



The Middle Path Actualization: Portrait of Religious Moderation in Indonesia

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Abstract. Although multiculturalism in Indonesia can be a blessing, it also poses a threat because, if left unchecked, it may give rise to conflicts and division. This debate is especially true when sensitive issues are involved. In such cases, tolerance and respect toward inter-religious differences are pivotal, and discussions on religious moderation become salient. This article discusses how to conduct religious moderation that is in accordance with government regulations in Indonesia and the local societal context. This paper is a literature review aiming to collect and extrapolate a pattern from existing studies about religious moderation in Indonesia. The finding highlights the importance of interpreting religious moderation as a middle path of a multicultural society and the role of inter-religious tolerance and respect. Cultural diversity is a natural phenomenon arising from a melting pot of various cultural differences. Each individual and ethnic group has unique cultural behavior and way of living, so a middle path is needed to maintain social order and harmony.

Keywords: Religious Moderation, Middle Path, Multiculturalism.

1 Introduction

Indonesian society is characterized by heterogeneity in culture, customs, religions, and many other aspects of life. While it is true that such diversity can become an asset, it can also pose challenges and threats, such as radicalism. In such a heterogeneous and pluralistic society, moderation is needed, especially in terms of religion. Past research, as well as the mainstream media, has discussed the importance of religious moderation. For example, according to a religious public figure and scholar, Quraish Shihab, moderation is almost equal to the word *wasathiyah*, which means middle, justice, and the best. Meanwhile, [1] define moderation as not exaggerating one's responses to differences.

Moderation can be understood as a balanced approach. In a discussion, for instance, a moderator remains impartial, ensuring fairness to all participants without favoring any side or opinion. Moderation also represents an optimal choice, a middle ground between two extremes or undesirable situations. For example, courage lies between recklessness and cowardice, and generosity is the balance between extravagance and stinginess. In the context of religion, moderation involves interpreting and practicing religious teachings in a fair and rational manner. It emphasizes justice and balance, aiming to address both religious extremism and trivialization, while focusing on the

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core principles of human dignity in religious teachings.

In line with its commitment to moderation, the Ministry of Religious Affairs upholds five core principles in its bureaucratic system: integrity, professionalism, innovation, responsibility, and exemplary conduct. Integrity involves aligning thoughts, words, and actions, fostering a commitment to positive behavior and adherence to laws, including rejecting corruption, gratification, and bribery. Professionalism requires carrying out duties with discipline, competence, and timeliness to achieve optimal results. Innovation refers to enhancing existing practices by introducing improvements. Responsibility involves working diligently, acknowledging mistakes, and accepting the consequences. Lastly, exemplary behavior entails setting a positive example, maintaining good morals, and serving others with kindness [2].

This article discusses how religious moderation is applied in accordance with government regulations and the context of Indonesian society. In the implementation, the roles of various stakeholders, including formal and informal educational institutions, are crucial, especially in today's digital era. Information technology develops rapidly, which brings not only benefits but also drawbacks. For example, misleading information disseminated massively through social media can pose a challenge to the realization of religious moderation. To illustrate, visual information displayed partially on social media may prompt multiple interpretations, which often result in dividing pros and cons groups among viewers. Against this backdrop, this article aims to address the challenge of realizing religious moderation by examining the role of a middle path in resolving conflicting opinions in society, especially in the context of the digital era.

2 Research Methods

This paper is a literature review, a systematic method for identifying and evaluating previous research work. The aim is to analyze and synthesize the existing literature about the research topic. Data in the forms of research articles, journals, and books that relate to topics was collected using relevant keywords [3], [4]. A systematic literature review seeks to collect all relevant references to answer a research question, in this case, about religious moderation practices in Indonesia.

Literature-based research employs a methodology that can be repeatedly and clearly applied to minimize bias in identifying, selecting, and summarizing existing studies [5], [6]. The objective of this method is to identify gaps in the literature to inform future research. Key references for this paper include the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education Number 7272 of 2019 on Guidelines for the Implementation of Religious Moderation, which highlights the significance of promoting religious moderation through education. Religious moderation is rooted in two core principles: fairness and balance.

Another primary reference is the book *Religious Moderation: Concepts, Values, and Development Strategies in Islamic Boarding Schools* [7], which emphasizes the crucial role of Islamic boarding schools in fostering religious moderation. As

educational institutions, these schools are tasked with cultivating Islamic culture (*as-tsaqafah Islamiyyah*), a role heavily influenced by *kiai* (Islamic clerics) as intellectual leaders. However, these schools face challenges from the surge of information and technology, which shape contemporary religious understanding. Religious moderation is often misunderstood as aligning with liberal values, sometimes disregarding the established norms in religious texts [8].

3 Results and Discussion

3.1. Strengthening Religious Moderation

In Islam, moderation is known as the concept of *wasathiyyah*. Linguistically, *al-wasathiyyah* is derived from the word *wasath*. According to Asfahaniy, *wasathan* means "the middle" or "the standard," representing a balance between two extremes. The word *al-wasathiyyah* originates from *al-wasath* (with a sukoon on the letter س) and *al-wasath* (with a fathah on the letter س), both infinitive forms of the verb *wasatha* [9]. Additionally, *wasathiyyah* is often synonymous with *al-iqtishad*, with *al-muqtashid* as its subject form. However, *wasathiyyah* is mainly used to describe a comprehensive paradigm of thought, particularly in relation to Islamic attitudes [10].

