# CONSTRUCTED CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE LEADERSHIP PARADOX IN INDONESIA'S RELIGIOUS MODERATION MOVEMENT

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**Abstract:** This study investigates how collective consciousness is framed by religious moderation activists and how false consciousness emerges within Indonesia's religious moderation movement. Using a qualitative comparative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary sources in North Sumatra and North Sulawesi. Findings reveal that collective consciousness is framed through political discourse, theological narratives, cultural references, and memories of conflict and injustice. In North Sumatra, theological framing is dominant, producing a fragmented harmony that is institutionally grounded yet exclusive. By contrast, North Sulawesi demonstrates performative harmony, emphasizing universal slogans while denying latent conflicts. Despite these contextual differences, both regions sustain harmony through forms of false consciousness—maintaining peace by avoiding open confrontation rather than fostering genuine negotiation.

**Keywords:** Religious Moderation Movement, Collective Consciousness, False Collective Consciousness, framing analysis, Collective memory.



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| Article history | Submitted: May 24, 2025 | Revision: August 21, 2025 | Accepted: December 9, 2025 | Published: December 17, 2025 |
| How to cite article | Nasution, Hasan Bakti, Muhammad Jailani & Siti Ismahani. "CONSTRUCTED CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE LEADERSHIP PARADOX IN INDONESIA'S RELIGIOUS MODERATION MOVEMENT." MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Keislaman 49, no. 2 (2025): 423 – 447. http://dx.doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v49i2.1464 | | | |

## Introduction

In terms of religious affiliation, Indonesia's population of approximately 237.6 million is predominantly Muslim, accounting for around 207.2 million people. The remainder comprises an estimated 16.5 million Protestants, 6.9 million Catholics, 4 million Hindus, 1.7 million Buddhists, 117,000 adherents of Confucianism, 299,000 followers of indigenous belief systems, and about 897,000 members of other religious communities.[1] Beyond religious affiliation, Indonesia is also characterized by remarkable ethnic diversity. The 2010 national census recorded 1,340 distinct ethnic groups residing across more than 5,000 inhabited islands, stretching from Sabang to Merauke, within a broader archipelago of 13,667 islands.[2] It is to no surprise that a writer wonders how Indonesia becomes and thrives as a nation.[3] Religion, as a social value, functions in an ambivalent manner.[4] On the one hand, it provides moral guidance that regulates human interaction and fosters social cohesion. On the other, it holds the potential to generate tension and conflict. As a normative framework, religion not only shapes personal convictions but also directs the collective attitudes and behaviors of its adherents.[5] Understanding religion as a belief system requires openness and tolerance toward followers of other faiths. Conversely, when individuals regard their own religion as the sole and absolute bearer of truth, such exclusivism often fosters tension and conflict between religious communities. To mitigate these risks, the notion of religious moderation has increasingly been promoted as a guiding principle for interfaith harmony.

In Islamic thought, this principle is articulated through the concept of *wasathiyyah* (the middle path), as reflected in the Qur'an (Q.S. Al-Baqarah 2:143) and in the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, which states: "The best of deeds are those that are balanced".[6] Other religions also embrace analogous teachings. For instance, Confucianism emphasizes reciprocity and ethical restraint through principles such as *Ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren* ("Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire") and *We tong tien* ("Only God's goodness is truly pleasing"). Similarly, Catholicism underscores the "fellowship of faith, hope, and love" as central to its ecclesial tradition. The term "moderation" itself derives from the English word *moderate*, meaning "to avoid extremes." In the Indonesian Dictionary *(KBBI),* moderation is defined as the act of tempering or reducing excess.[7] Applied to religion, it implies practicing faith through a balanced approach that resists both rigid exclusivism (*tasyaddudiyah*) and permissive laxity (*tasahhuliyah*). Indicators of religious moderation include upholding divine and humanistic values, cultivating deliberation and consensus among believers, and safeguarding public order.[8] As Lukman Hakim Saifuddin (former Indonesian Minister of Religious Affairs) asserts, religious moderation represents a perspective, attitude, and practice that consistently occupies the middle ground, acts justly, and rejects all forms of extremism.[9]

The religious moderation movement can be understood as a form of social movement aimed at transforming or reinforcing the norms and values associated with moderate religiosity. It evolves through the dynamics of collective memory, collective consciousness, shared objectives, and collective action undertaken by individuals, communities, and religious

organizations. Within this framework, the religious moderation movement draws upon David C. Snow's social movement theory as an analytical lens to explain its development and strategies.[10] In conceptualizing religious moderation as a social movement, Émile Durkheim underscored the centrality of collective consciousness in shaping social action. He defines collective consciousness as the body of shared beliefs, values, and sentiments that bind members of a community together, forming a coherent and enduring system with a reality of its own.[11]

