: CRCS UGM, 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Zainal Abidin Bagir Husni Mubarak, "Religious Freedom, Harmony or Moderation?"

disadvantage minorities. Religious freedom, which is protected by the 1945 constitution and reinforced by human rights laws, is also critiqued for being perceived as a predominantly Western concept despite its strong legal foundation in Indonesia.<sup>41</sup> Religious moderation was introduced in 2018 as a government response to growing religious extremism. Although it aims to foster a positive attitude, it has been criticized for potentially deepening divisions between moderate and non-moderate groups and possibly leading to state-imposed restrictions on religious freedom. It is crucial to find a balance between religious moderation, democracy, and human rights when addressing the challenges in Indonesia. Upholding religious freedom, which is protected by the constitution, is important in managing Indonesia's religious diversity. Religious moderation programs should encourage respect for religious diversity and prevent the oppression of minority groups and restrictions on religious freedom. Democratic values, human rights, and respect for diversity in religious practices should be integrated to reinforce these concepts in Indonesia.

The implementation of these concepts raises critical questions about law enforcement and government policy. For instance, the existing Blasphemy Law might strengthen intolerance and curtail religious freedom, whereas religious moderation is expected to enhance societal conditions.<sup>42</sup> There are concerns that government religious moderation programs might overly control religion institutionally, potentially limiting religious freedom and increasing society's reliance on the state to dictate permissible religious practices. While supporters of religious moderation programs see them as necessary to combat troubling religious extremism, these measures require careful consideration to avoid harmful consequences.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion of religious moderation in Indonesia is enriched through the lens of intersectionality. This approach invites a deeper reflection on the complexities inherent in its genesis and propagation. As we navigate the landscape of religious moderation, we must remain attuned to the evolving interplay between diverse societal elements and state-driven initiatives, all of which contribute to the shaping of the "middle path." This understanding fosters a more nuanced appreciation of the multifarious forces at play and offers insights into the future trajectory of religious moderation in Indonesia.

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