The Concept of Religious Moderation in Indonesian: Debates and Implications

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Abstract

This article explores the ongoing debates surrounding the concept of religious moderation in Indonesia by examining its theological, social, and policy dimensions. Employing a qualitative, literature-based, and discourse-analytic approach, the study reveals that religious moderation has been interpreted in diverse and sometimes contrasting ways. On one side, it is viewed as a constructive effort to strengthen tolerance, maintain social harmony, and promote peaceful coexistence within Indonesia's plural society. On the other, it is criticized as an ideological project that may reduce the spiritual depth of religion and serve certain political interests. Proponents emphasize values such as balance, justice, and moderation as integral to Islamic ethics, while critics warn against secularization and the politicization of faith. The findings indicate that these differences emerge from distinct epistemological and interpretative frameworks rather than purely political divisions. Therefore, religious moderation should be understood as a dynamic, dialogical process that bridges faith and contemporary social realities, rather than a rigid or uniform state-imposed construct.

Keywords: Religious Moderation, Wasathiyah, Pluralism, Extremism, Inkusive.

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Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas perdebatan yang terus berlangsung mengenai konsep moderasi beragama di Indonesia dengan menelaah dimensi teologis, sosial, dan kebijakan publiknya. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi pustaka dan analisis wacana, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa moderasi beragama dipahami secara beragam dan sering kali menimbulkan pandangan yang saling berlawanan. Di satu sisi, moderasi dianggap sebagai upaya konstruktif untuk memperkuat toleransi, menjaga kerukunan sosial, dan mewujudkan kehidupan damai dalam masyarakat yang majemuk. Namun di sisi lain, ia dikritik sebagai proyek ideologis yang berpotensi mengurangi kedalaman spiritual agama dan sarat dengan kepentingan politik. Para pendukung menekankan nilai keseimbangan, keadilan, dan sikap moderat sebagai inti etika Islam, sedangkan para pengkritik menyoroti bahaya sekularisasi dan politisasi agama. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perbedaan pandangan ini lebih disebabkan oleh keragaman epistemologis dan penafsiran daripada faktor politik semata. Dengan demikian, moderasi beragama perlu dipahami sebagai proses dialogis yang dinamis antara iman dan realitas sosial kontemporer, bukan sebagai konsep kaku yang seragam.

Kata Kunci: Moderasi Beragama, Wasathiyah, Pluralisme, Ekstremisme, Inklusif.

Introduction

The year 2023 marked a pivotal moment in Indonesia's religious policy landscape, with the issuance of Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 on religious moderation.[1] This policy serves as a guide for the central government, local governments, and the general public in living a more harmonious religious life in the midst of diversity. A year initiative, this initiative was further reinforced by the issuance of Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation

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[1]Humas, 'Presiden Jokowi Terbitkan Perpres 58/2023 tentang Penguatan Moderasi Beragama', Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 27 September 2023, https://setkab.go.id/presiden-jokowi-terbitkan-perpres-58-2023-tentang-penguatan-moderasi-beragama/.

No. 3 of 2024, which more technically regulates the implementation of religious moderation values.[2] The presence of these two regulations shows that the government sees religious moderation as a strategic necessity in maintaining tolerance and social harmony.

This effort was not without foundation. The concept of religious moderation had previously been integrated into the 2019 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) and was further institutionalized through the publication of the *Religious Moderation* handbook by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which serves as a primary reference.[3] Nevertheless, it is important to note that the discourse on moderate religious paradigms is not entirely new. Over the past two decades, similar ideas have emerged from both Western intellectual circles[4] and Muslim scholars,[5] aiming to reconcile faith-based values with the challenges of modernity. However, the formalization of religious moderation through state regulations has sparked a range of responses and controversies. Some view it merely as a political project or a tool of social control, while others criticize it for allegedly contradicting the fundamental principles of religious teachings, particularly those of Islam.[6]

In this context, a fundamental question arises: what is the true purpose behind the state's formalization of religious moderation? Various studies reveal that this concept has been

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[2]Kemenag, 'Kemenag Terbitkan PMA, Atur Penguatan Moderasi Beragama Lintas K/L dan Pemda', https://kemenag.go.id, accessed 18 July 2024, https://kemenag.go.id/nasional/kemenag-terbitkan-pma-atur-penguatan-moderasi-beragama-lintas-k-l-dan-pemda-cyrA2.