Since 2017, Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs has promoted a nationwide program on religious moderation, designed to shape patterns of thought, collective movements, and practical action. The ministry and its affiliated institutions act as the primary agents in disseminating the discourse and initiatives of moderation on a broad scale. This involves social-religious organizations[12] and educational institutions[13] where the theme has become part of the curricula.[14] As a social movement, religious moderation seeks to advance religious teachings by emphasizing compassion, kindness, and respect, while discouraging rigid or extreme interpretations. Its goal is to strengthen devotion to religion, the nation, and cultural heritage, while fostering mutual respect across communities and individuals.[15] In practice, however, the movement continues to encounter debate regarding its conceptual foundations and implementation.[16] The character of religious moderation is deeply influenced by the demographic composition of religious groups as well as the cultural and historical contexts of different regions.[17] These conditions shape collective memory and shared experiences, which in turn frame collective consciousness and mobilize collective action. Historical trajectories, theological traditions, and experiences of conflict or reconciliation provide the foundation for this framing process.[18] Yet, as with many emergent social movements, the early stages often produce forms of false consciousness, resulting in approaches that appear elitist and disconnected from grassroots realities.

Within the religious moderation movement, framing functions as a mechanism for assigning meaning to events, actors, activities, and contexts. Collective awareness does not emerge automatically from material conditions but rather through processes of interpretive interaction. David Snow noted that the concept of framing, originally developed by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis*—itself inspired by Gregory Bateson and grounded in symbolic interactionism and constructivism—explains how meaning is culturally mediated through interpretation. Framing operates by directing attention to certain aspects of reality while excluding others, serving as an articulatory device that integrates disparate elements into shared meaning, and performing a transformative function by reshaping how social actors and issues are understood. In the context of social movements, framing thus highlights the symbolic transformation of perceptions of justice and injustice.[19] To achieve what is termed *frame resonance*—the capacity of frames to generate adequate responses that transform potential mobilization into actual mobilization—various issues and symbols are selectively emphasized and contextualized. As Goffman explained, frames function as "interpretive frameworks that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their personal lives and the broader world." In this sense, frames help individuals disentangle

complex events, render them intelligible, and subsequently organize these experiences in ways that guide social action.

Building on this, Snow and colleagues[20] identified two principal mechanisms of collective action framing. The first is articulation, which refers to the process of linking issues, experiences, and ideologies into a coherent and integrated interpretive framework. The second is elaboration, which involves accentuating particular issues or problems to increase their salience, while simultaneously relegating others to the margins. Empirically, elaboration can be assessed by examining the amount of discursive space devoted to a specific issue—whether in spoken interaction, written forums, or media channels. For instance, in newspapers, the allocation of column space to a topic may serve as a measurable indicator of its discursive prominence.[21]

A number of studies have examined the dynamics of social movements and the religious moderation movement within diverse contexts. For example, the work of Mukhlis Effendi and colleagues (2025) on *Class Conflict and Collective Consciousness Communication in the Dago Elos Land Dispute, Bandung, West Java* demonstrated that residents' collective consciousness is shaped not solely by shared lived experiences, but also by patterns of interaction and the circulation of information. These processes, mediated through the lens of class conflict, play a crucial role in transforming communication into collective action.[22] Shteynberg's research on the psychology of collective consciousness demonstrates that shared attention, social norms, and collective identity significantly influence cognition, emotion, motivation, and behavior. His work bridges Durkheim's classical sociological insights with contemporary psychological scholarship, thereby providing an integrative framework for understanding how collective consciousness operates across both social and individual dimensions.[23] The influence of collective consciousness on behavior is also highlighted in Guo Y.'s 2024 study on individual collective consciousness in the use of government digital portals. The research demonstrates that collective consciousness shapes individuals' intentions to continue engaging with these portals, with conformity behavior functioning as a full mediating factor. The study further underscores the importance of leveraging role-model effects to guide and sustain user behavior in digital governance contexts.[24] At the same time, collective consciousness can also serve as the foundation for shared anxieties. Farnam's study, for instance, illustrates how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped global collective consciousness by generating a profound sense of existential anxiety. This shared experience, according to the study, necessitates both psychological growth and spiritual transcendence as essential resources for confronting and overcoming such a collective crisis.[25] Meanwhile, Silvia Da Costa's research demonstrated that intergroup conflict, perceived realistic threats, collective identity, collective efficacy, and moral emotions constitute key psychosocial factors influencing collective behavioral participation in social movements.[26] Da Costa conducted a meta-analysis and systematic review of Scopus-indexed studies, identifying the psychosocial dimensions that shape participation in social movements. In a related context, Subchi et al. examined religious moderation among Indonesian Muslims, with particular attention to tolerance,

inclusivity, and socio-religious dynamics. Employing the Religious Moderation Scale—which encompasses national commitment, rejection of violence, and cultural accommodation—they found that religiosity plays a pivotal role in fostering moderation while curbing intolerance and radicalism. At the same time, socioeconomic conditions were shown to exert a significant influence on the degree to which moderation is internalized and practiced.[27] Similarly, research on patterns of religious moderation conducted by Andhika Putri Maulani and colleagues revealed that student organizations play an active role in promoting moderation. They do so by facilitating interfaith dialogues, organizing social engagement initiatives, and articulating shared visions that foster inclusivity and mutual understanding across religious boundaries.[28] Using Talcott Parsons' theoretical framework[29] as the basis for analysis, this study does not discuss clearly how the movement was established. Other studies have analyzed the topic from ideological perspectives[30] as well as different educational ones.[31]