According to Yazid, as quoted by Mohamad [9], the practical manifestation of moderation in Islam can be categorized into four areas: 1) moderation in matters of faith, 2) moderation in worship, 3) moderation in character, and 4) moderation in *tasyri'* (sharia formation). Other Islamic concepts related to moderation include *tawazun* (balance), *i'tidal* (uprightness), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *musawah* (egalitarianism), *shura* (consultation), *ishlah* (reform), *aulawiyah* (prioritization), and *tathawwur wa ibtikar* (dynamism and innovation) [9].

Though moderation is well-known in Islam through *wasathiyyah*, it is also present in other religions. In Hinduism, it is called *madyhamika*; in Christianity, it is the concept of the golden mean; in Buddhism, it is known as *Majjhima Patipada*; and in Confucianism, it is referred to as *Zhong Yong*. Each of these terms highlights the idea of choosing a middle path between extremes as the ideal religious attitude. Ulil Abshar Abdalla, a prominent Nahdlatul Ulama scholar, emphasizes that religious moderation is a broad and universal discourse, relevant not just to Muslims but to all faiths. Therefore, studying religious moderation requires a multi-perspective approach [11].

3.2. The Middle Path Actualization

Multiculturalism can be both a blessing and a challenge in Indonesia. Under certain circumstances, it may give rise to conflict and division, especially when sensitive issues are involved. In such cases, tolerance and respect for differences in beliefs between religious communities are needed. Cultural diversity is unavoidable as it happens naturally when various cultures meet. Each individual and ethnic group has cultural behavior and a unique way of living [12]. In Indonesia, the issue of religious

tolerance remains a concern.

An example of a case that went viral on social media was Jovi Adhiguna, an influencer who added pork crackers to his meal when dining at A-Fung Baso Sapi. He uploaded the content to his TikTok account @pawpaw.kids on 18 July 2023. This pork cracker incident happened at a meatball stall at Ngurah Rai Airport in Bali. It went viral and triggered a controversy on social media. A-Fung Baso Sapi was certified as a halal restaurant, but this was questioned after the event. The plot thickened when the management of the restaurant responded by destroying all the cutlery the next day (19 July 2023). The destruction was claimed to be a commitment to maintain the halalness of the restaurant (Anwar, 2023). However, such a 'commitment' to halalness received criticism from some Balinese Hindus. Arya Wedakarna, the Regional Representative Council of the Republic of Indonesia for Bali Province, visited the outlet. He received complaints from the Balinese Hindus regarding the destruction of eating utensils. They considered that the action was excessive. They argued that Bali is not a Muslim area (most of the Balinese population are Hindus) and that Bali is an area for international tourists from various religious backgrounds [13].

This situation has sparked debate and uncertainty about how the restaurant owner should handle it. On one side, the management needs to uphold its reputation as a restaurant with halal certification. On the other side, destroying the eating utensils would upset the Hindu community. This scenario highlights the religious conflicts that frequently arise in Indonesia. These conflicts, often stemming from differing religious views, are usually caused by exclusive religious attitudes and competition between religious groups seeking community support without a foundation of tolerance. Thus, practicing religious moderation requires a broad perspective, and all groups must wisely consider differing viewpoints.

Developing a moderate way of practicing religion is necessary to prevent social friction. In other words, an inclusive way of practicing Islam is needed, which means an open religious attitude. Moderation means the middle path—the opposite of extreme or excessiveness in responding to differences and diversity. Moderation in Islamic thoughts prioritizes the importance of tolerance toward differences and openness to accept diversity or inclusiveness in schools of thought and religion. Because this challenge is increasingly complex, implementing religious moderation is not only an internal task of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Religious organizations, especially mass organizations, should also partake in the effort. In addition, cooperation with inter-religious organizations can also be strengthened as differences do not minimize cooperation from humanitarian principles [14].

4 Conclusion

Multiculturalism can lead to social conflict, often arising from differing perspectives between cultural groups. A multicultural society requires an understanding and awareness that respects diversity and pluralism, along with a commitment to fair interaction with others, regardless of their religious backgrounds. Religious

moderation involves acknowledging the existence of others, demonstrating tolerance, respecting differing opinions, and refraining from imposing one's beliefs through violence. To foster harmony and peace, it is essential for the government, community leaders, and religious educators to promote and cultivate religious moderation within society [15].

In the context of religious moderation, does God need to be defended? No need because God is capable of everything. Does religion need to be defended? It does because religion provides a guideline for religious people in taking the path of behavioral modesty (*mubādalāh*, مبادللة) and in fostering mutual compassion. Religion needs to be defended in three ways. The first is by honing spiritual sensitivity as sharply as possible. The second is by fostering a sincere sense of humanity. The third is protecting nature as best as possible. Apart from that, there has to be a balance and justice in the application of God's laws that are interpreted (by) humans, natural laws that are experienced (by) humans, and social laws that are agreed upon (by) humans. Otherwise, the law of the jungle would prevail. This should be prevented by upholding humane laws to maintain life balance and social justice. May the spirit and actualization of religious moderation always live and support our lives and in the pleasure of Allah SWT. Amen.

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