[3]RI Kementerian Agama, *Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama, 2019).

[4]Angel Rabasa, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Rand Corporation, 2007).

[5]Syamsul Rijal, 'Media and Islamism in Post-New Order Indonesia: The Case of Sabili', *Studia Islamika* 12, no. 3 (1 January 1970), https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v12i3.582.

[6]'Moderasi Beragama, Proyek Propaganda Atas Islam', *LenSa MediaNews* (blog), 14 November 2021, https://lensamedianews.com/2021/11/14/moderasi-beragama-proyek-propaganda-atas-islam.

approached from multiple perspectives, reflecting the complexity of Indonesia's socio-religious landscape. For instance, the journal article by Fahri and Zainuri situates moderate and inclusive attitudes within Islamic education while firmly grounding them in Islamic teachings.[7] In contrast, the works of Nurlaili, Fitriana, Cut Ulfa Millah, and Nasution aim to foster an inclusive society through religious moderation but do not explicitly anchor their framework in Islamic values.[8] Meanwhile, Syamsuddin Ramadhan an-Nawiy adopts a critical stance in his writing *Resisting the Project of Religious Moderation*, highlighting the ideological challenges and potential distortion of meaning that accompany the state's formalization of this concept.[9]

In response to this phenomenon, this paper seeks to critically examine three essential aspects. First, it explores the concept of religious moderation as articulated in Indonesia's official policy framework and within the broader spectrum of religious thought ranging from fundamentalist to liberal-secular perspectives. Second, it traces the historical roots of the moderation discourse and the key events—both in the Western world and in Indonesia-that have influenced its development. Third, it analyzes differing viewpoints and evaluates the theological and social implications of religious moderation. Through this discussion, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how far the concept of moderation is accepted, practiced, and remains relevant within the religious life of Indonesian Muslim society.

This study uses a qualitative approach by analyzing various relevant sources, such as government policies, academic literature, and public discourse related to religious moderation. The author

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[7]Fahri dan Zainuri, Moderasi Beragama di Indonesia, *Intizar*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2019.

[8]Nurlaili, etc, Moderasi Beragamadi Indonesia: Konsep Dasar dan Pengaruhnya, *Moderation: Journal of Religious Harmony*, Vol. 1, No.1, 2024.

[9]an-Nawiy, Syamsuddin Ramadhan, *Melawan proyek moderasi agama: istilah, wacana, propaganda, dan ide-ide derivasinya*, Cetakan 1, Bogor Utara: Al-Azhar Fresh Zone Publishing, 2023.

conducts a thematic analysis to identify key patterns and issues emerging in the discourse on religious moderation. This method allows for the exploration of diverse perspectives and ensures a more in-depth and objective research outcome. The study also relies on cross-verification from multiple sources to strengthen the validity of the findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic discussed.

The Concept of Religious Moderation

Religious moderation essentially means adopting a balanced stance between two extremes, derived from the Latin word *moderatio*, which signifies balance or self-restraint.[10] In the Indonesian context, the Ministry of Religious Affairs defines it as a religious perspective and practice that emphasizes justice, equilibrium, and respect for diversity.[11] Former Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin describes religious moderation as a "middle path" that is relevant to Indonesia's plural society and serves as a means of upholding human dignity and public civility. [12] However, in Western discourse-particularly after the 9/11 attacks-the term *moderate Islam* has often been understood as a form of religiosity that supports pluralism and liberal democracy.[13] Scholars such as L. Benkin and Greg Fealy have criticized this concept as a Western geopolitical construct aimed at curbing the political potential of Islam.[14] Therefore, religious moderation should be understood critically-not as an ideological project, but as an authentic embodiment of justice and balance rooted in Islamic teachings.