From the reviewed literature, the present study identifies a significant gap that forms the basis of its novelty. Most existing works conceptualize collective consciousness as a force that strengthens social cohesion (Effendi; Shteynberg), motivates pro social behavior (Guo), functions as a coping mechanism during crises (Farnam), or facilitates participation in social movements (Da Costa). However, none explicitly examine how collective consciousness can also be illusory, manipulative, or "false"—constructed through selective narratives, propaganda, or information biases that create an impression of unity while concealing conflicting interests within the group. Prior research has largely focused on factors such as interaction, shared attention, social norms, identity, and moral emotions, yet it tends to overlook the mechanisms of distortion that generate false solidarity while masking underlying inequalities. Moreover, these studies rarely provide a cross-contextual analysis of false collective consciousness in relation to politics, culture, social movements, and religious moderation. They also fail to interrogate whether moderation represents genuine conviction or merely performative action shaped by social image, normative pressure, or political interests, nor do they address whether collective consciousness emerges from critical reflection or is imposed through hierarchical power, organizational agendas, and ideological hegemony.

The dynamics of religious moderation in North Sumatra and North Sulawesi exemplify these complexities. North Sumatra, with a population of 15.6 million, has a Muslim majority (64%), while North Sulawesi, with 2.7 million inhabitants, is predominantly Protestant (62%). Both provinces possess long histories of interreligious conflict and simultaneously claim to be pioneers in fostering interfaith harmony. Although the religious moderation movement in these regions is often portrayed as having penetrated the grassroots, in practice it remains largely elitist. Recurrent outbreaks of interreligious conflict further underscore the fragility of this constructed harmony.[32]

In these contexts, the central challenge lies in how collective consciousness is framed and the extent to which it produces false consciousness. Drawing on Friedrich Engels' concept, false consciousness perpetuates traditional religious narratives that generate

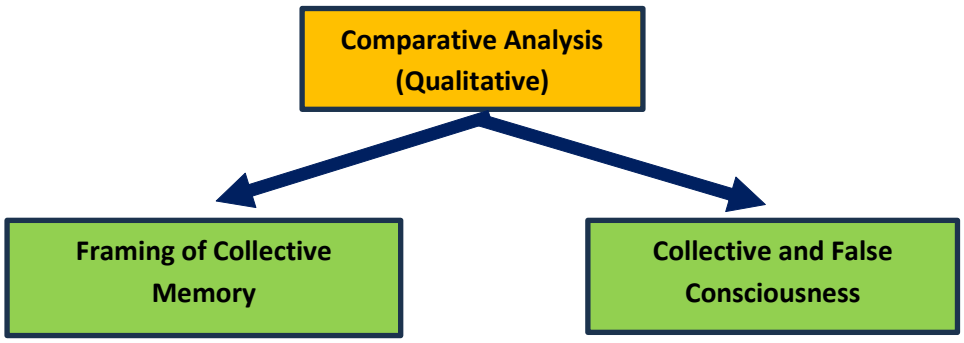
cooperation between communities which is superficial rather than organically developed. When religious moderation is driven by such distorted consciousness, it risks shaping the perceptions of congregations in ways that foster pseudo-moderation—fragile, performative, and highly vulnerable to division and conflict.

Accordingly, this study underscores the importance of examining how false consciousness is constructed within the religious moderation movement and how it is framed by activists in both North Sumatra and North Sulawesi. By doing so, the research seeks to illuminate the processes that hinder genuine grassroots engagement and to contribute to building an authentic model of religious moderation capable of strengthening social solidarity in pluralistic societies.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative design,[33] using a comparative analysis approach combined with social mapping that integrates geographical, demographic, and sociological perspectives. The comparative method is situated within the broader framework of case study research. As discussed by Yin and Stake in Creswell,[34] case studies are widely adopted across disciplines for their capacity to generate an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon—be it a program, event, process, or social group.

In this research, the comparative design is applied to examine the dynamics of religious moderation in two provinces. Specifically, it explores how collective consciousness is framed by key actors promoting religious moderation, and how elements of false consciousness emerge within these movements. The analysis contrasts both the construction of collective memory and the manifestation of distorted or performative consciousness among religious moderation actors in North Sumatra and North Sulawesi, as illustrated in the figure below.




Picture 1: Variables of the Study

Fieldwork was carried out over a two-month period in North Sumatra and North Sulawesi, two provinces that respectively represent Muslim-and Christian-majority contexts with documented histories of intergroup conflict. Primary data were obtained

through in-depth interviews with a diverse range of informants, including religious leaders, cultural figures, organizational representatives, scholars, and government officials—particularly from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Provincial Agency for National Unity. In addition, focus group discussions were convened in Medan and Manado, bringing together key stakeholders such as religious authorities, community organizations, cultural leaders, and academics to capture multiple perspectives on the dynamics of religious moderation.

Table 1. Composition of Interviewees in Two Provinces

| No. | North Sumatra | North Sulawesi |
|---|---|---|
| **1.** | Chairperson of the Interfaith Harmony Forum, North Sumatra Province | Representatives of FKUB and DPW Muhammadiyah administrator of North Sulawesi |
| **2.** | Head of the Regional Office, Ministry of Religious Affairs, North Sumatra Province | Head of National Unity and Politics of North Sulawesi Province |
| **3.** | Head of the Agency for National Unity and Political Affairs, North Sumatra Province | Chairperson of Gereja Masehi Injili Minahasa (GMIM) |
| **4.** | Catholic religious leader | Female Pastor of GMIM |
| **5.** | Protestant religious leader | Muslim Academics from IAIN Manado |
| **6.** | Chairperson of the Indonesian Ulema Council, North Sumatra Province | Representatives of Catholic Priests |

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in the two provinces involved a broad spectrum of participants, including representatives from major religious traditions—Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Al-Washliyah (in North Sumatra only) were also represented, alongside members of the press, scholars, the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB), and cultural community leaders (particularly in North Sulawesi).

Secondary data, used to complement the primary findings, were drawn from scholarly articles, books, newspaper reports, and relevant prior studies, some of which were provided directly by research participants. The data were systematically categorized and analyzed using Erving Goffman's framing theory, integrated with perspectives from

social movement theory and the concept of false consciousness. Collective memory was examined through indicators such as interpretations of religious moderation, framing of injustice, and historical narratives. Meanwhile, collective and false consciousness were analyzed through dimensions including manifestations of false awareness, conflict-related attitudes, trust dynamics, political affiliations and religious identity, as well as interpretations of tolerance. To ensure validity, data triangulation across multiple sources was employed.

## Results and Discussion

### Collective Memory and the Framing of the Religious Moderation Movement in North Sumatra and North Sulawesi

The emergence of collective consciousness is grounded in shared experiences that gradually crystallize into collective memory. In North Sumatra, the initial promotion of religious moderation was largely framed through state-issued religious regulations and disseminated in interfaith forums. Yet, the transmission of these theological principles into public discourse often produced partial and uneven interpretations among religious leaders. Within Islamic communities, for instance, debates continue regarding the distinction between the state's formulation of religious moderation and the Islamic notion of *wasathiyah*.

One prominent North Sumatran Muslim scholar, Arifinsyah, has emphasized the importance of sharpening and reinforcing the concept of moderation so that it does not lead to what he terms a "de-religionization" of faith. Drawing upon the works of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, he argues that the term *wasathiyah* in Islam should not be equated directly with "moderation." Whereas "moderation" may imply compromise or neutrality, *wasathiyah* refers to a principled middle path—superior in quality, firmly rooted in religious conviction, and resistant to extremism. In this sense, *wasathiyah* embodies strength without falling into radicalism, offering a balanced approach that affirms religious identity while discouraging excess.

From a theological perspective, the principle of moderation finds normative grounding across diverse religious traditions. In Islam, for instance, beyond the oft-cited Qur'anic verse in Surah al-Baqarah (2:143), other scriptural sources emphasize a similar ethos. One such reference is found in Surah al-Mumtahanah (60:8): "Allah does not forbid you from showing kindness and acting justly toward those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly." This verse, along with related hadiths, underscores the Islamic imperative of fairness, compassion, and peaceful coexistence.

Christianity also carries a long-standing tradition of moderation, dating back to the ministry of Jesus, whose teachings and actions created space for dialogue, tolerance, and difference of opinion. Within Catholicism, this spirit of moderation is reflected in the theological re-interpretation of the maxim *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the Church

there is no salvation"). Modern Catholic thought has reframed this doctrine, recognizing the possibility of salvation beyond the institutional boundaries of the Church—an important gesture of inclusivity.

In Hinduism, moderation is expressed through the philosophical framework of Tri Hita Karana, which emphasizes harmony in three interrelated spheres: (1) the relationship with the Divine, (2) relationships among human beings, guided by the principle of ahimsa (non-harming), and (3) the relationship with the natural environment, reflected in practices such as reserving part of one's land for water absorption and ecological balance. The broader principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—"the world is one family"—further reinforces the vision of universal brotherhood and the recognition that all creation is interconnected.

Buddhist teachings also embody the principle of religious moderation, particularly through the doctrine of Saraniya Dhamma. In this framework, the Buddha identifies six essential factors for cultivating harmony within the community: (1) radiating loving-kindness through one's actions; (2) speaking with compassion; (3) maintaining goodwill in thought; (4) sharing rightful possessions and opportunities with others; (5) living ethically and refraining from causing harm to others; and (6) avoiding disputes arising from differences of opinion. These principles are intended to be practiced consistently, both in the presence of others and in their absence, underscoring sincerity and integrity in conduct.