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[10]KBBI VI Daring', and Moderation', Oxford Research Encyclopedias, accessed 4 October 2024, https://oxfordre.com/search?isQuickSearch=true&q=moderation&searchBtn=Search.

[11]RI, Kementerian Agama, *Moderasi Beragama*, Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama, 2019. hal. 16.

[12]Kemenag, *LHS dan Moderasi Beragama*, https://kemenag.go.id/opini/lhs-dan-moderasi-beragama-lf0fyj.

[13]Aafreedi, Navras Jaat, dkk, *What Is Moderate Islam?, ed. by Richard L. Benkin*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017. hal. 7.

[14]Rahmatullah, *Islam Moderat Dalam Perdebatan*, Dialog 34, no. 1, 2011. hal. 42. https://doi.org/10.47655/dialog.v34i1.148.

A similar narrative was also developed by the research institution Rand Corporation through its report *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, authored by Angel Rabasa. In the report, Muslims are considered moderate if they support gender equality, democracy, pluralism, reject traditional religious authority, and adopt a passive stance toward conflicts between the Islamic world and the West.[15] These criteria are closely tied to the institutional objectives of Rand Corporation itself, which is primarily concerned with addressing domestic U.S. public policy issues through research and analysis. As a result, the definition of moderation it promotes tends to reflect a more inclusive and liberal perspective.

This phenomenon indicates that the concept of religious moderation is not monolithic. It is not value-neutral, but is always shaped by the socio-political contexts in which it is embedded. This requires us to distinguish between moderation as an intrinsic value within religious teachings and moderation as a political project. In Islam itself, the principle of *ummatan wasathan* (a middle or balanced community), as mentioned in the Qur'an (Surah Al-Baqarah: 143),[16] has long emphasized balance in matters of faith (*'aqidah*), worship (*'ibadah*), and social interaction.[17] Even the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reflects a moderate stance-rejecting coercion in belief, upholding peace, yet remaining firm in defending the principles of *tawhid* (divine oneness) and justice.

Therefore, the model of moderation developed in Indonesia must be adapted to its specific social context. It should avoid adopting Western paradigms of moderation in ways that demand compromises on the fundamental values of Islam. Instead, moderation in the Indonesian context should remain aligned with the teachings of Islam, particularly the concept of *wasathiyah al-Islam*. This ensures that the underlying values of moderation are grounded

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[15]Rabasa, Angel, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, Rand Corporation, 2007. hal. 66.

[16]RI, Kementerian Agama, *Moderasi Beragama,* Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama, 2019. hal. 16.

[17]Habnakah 'Abdur Rahman Habnakah al- Madānī, *Al-Wasaṭiyyah fi al-Islam* (Beirut: Muāsasatu Ar-Riyān, 1996), hal. 10.

in Islamic principles. For example, the Islamic notion of justice is not equivalent to neutrality without conviction, but rather to openness without the loss of identity.[18] More comprehensively, *wasathiyah al-Islam* is rooted in the principle of *tawhid*—the oneness of God as the central value[19]—and justice as an essential ethic of religious life.

Throughout history, the concept of religious moderation has carried broad, dynamic, and contextual meanings. This conceptual heterogeneity often reflects an adjustment of religious attitudes within a social framework shaped by the prevailing legal and political systems of a given state. As a result, a form of moderation constructed in one context may appear contradictory when examined through the lens of another, where cultural and moral values differ significantly. In the Islamic tradition specifically, the notion of moderation is most appropriately understood in relation to the concept of *wasathiyah*. This concept offers a meaningful framework for navigating human pluralism and fostering a peaceful and civilized social life—without compromising the spiritual and theological integrity of religious communities.

The Origins of Religious Moderation

Understanding the origins of religious moderation is not only significant as a matter of historical insight, but also essential for comprehending how the concept has been formed, developed, and applied in contemporary contexts. By tracing its roots, we can uncover the socio-political dynamics that have shaped the discourse on religious moderation, and, in doing so, better understand the emergence of diverse perspectives regarding its relevance and authenticity.

a. Moderation in Western Tradition

The concept of religious moderation in the West emerged as a response to extremist religious practices that posed threats to socio-political stability. The 9/11 attacks marked a pivotal turning point

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[18] Shihab, Muhammad Quraish, *Wasathiyyah (Wawasan Islam Tentang Moderasi Beragama)*. Lentera Hati, 2019.

[19] Habnakah 'Abdur Rahman Habnakah al- Madānī, *Al-Wasaṭiyyah fi al-Islam* (Beirut: Muāsasatu Ar-Riyān, 1996), hal. 10.

that prompted the West to seek solutions from Islam and Muslim communities.[20] This tragedy catalyzed various Western thinkers and institutions to develop religious narratives deemed compatible with liberal-democratic values.[21]They endeavored to reinterpret Islam to align with visions of global peace and security, including through academic initiatives and foreign policy programs aimed at constructing networks of "moderate Muslims" across various countries.[22] While ostensibly constructive, these efforts have elicited sharp criticism for their secular bias and for defining moderation from an external—Western—perspective rather than from within the Islamic tradition itself.[23]

The subsequent definition of "moderate Muslims" has imposed standards fundamentally contradictory to Islamic identity and often propelled by anti-Islamic sentiment. These criteria, clearly evident in the perspectives of commentators such as Andrew McCarthy and Daniel Pipes, effectively demand that Muslims relinquish core tenets of their faith, including the Prophethood of Muhammad, the concept of jihād, the Caliphate, and most crucially, the wholesale rejection of Sharī'ah.[24] McCarthy explicitly conflates moderate attitudes with anti-Sharī'ah positions, thereby complicating the discourse for Muslims.[25] Meanwhile, Pipes demands the rejection of explicit Qur'anic commandments, such as inheritance laws and the

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[20] Hadiz, Vedi R., *Radikalisme Islam di Indonesia (Menuju Suatu Pemahaman Sosiologis)*, IndoPROGRESS, 2016, p. 9.

[21] Esposito, John L., "Moderate Muslims: A Mainstream of Modernists, Islamists, Conservatives, and Traditionalists," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22, no. 3 (2005): 11–20.

[22] Rabasa, Angel, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, Rand Corporation, 2007.

[23] An-Nawiy, Syamsuddin Ramadhan, *Melawan proyek moderasi agama: istilah, wacana, propaganda, dan ide-ide derivasinya*, Al-Azhar Fresh Zone Publishing, 2023.

[24] McCarthy, Andrew, "Inventing Moderate Islam," *National Review Online*, August 24, 2010; Pipes, Daniel, "Criteria for a Moderate Muslim," danielpipes.org.

[25] McCarthy, Andrew, "Inventing Moderate Islam," *National Review Online*, August 24, 2010.

prohibition of usury (ribā).[26] Such criteria reflect what critics have identified as an intolerant synthesis of liberal, secular, and racialized thought that fundamentally seeks to redefine Islam from outside its own epistemic boundaries.

Critics such as Abid Ullah Jan condemn these standards for requiring Muslims to "openly reject the Qur'an" to be considered moderate.[27] Jan contends that authentic moderation is rooted in total commitment to Islam, not its renunciation.[28] This critique reveals a fundamental tension; for instance, Western definitions of "moderate Islam" frequently operate not as genuine theological engagement but rather as instruments of cultural hegemony and political control. The implications are extensive, as these definitions not only misrepresent Islamic teachings but also engender artificial divisions within Muslim communities based on externally imposed standards of acceptability. Understanding the genealogy of this "moderate Islam" discourse is crucial for contextualizing contemporary debates about religious moderation in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia.

b. The Rise of Religious Moderation in Indonesia

In Indonesia, the discourse on religious moderation emerged as a response to two opposing extremes that threaten national harmony: on one hand, religious extremism; on the other, a form of liberalism that tends to deconstruct the fundamental values of religious teachings.[29] Waves of violence carried out in the name of religion—such as a series of bombings since the early 2000s[30] have

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[26] Pipes, Daniel, "Criteria for a Moderate Muslim," danielpipes.org.

[27] Jan, Abid Ullah, "Moderate Islam: A Product of American Extremism," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 22, No.