The ethic of respecting difference is further reinforced in the Tripitaka and exemplified in the edicts of King Ashoka. In the Kalinga inscription, Ashoka proclaimed: "To exalt one's own faith while disparaging that of others harms one's own religion. True piety lies in honoring and respecting the beliefs of all traditions." Such teachings emphasize that genuine religious commitment entails humility, tolerance, and recognition of pluralism.

Confucianism also promotes the spirit of moderation through its moral maxims that emphasize reciprocity and the cultivation of virtue. The principle of *Ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren* conveys the idea that one should not impose upon others what one does not wish for oneself—a formulation of the ethic of reciprocity that parallels the "Golden Rule" in other traditions. Similarly, the teaching of *Ji li li ren, da ren* emphasizes that personal virtue must be pursued in such a way that it contributes to the flourishing of others. The expression *Wei tong tian* further underscores that only what accords with divine goodness is truly pleasing.

In the Hindu perspective, as articulated by Parisada Hindu Dharma in North Sumatra, the concept of Dharma extends beyond personal piety to include civic responsibility. Accordingly, Hindus are called to uphold both religious Dharma and the Dharma of citizenship, which entails adherence to state laws and policies, including those designed to foster religious moderation.

Framing processes are often shaped by religious and political elites who exercise influence in line with their interests and authority. As noted by Irwansyah, sources of disharmony in North Sumatra include a weakened sense of national identity, inter- and

intra-religious intolerance, the dissemination of radical ideologies, and resistance to local cultural traditions. Such framing reinforces collective memories of injustice attributed to other groups and is further entrenched by state policies, thereby rendering injustice a recurring motif in the region's collective consciousness.

In contrast, in North Sulawesi, framing actors—particularly community and cultural leaders—draw upon historical narratives to construct a sense of shared experience. Here, ethno-religious memory plays a central role in shaping identities that differentiate moderate from radical groups. While this memory cultivates solidarity, it simultaneously carries the risk of fostering exclusivity and conflict. Drawing on Bourdieu, these identity boundaries can be understood as forms of social distinction rooted in taste, economy, and culture. Although such distinctions may stratify society, they also open spaces of contestation in which possibilities for unity can still emerge.

## Ideological Blind Spots in the Practice of Religious Moderation

In both North Sumatra and North Sulawesi, preliminary observations and interviews indicate a prevailing sense of interreligious harmony, with conflict described as infrequent—a view often echoed in interfaith forums. However, more nuanced interviews reveal underlying vulnerabilities, largely stemming from misconceptions about the meaning and practice of religious moderation. Ideally, key actors should acknowledge disparities in communication, access, influence, and social welfare across religious communities. Yet, the findings suggest the presence of a form of false consciousness, frequently reinforced by religious and community leaders in both provinces.

One recurring theme is the tendency to dismiss the link between conflict and religious moderation. As articulated by a cultural leader in North Sulawesi:

> "Why is conflict placed alongside religious moderation? It is not appropriate to frame moderation through conflict. Conflict is inevitable. We should not deliberately design for it. In Minahasa, conflict has existed since ancient times."

Another recurring pattern is the reluctance to revisit memories of past conflicts as a means of cultivating shared awareness. This sentiment was echoed by Buddhist leaders in North Sulawesi, one of whom remarked:

> "I share the same view as Reinhard—conflict-related terms should not be used here. Every religion is distinct and cannot simply be equated. What matters is how we strive to live peacefully. If peace can be maintained, there is no need to take discussions of conflict further. The Tanjung Balai incident is their problem, not ours. It should not be projected onto North Sulawesi, because our perspectives and social realities are different."

A Hindu leader in North Sulawesi emphasized that incidents such as the burning of sacred texts—although they may escalate and attract widespread attention—are not always rooted in religion or deliberate acts of blasphemy. In practice, such events often have little

impact beyond the local context. The reluctance of cultural and minority religious leaders in North Sulawesi to employ the language of "conflict" has shaped public discourse, redirecting explanations toward issues of misunderstanding, economic grievances, or disputes over land. In this framing, conflict is not attributed to feelings of insecurity stemming from migration or the growth of other religious communities. As one Manado cleric noted:

> "The dispute over the construction of a mosque in North Minahasa began merely as a misunderstanding, yet today the mosque has grown significantly. In that sense, Manado has become a barometer of religious moderation." [35]

The deliberate construction of Manado, North Sulawesi, as a symbol of religious harmony and moderation is carefully maintained through the avoidance of explicit discussions on conflict. Rather than engaging deeply with potential sources of tension, community leaders frame harmony as a means of preventing latent disputes from escalating into open confrontation. This strategy reinforces the city's image as a model of coexistence. An Islamic leader articulated this perspective:

> "In my conversations with colleagues, we concluded that the national capital should actually be in North Sulawesi rather than Sumatra—or even Kalimantan—because our society is the most harmonious. The cases in Manado and Minahasa were the result of misunderstandings. The people of Sulawesi are already very moderate, not only in their acceptance of differences but also in their willingness to cooperate. Even at the high school level, interfaith dialogues on religious moderation are regularly held."

Similar views were echoed by Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant leaders, who emphasized that North Sulawesi provides a highly conducive environment for interreligious harmony. They attributed this to local cultural traditions such as *mapalus* (communal cooperation) and *maitua* (mutual support), which continue to shape everyday social relations. Such statements highlight the region's culture of harmony and illustrate a form of symbolic tolerance that reinforces solidarity across religious communities.[36] The notion of symbolic harmony and tolerance in North Sulawesi can be understood as a deliberate choice among community leaders to avoid provoking debates or disputes that might strain relations between religious groups. This approach emphasizes mutual restraint—preventing accusations, hostility, or blame—and instead frames interreligious relations in terms of safeguarding unity. A prominent cultural figure in Manado even argued that the term conflict should not be associated with religious moderation. As he remarked:

> "Placing the word conflict alongside religious moderation is paradoxical. Why bring up conflict when disputes have existed in Minahasa since ancient times? Do not force this project… I speak here out of frustration with academic elites, religious authorities, and especially researchers clustered under BRIN."

This perspective was echoed by a leader of a Buddhist organization, who similarly resisted the use of conflict-oriented terminology:

> "I share some of [cultural leader] Dr. Reinhard's concerns. The language of conflict should no longer be used. Every religion is inherently different. When the research team referred to the case in Tanjung Balai, that was not our issue—it was not a Buddhist problem. That was their issue, not ours. Our context and way of thinking are not the same, and we should not be expected to follow them. The same applies to the recent case involving Minister X. That is your affair, not ours."

The response of this leader illustrates the positioning of religious and cultural authorities within a shared forum. In reality, latent conflict can never be resolved if it remains unacknowledged. Conflict should not always be equated with violence; rather, by recognizing and learning from existing tensions, strategies for strengthening religious moderation can be more effectively developed. However, in Manado, minority religious leaders—particularly those without prominent representation—tend to become passive bystanders in the broader movement for religious moderation.

In North Sumatra, a form of false consciousness emerged among actors engaged in interfaith organizations, where tolerance was understood more as the concealment of tension than its genuine resolution. For example, the FKUB of North Sumatra consistently avoided acknowledging internal disputes and refrained from classifying incidents such as the Tanjung Balai case as interreligious conflict. This avoidance fostered difficulties in building trust, as noted by Protestant leaders in the region, who argued that one of the greatest obstacles in conflict resolution lies in the perception that mediators are not truly part of "us." According to one Christian leader, this distrust persists even at the local level, where officials such as neighborhood or hamlet heads remain reluctant to foster genuine integration.

Second, in both North Sumatra and North Sulawesi, religious conceptions have not kept pace with the dynamics of urban life. Traditional notions of harmony are still applied to contemporary urban settings, where new challenges—such as the establishment of places of worship—often create friction. In contrast, in rural or traditional communities, the construction of religious facilities rarely becomes a source of dispute, highlighting a disconnection between inherited frameworks of harmony and present-day realities.

Third, false consciousness is also reflected in the unwillingness to confront social realities and the acceptance of unequal power relations for the sake of avoiding conflict. In both provinces, local leadership contests are deeply influenced by religious identity—except in Manado, where personality and personal credibility appear to outweigh religious affiliation. The election of a Chinese Confucian mayor in a predominantly Protestant city illustrates this exception. This contrasts sharply with other areas such as Buton or North Minahasa, where religion and political authority remain closely intertwined. Interestingly, when asked about the use of religious identity in politics, leaders in North Sulawesi often deflected, suggesting that such strategies depended on "the individual" and emphasizing personal honesty rather than openly acknowledging structural patterns of identity-based politics.

Fourth, divergent interpretations of tolerance further complicate interreligious relations. In North Sumatra, some leaders conceptualize tolerance as conditional, with limits defined by "the fundamentals" *(al-ushûl),* beyond which tolerance ceases to apply. In North Sulawesi, by contrast, tolerance is often framed as the deliberate avoidance of sensitive issues—especially those linked to potential conflict triggers—so as not to disrupt harmony among religious elites. Yet, leaving these matters unaddressed at the elite level allows them to fester at the grassroots, where they are often interpreted in fragmented ways and provoke differing community responses. For instance, in Buton City, despite its reputation as a tolerant community bound by the cultural tradition of *kande-kandea,* no meaningful dialogue has taken place to address the roots of conflict. The 2019 riots, marked by religious undertones, revealed how suppressed tensions can erupt violently, leaving behind latent divisions and spatial segregation. The comparative findings and analytical insights into the manifestation of false consciousness among religious moderation actors are summarized in the following table.