[28] Jan, Abid Ullah, "Moderate Islam: A Product of American Extremism," 30.

[29] RI, Kementerian Agama, *Moderasi Beragama,* Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama, 2019. hal. 7.

[30] Husein, Muh Turizal, *Fenomena Radikalisme di Indonesia*, *Rausyan Fikr : Jurnal Pemikiran Dan Pencerahan* 13, no. 2, 2017. hal. 1-9.
https://doi.org/10.31000/rf.v13i2.404.

severely tarnished the image of Islam as a religion of mercy (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*). Meanwhile, within intellectual circles, a trend has emerged that questions, and in some cases relativizes, core religious doctrines under the pretext of freedom of thought and interpretation.[31]

These two opposing extremes have paved the way for the emergence of a middle-path discourse known as *religious moderation*.[32] The Indonesian government responded to this situation through a series of strategic policies and programs, including the integration of religious moderation into national development planning documents such as the RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan), as well as the publication of the book *Moderasi Beragama* (*Religious Moderation*) by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.[33]

The emergence of the discourse on religious moderation is also inseparable from the responses of numerous Muslim scholars and political figures. These responses often took the form of promoting the idea of *moderate Islam* as an effort to restore the global image of Islam.[34] Former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had, in fact, addressed the notion of moderate Islam early on as part of Indonesia's national discourse. Initiatives such as the Bali Democracy Forum and the International Conference on the Global Movement of Moderates[35] served as significant platforms to affirm Indonesia's position as a tolerant and peaceful Muslim-majority nation.

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[31] Zarkasyi, Hamid Fahmy, *Misykat: Refleksi tentang Islam, westernisasi & liberalisasi*. Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilizations, 2021. hal. xxiv.

[32] RI, Kementerian Agama, *Moderasi Beragama*, Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama, 2019. hal. 7.

[33] Ibid. hal. 118.

[34] Zumrotus Sholikhah and Muhamad Basyrul Muvid Muvid, 'Konsep Islam Moderat Sebagai Alternatif Dalam Proses Penanggulangan Paham Radikal Di Indonesia', *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies*, 21 October 2022, 116-117, https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v5i4.324.

[35] Andriasanti, Lelly, *Identitas Islam Moderat Dalam Kebijakan Luar Negeri Indonesia*, GLOBAL Vol. 16 No. 1 Mei 2014, hal. 85.

c. The Term Moderate in Islam

The concept of moderation in Islam is authentically reflected in the term *wasatiyyah*, a concept deeply rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an. Allah refers to the Muslim community as *ummatan wasaṭan*-a community that is just, balanced,[36] and positioned in the middle-in Surah al-Baqarah (2:143). Classical exegetes (*mufassirūn*) such as al-Zamakhsyarī in *al-Kasysyāf*[37] and al-Qurṭubī in *al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān*[38] explain that *wasatiyyah* is not merely a socially moderate position, but also reflects justice (*al-'adl*), prudence (*al-iḥtiyāṭ*), and a moral balance between two extreme tendencies. Thus, a moderate stance in Islam is not a sign of weakness or compromise; rather, it is an expression of spiritual awareness and an ethical commitment to uphold truth in a just and proportional manner.

Furthermore, *wasatiyyah* is an integral part of the Islamic worldview that is predicated on the values of *tawḥīd* (monotheism).[39] It does not stand in isolation but is intricately intertwined with the three main pillars of Islamic teachings: *aqīdah* (creed), *sharī'ah* (law), and *akhlāq* (ethics/morality).[40] From this framework, it can be understood that *wasatiyyah* is not a pragmatic product or a result of social adaptation, but a theological reflection on the equilibrium between the spiritual and human dimensions. This concept differs fundamentally from the notion of moderation in the Western tradition, which is often rooted in secularism, moral relativism, and socio-political compromise. In Islam, moderation signifies fidelity to

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[36] Al-Qaraḍowi, Yusuf, *Kalimat Fi Al-Wasathiyyah Al-Islam Wa Ma'alimiha*, 3rd edition, Kairo: Dar Shorouk, 2011.

[37] Al-Zamakhsyarĭ, Abĭ al-Qǎsim Mahmǔd bin 'Umar, *Tafsir al-Kassyǎf 'an Ḥaqāiq*, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2009.

[38] Al-Qurthubi, Abu ' Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Anshor, *Tafsir al qurthubi jilid 1 : Juz 1 - 2 / Abi Abdullah bin Ahmad al-Anshari al-Qurthubi.* Beirut : Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2014.

[39] Arif, Syamsuddin, dkk, *The Concept Of Wasathiyah Ibn Taimiyyah And Its Implementation In Aqidah*, Al Qalam 36, no. 2 (2019), hal. 150.

[40] Habnakah 'Abdur Rahman Habnakah al- Madānī, *Al-Wasaṭiyyah fi al-Islam* (Beirut: Muāsasatu Ar-Riyān, 1996), hal. 10.

the principles of divine truth while simultaneously maintaining harmony and the common good (*maṣlaḥah*) of humanity, rather than negotiating truth in the name of tolerance.

This line of thought has been deeply elaborated by Muhammad Hashim Kamali, an Afghan Muslim scholar known for his work *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur'anic Principle of Wasatiyyah*. Kamali views *wasatiyyah* as a Qur'anic principle that emphasizes the balance between tradition and modernity, and between sacred texts and social context. For him, moderation is not a form of compromise to religious doctrine, but a rational, just, and contextual methodology for living (*manhaj al-hayāt*) when faced with the challenges of both extremism and modernity.[41] Through a Qur'anic approach and historical reflection, Kamali positions *wasatiyyah* as an ethical and intellectual paradigm of Islam relevant to the global age, simultaneously offering a constructive middle ground for interfaith and inter-civilizational dialogue.[42]

d. Conceptual Reflection

Conceptually, religious moderation cannot be understood merely as a neutral middle path between two extreme poles. It is an ideological and epistemological construct shaped in the dialectic between religious texts, social interpretation, and the influence of power. On one hand, moderation offers a formula for religion that is inclusive, accommodative, and peaceful. On the other hand, it can also become an instrument for the selection of religious expressions deemed legitimate or illegitimate in the public sphere. In this framework, moderation is not only a religious product but also a discourse arena contested by various actors with differing interests.

In the Indonesian context, the discourse on religious moderation often arises as an effort to mitigate sharp socio-religious polarization, especially following various incidents of extremism. However, problems arise when this concept is positioned

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[41] Mohammad, Hashim Kamali *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur'anic. Principle of Wasatiyyah*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, hal. 50.

[42] Ibid, hal. 75

normatively and singularly, without allowing space for authentic religious expressions. Rather than fostering tolerance, an overly political approach to moderation may create a new dichotomy: between those deemed moderate and those labeled as radical. This oversimplifies the multidimensional complexity of religious life and may result in the marginalization of critical religious expressions or those deeply rooted in traditional identities.

Therefore, it is important to position moderation not as a compromise of religious values, but as a religious strategy guided by the principles of justice (al-ʿadl), wisdom (al-hikmah), and the objectives of Sharia (maqāṣid al-sharīʿah). Moderation does not mean abandoning commitment to the truth of religious teachings, but rather making religion a source of solutions to the complex issues of humanity. By understanding this dynamic, we can be more critical and wise in addressing religious moderation, not merely as state policy or a popular narrative, but as part of the struggle for meaning in faith and piety in the modern world.

Pros And Cons of Religious Moderation in Indonesia

In recent years, the term religious moderation has not only become a religious policy slogan, but also a battleground for various ideological, social, and political interests. Moderation is no longer just a normative concept in religious discourse, but has transformed into a social practice that has generated significant dynamics within Indonesia's plural society. As this unfolds, the responses to the religious moderation program have also developed across a broad spectrum-from full support as a sign of religious maturity, to sharp suspicion that positions it as an ideological engineering project.