Table 2. Comparison of False Consciousness Among Religious Moderation Actors

| Aspect | North Sumatra | North Sulawesi |
|---|---|---|
| **Forms of False Consciousness** | Manifested within intra-religious moderation forums (e.g., FKUB), where tensions are managed by withholding acknowledgment of internal or interfaith disputes. | At the symbolic level withi interfaith forums, there is a marked resistance to employing the term conflic discussions of religious moderation. |
| **Attitudes toward Conflict** | Avoiding discussion of conflicts to prevent damage to the image of internal harmony; refusing to label conflicts as religious conflicts (e.g., the Tanjung Balai case). | The prevailing narrative reframes conflict as a mere "misunderstanding" or attributes it to non-religiou causes such as economic o land disputes, while simultaneously reinforcing Manado's image as a "barometer of harmony." |
| **Factors of Trust** | One of the central challenges in fostering trust during conflict resolution lies in the suspicion directed at mediators who are perceived as outsiders or not belonging to the community. | Interreligious trust is outwardly well-maintained yet proves fragile when confronted with sensitive issues that carry the risk of reopening historical tensio |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Political Connections & Religious Identity** | Local electoral dynamics remain deeply shaped by religious affiliation, with political choices often aligned along confessional lines. | In Manado, leadership personalities often outweig religious identity in shapin intercommunal relations; however, this pattern does not necessarily extend to other regions of North Sulawesi. |
| **Interpretations of Tolerance** | Boundaries of tolerance are frequently framed as fixed and non-negotiable, especially when linked to what is | olerance is frequently interpreted as the avoidanc of sensitive topics in order prevent friction—an appro that, paradoxically, leaves |

## Framing Collective Consciousness as a Foundation for the Religious Moderation Movement

The development of everyday consciousness within the religious moderation movement in North Sumatra reflects a shared conviction that all religions fundamentally reject violence. At least four key factors shape this consciousness. First, local customs such as the principle of *dalihan natolu* emphasize strong kinship ties across the three social strata within Batak society. Clan-based solidarity functions as a binding force that transcends religious differences, as inter-clan conflict must be avoided. Other forms of local wisdom, such as the ethos of mutual cooperation (*marsialap ari*), likewise serve as social adhesives.[37] Second, the movement draws heavily on respected role models—religious leaders, traditional figures, and community elders—both within and beyond FKUB. In addition to FKUB, various forums such as FPK, FKDM, FPB, the Terrorism Prevention Coordination Forum, and Forkala play a role in maintaining social harmony. Given the Indonesian cultural tendency to follow charismatic figures, the framing adopted by these leaders often shapes interfaith relations. When aligned with the state, they advance government-framed religious moderation with theological justification; conversely, when associated with oppositional groups, they frame discourse around injustice and existential threats, supported by alternative theological reasoning. Third, the people of North Sumatra are often described as rational in outlook. This rationality informs their approach to conflict: violence is viewed as mutually destructive, eroding both material assets and long-standing social bonds. Such rational pragmatism mirrors the permissive tendencies observed in North Sulawesi, where individuals are similarly resistant to provocation into personal disputes. Fourth, moderation in North Sumatra is also sustained by the accommodating stance of religious minorities, who often "give way" for the sake of broader communal harmony. For example, Buddhists in Tanjung Balai agreed to reduce the height of a Buddha statue following public tension, while Muslims in Pahae relocated the construction

of a mosque in response to local resistance. Such acts of concession, however, can be reframed within minority groups as instances of internal solidarity against perceived injustice, echoing Lewis A. Coser's understanding of conflict dynamics.[38]

By contrast, in North Sulawesi, collective consciousness in religious moderation emerges primarily through the objectification and internalization of culturally rooted philosophies. Leaders externalize local wisdom through enduring taglines drawn from Minahasan traditions. Sam Ratulangi's maxim *Sitou Timou Tumou Tou* ("to humanize others") stresses not only benevolence but also the responsibility to cultivate goodness in others, regardless of ethnicity or religion. *Torang Kita Basodara* ("we are all brothers and sisters") reinforces an egalitarian ethos, while *Torang Samua Ciptaan Tuhan* ("we are all God's creations") situates fraternity within a universal cosmology that extends to all living beings and even nature itself. As articulated by the provincial Kesbangpol secretary, the emphasis in North Sulawesi has shifted from human relations alone to a more holistic connection between humanity and the natural world, a vision later institutionalized in the provincial development plan. Local wisdom also takes practical form in the *Mapalus* tradition of collective labor, parallel to marsialap ari in North Sumatra. This ethos governs cooperation across religious boundaries, as exemplified by mutual participation in security during Christian or Muslim religious festivities. In this context, religious moderation remains highly dependent on community leadership. As one pastor remarked, even local ruffians show deference to religious leaders, highlighting the authority such figures wield in sustaining harmony.