On one hand, some religious figures and academics view religious moderation as an authentic manifestation of the noble values of religion.[43] They associate moderate attitudes with the spirit of diversity that has long been the heartbeat of the Indonesian nation. For instance, Minister of Religious Affairs Yaqut Cholil Qoumas

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[43] Pentury, Thomas, dkk, *Lukman Hakim Saifuddin: Gagasan - Kinerja: Moderasi Beragama dan Transformasi Kelembagaan Pendidikan,* Jakarta Pusat: Rehobot Literature, 2019. hal.xv-xvi.

emphasized that moderation is the middle ground needed to maintain religious and belief diversity.[44] From this perspective, a moderate stance is not just about tolerance, but also being active in maintaining social harmony and reinforcing national commitment.[45] A similar idea was echoed by Azyumardi Azra, who stated that Islam as the middle path is an important heritage in the history of Nusantara Islam, which is inclusive, dialogical, and accommodative to social realities.[46]

However, in contrast to those who view religious moderation positively, many others perceive it with suspicion, even rejection. Sharp criticism comes from those who argue that the religious moderation project is laden with foreign ideological content attempting to infiltrate secular values into the body of Islam.[47] From their perspective, the terms "moderate Islam" or "moderate Muslim" did not originate from the internal tradition of Islamic scholarship, but were shaped by the global political agenda following the 9/11 tragedy.[48] Tracing documents like *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* released by RAND Corporation is often cited as evidence that religious moderation is merely a subtle way to undermine Islam's resistance to Western liberal values, such as absolute pluralism, gender equality that includes non-normative sexual orientations, and liberal democracy that strips away the element of divinity.[49]

The notion of religious passivity within Rabasa's criteria is seen as problematic, as it risks placing Muslims in a dichotomous

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[44] Kemenag, *Menag Sebut Moderasi Beragama Solusi Masalah Sosial Keagamaan*, https://kemenag.go.id/nasional/menag-sebut-moderasi-beragama-solusi-masalah-sosial-keagamaan-2a9cun.

[45] Pentury, Thomas, dkk, *Lukman Hakim Saifuddin: Gagasan - Kinerja: Moderasi Beragama dan Transformasi Kelembagaan Pendidikan*, Jakarta Pusat: Rehobot Literature, 2019. hal.xxi

[46] Azra, Azyumardi, dkk, *Membincang Moderasi Beragama: Sebuah Intisari Serial Webinar*, UIN Jakarta: PPIM, 2021. hal. 17.

[47] Arif, Syamsuddin, *Wacana Islam dan Moderasi: Telusur dan Telaah,* Republika, 2022.

[48] Rabasa, Angel, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, Rand Corporation, 2007.

[49] Ibid hal. 66.

position: either conforming to Western standards of being "moderate" or being labeled as "radical." More crucially, this concept appears to blur fundamental Islamic values, such as justice and solidarity with the oppressed, particularly in the context of Palestine.[50] In other words, Rabasa's version of moderation seems to reduce certain aspects of Islamic teachings in favor of global political acceptance.

Opposition to religious moderation does not merely manifest in opinion pieces, but also in the form of published books, articles, and even systematic intellectual movements. One notable publication is *Rejecting the Project of Religious Moderation*, published by Al-Azhar Fresh Zone Publishing.[51] In this book, the author explicitly rejects the term "moderate Islam," arguing that it lacks epistemological roots in the classical Islamic tradition. Their main concern lies in the tendency of the moderation discourse to blur the exclusive boundaries of religious teachings, lead towards secularism, and promote an uncritical form of pluralism.[52]

Such narratives have been raised by several independent Islamic media platforms, such as *Tinta Media*, which highlight what they refer to as "theological inaccuracy" in associating the concept of religious moderation with Q.S. al-Baqarah: 143. According to their perspective, interpreting this verse in light of modern notions of moderation is seen as forced and neglectful of its original context. Furthermore, they criticize the indicators of religious moderation formulated by state institutions for containing conceptual inconsistencies. In some circles, the entire moderation project is even

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[50] Hilmy, Masdar, *Quo-Vadis Islam Moderat Indonesia? Menimbang Kembali Modernisme Nahdlatul Ulama Dan Muhammadiyah*, MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman 36, no. 2 2012. hal. 266. https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v36i2.127.

[51] an-Nawiy, Syamsuddin Ramadhan, *Melawan proyek moderasi agama: istilah, wacana, propaganda, dan ide-ide derivasinya*, Cetakan 1, Bogor Utara: Al-Azhar Fresh Zone Publishing, 2023.

[52] Ibid. hal. 21

viewed as a political tool aimed at neutralizing Islamic political forces perceived as potential threats to national stability.[53]

The discourse on religious moderation often sets up a tension between the exclusivity of religious doctrines and the inclusive values of humanity. This controversy reveals an epistemological conflict between preserving the purity of religious teachings and the need to engage in dialogue within a pluralistic social space. Some groups interpret inclusivism as a sign of decline in doctrinal firmness, while others view it as a mark of religious maturity in the face of plural realities. Religious inclusiveness is the key to relaxing differences in religious teachings by accepting the truth of different religious teachings.[54] This understanding is also seen as a way to equalize all religions.[55]

Upon closer examination, the Ministry of Religious Affairs' formulation of religious moderation places inclusivism as one of its key indicators. Beyond being described as openness, inclusivism is also illustrated through the Catholic Church's stance as expressed in the Second Vatican Council. The inclusive values of the Council declared that the Church no longer rejects the truth and holiness found in non-Christian religions.[56] This statement reflects a paradigmatic shift in interfaith relations toward a more conciliatory and open approach. However, such a stance is often viewed as aligned with religious pluralism, which may blur the clear

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[53] Shiddiq, M, Kritik Terhadap Konsep Moderasi Beragama, *Tinta Media* (blog), accessed 18 July 2024, https://www.tintamedia.web.id/2022/11/kritik-terhadap-konsep-moderasi-beragama.html.

[54] Arif, Syamsuddin, *Islam dan Diabolisme Intelektual*, Jakarta: INSISTS, 2018. hal. 86-87.

[55] Afifuddin, *Inklusivisme Dan Toleransi Kontekstualisasi Pendidikan Agama Di Sekolah*, Pena Persada: Banyumas, 2020, hal. 32.

[56] Declaration On The Relation Of The Church To Non-christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, Proclaimed By His oliness Pope Paul Vi, On October 28, 1965.

boundaries of Islamic creed and challenge the principle of exclusive truth in Islam.[57]

The various responses above reflect differing perspectives on religious moderation. Proponents tend to emphasize social harmony amid the nation's pluralism, viewing moderation as part of Indonesia's heritage in cultivating an inclusive and accommodative religious attitude. In contrast, critics adopt a more skeptical stance, perceiving religious moderation as a Western-imported concept rooted in the secularization of thought. Furthermore, they argue that the concept contains internal contradictions, is theologically problematic, and rests on misguided interpretations.

Therefore, it is essential to view moderate attitudes more carefully, particularly as a form of tolerance. Every understanding, despite its conceptual flaws, generally aims toward a noble purpose—although in practice, it may risk reducing core religious values. In the context of Indonesia, where Islam is the majority religion, the concept of *wasathiyyah* is more appropriate as the foundation of moderation. Promoting *wasathiyyah* as a moderate stance can help shape a Muslim society that is not only responsive to social dynamics but also steadfast in its creed-a middle path that is neither ambiguous nor compromising, but firm in wisdom and ethical conduct.

Conclusion

Religious moderation in Indonesia has generated diverse perspectives that reflect the complex relationship between religion, society, and the state. Some regard it as a positive effort to strengthen tolerance and social harmony, while others view it as an ideological project that may blur core religious values. These differing views indicate that religious moderation is not a single concept, but rather the result of dynamic interpretations shaped by varying social contexts. As a recommendation for further research, the understanding of religious moderation should be developed more critically and comparatively, including through cross-national

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[57] Toha, Anis Malik, *Tren Pluralisme Agama,* Jakarta: INSISTS, 2021. hal. 252.

studies among Muslim countries, so that Indonesia can enrich its model of implementation in ways that are more relevant, effective, and firmly rooted in Islamic theological values.

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