The construction of collective consciousness, however, differs between the provinces. In North Sulawesi, shared values have been successfully objectified and internalized across communities, producing a broader "Minahasanization." In North Sumatra, by contrast, the cultural principle of dalihan natolu remains largely confined to Batak communities, preventing wider integration and limiting the development of collective identity. A persistent obstacle to strengthening moderation in both contexts is the endurance of false consciousness. This is evident in the denial of the relationship between conflict and religious moderation, including outright rejection of the term conflict itself. Such denial hinders efforts at prevention and resolution, as acknowledging conflict is a necessary first step toward addressing it. Moreover, the failure to recognize religion's evolving role in urban life sustains reluctance to confront social realities, reinforcing mistrust in conflict management. Drawing on Erving Goffman's framework,[39] the framing processes in both provinces reflect interpretive schemes that individuals and groups employ to assign meaning to everyday interactions. Traditional values, cultural philosophies, and the authority of role models provide the primary interpretive frameworks. Through the transformation of meaning—from local customs to state discourses of moderation—religious life is framed in ways that often obscure or sidestep underlying tensions. This concealment, institutionalized in social norms and unwritten rules, reproduces a form of collective false consciousness that perpetuates harmony on the surface while leaving latent conflicts unresolved.

Based on Erving Goffman's concept-based analytical framework, comparative framing analysis of collective consciousness forms a religious moderation movement in both provinces, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 3. Comparative Framing Analysis Collective Consciousness forms a religious moderation movement

| Aspect | North Sumatra | North Sulawesi |
|---|---|---|
| **Framework** | The *dalihan natolu* tradition, together with practices of mutual assistance (marsialap ari), continues to serve as a cultural framework for sustaining communal ties. | Sam Ratulangi's philosophy of mapalus, often framed as a cultural slogan of harmony, has become a unifying tagline in the region. |
| **Inter-ethnic acceptance** | However, these practices are not universally applied, reflecting the limitations of efforts toward a broader "Bataknization" of local traditions. | Unlike other localized traditions, it is perceived as more universal, with the process of "Minahasaisation" largely regarded as successful. |
| **Role of figures-Movement Actors** | They may function either to reinforce or to challenge state-driven narratives of harmony, depending on the context. | This philosophy generally aligns with and reinforces the state's official narrative of interreligious harmony. |
| **Everyday awareness** | Such values are shaped through the interplay of customary practices and the influence of community role models, yet their application often appears fragmented. | It has been collectively internalized as part of cultural identity, functioning more as a shared symbolic marker than a contested value. |
| **False consciousness** | There is also a tendency to avoid openly acknowledging conflict, leading instead to a formalistic expression of harmony that may conceal underlying tensions. | At the same time, there is a tendency to suppress open acknowledgment of conflict, resulting in what can be described as a form of culturalized harmony that privileges image over substance. |

## Conclusion

Religious moderation in North Sumatra and North Sulawesi is framed through collective memory shaped by theology, cultural tradition, and leadership authority. In North Sumatra, such framing remains contested, particularly within Islamic discourse, where it frequently reinforces narratives of historical injustice, intolerance, and resistance to local culture. By contrast, in North Sulawesi, moderation is sustained through cultural and historical narratives that emphasize shared identity, though these narratives can also generate subtle forms of exclusivity. While normative religious teachings across both regions support moderation, its practice remains fragile, often vulnerable to politicization and competing claims of authority.

This study demonstrates that religious moderation in both provinces is embedded in collective consciousness rooted in local customs, philosophies, and the influence of community leaders. Yet, a persistent false consciousness is evident in both contexts, reflected in the reluctance to acknowledge conflict as integral to moderation. In North Sumatra, this tendency is institutionalized within interfaith forums such as FKUB, where the image of harmony is preserved by suppressing disputes. In North Sulawesi, resistance operates more symbolically, with conflicts reframed as misunderstandings or as matters outside the religious domain, thereby maintaining the appearance of harmony.

Such avoidance fosters symbolic tolerance rather than substantive dialogue. This limits trust-building, obscures latent tensions, and prevents communities from openly addressing sensitive issues. Political identity further complicates these dynamics: local elections in both provinces are frequently shaped by religious affiliation, with the notable exception of Manado, where individual personalities often carry more weight. Interpretations of tolerance vary—sometimes reduced to doctrinal boundaries, other times stretched to silence uncomfortable debates.

The framing analysis highlights distinct patterns: in North Sumatra, collective consciousness is fragmented and tightly linked to ethnic identity, whereas in North Sulawesi, cultural slogans and traditions are more deeply internalized in interreligious life. In both cases, moderation relies heavily on cultural narratives and symbolic displays of harmony rather than on meaningful engagement with conflict. Such reliance on false consciousness undermines resilience, as unresolved tensions may resurface during moments of political or social crisis.

To strengthen religious moderation, leaders, community actors, and government agencies must move beyond symbolic harmony and begin to recognize conflict as an inherent part of moderation. Mechanisms for dialogue should be expanded to allow sensitive issues to be addressed openly and safely, reducing the risk of their re-emergence in destructive ways. Moreover, theological interpretations of moderation—such as *wasathiyah* in Islam, *Saranya Dhamma* in Buddhism, and *Tri Hita Karana* in Balinese Hinduism—need to be recontextualized to engage with contemporary urban dynamics and interreligious realities.

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