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The Urgency of Religious Moderation amid Indonesia's Diversity

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ABSTRACT

Background: Indonesia's rich religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity is a source of pride but also presents challenges to social harmony. The rise of extremism and intolerance highlights the urgent need for a balanced and inclusive approach to religious life. **Objective**: This study aims to analyze the urgency of religious moderation within Indonesia's diverse society and to identify the potential consequences if such moderation is neglected. **Method:** A qualitative method was employed, using a library research approach to examine relevant literature, policy documents, and scholarly publications. **Result:** The findings indicate that without a moderate approach to religious life, the risks of social conflict and national disintegration increase significantly. Religious moderation has proven effective in reducing extremism, fostering interfaith dialogue, and strengthening the values of tolerance and unity within the framework of Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika. **Conclusion:** Religious moderation plays a critical role as a middle path that can help mitigate the tensions arising from Indonesia's rich religious diversity. Religious moderation, deeply rooted in Cultural heritage, bridges differing religious practices and local wisdom. **Contribution:** The contribution of this research lies in offering a deeper conceptual understanding of the importance of religious moderation as a preventive strategy for maintaining national integration and as a foundation for inclusive educational and social policy development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as a nation rich in cultural diversity, and it has grown and thrived harmoniously within its society. The country is home to over 740 ethnic groups and approximately 583 languages and dialects derived from 67 language families, reflecting its vast linguistic and ethnographic wealth (Nurhasanah, 2021). In addition, Indonesians practice various religions, including Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and hundreds of local beliefs are deeply embedded in each community's cultural identity (Suryawati & Krisnanto, 2021). This cultural diversity or multiculturalism is a natural outcome of ongoing community interactions, where individuals and groups bring different cultural backgrounds, lifestyles, and values into shared social spaces.

As a democratic nation, Indonesia provides room for differing opinions and interests, including in the religious sphere (Gole & Sudhiarsa, 2024). In this context, the state plays an important role in guaranteeing every citizen's right to embrace and practice their religion according to their beliefs. Religious tolerance includes respecting individual beliefs, especially in faith and personal relationships with the divine. Therefore, everyone can freely choose their beliefs and receive legal protection when practicing religion (Rellang et al., 2024).

At the same time, Indonesia is undergoing a modernization process transitioning toward a more advanced society in areas such as economics, social life, culture, and technology (Mustofa et al., 2023). Modernization repre-

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sents a shift from traditional ways of life to more rational and efficient systems, with the primary goal of improving societal welfare (Rizik et al., 2021). This transformation, driven by rapid developments in science and technology, directly and indirectly, influences people's mindsets and social-cultural behavior.

While modernization brings many benefits, it also presents challenges. In response to these changes, society must be equipped with a strong understanding of the importance of a moderate religious attitude (Yanto, 2024). Religious moderation can be understood as a firm commitment to the essence of religious teachings while remaining open to non-essential differences in interpretation (Khoirunnissa & Syahidin, 2023). In general, moderation is positioned as the opposite of extremism and radicalism, embodying values such as honesty, justice, compassion, and tolerance.

Religious moderation is highly relevant in fostering tolerance and harmony, which is essential for strengthening national unity and cohesion. Given Indonesia's pluralistic nature, the potential for conflict arising from differences is significant (Zubaedi et al., 2021). Therefore, applying the values of moderation in religious life is expected to serve as a solution for easing tensions among religious communities. Indonesians can live together peacefully and harmoniously through mutual respect, understanding, and acceptance of diversity as a shared asset.

Indonesia has an exceptionally high level of diversity ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously. Within this pluralistic environment, religious moderation serves as a key principle for maintaining social harmony and national integration (Wahid, 2019). However, in recent years, Indonesia has faced an urgent need for religious moderation due to increasing intolerance, radicalism, and religion-based conflicts (Suryadinata, 2017). Most prior research has focused on the conceptual dimensions of religious moderation (Hidayat, 2020; Muttaqin, 2021) without thoroughly addressing how it is practiced and perceived at the community level. This gap highlights the need for more practical and contextual studies on how the values of religious moderation are understood, embraced, and implemented amid the complexities of Indonesia's diversity.

Although the concept of religious moderation has been discussed in various academic and policy circles, existing studies often focus primarily on its normative and theological dimensions. There remains a significant gap in research that critically examines religious moderation as a strategic framework for preventing social conflict and promoting national cohesion in the context of Indonesia’s complex diversity. Furthermore, many studies lack a clear integration between religious moderation and Indonesia’s foundational values such as Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, as well as its rich cultural traditions and local wisdom that could serve as practical anchors for promoting tolerance and harmony.

The novelty of this research lies in its contextual and integrative approach, which positions religious moderation not only as a moral ideal but also as a concrete, strategic response to rising religious extremism and social polarization. By linking religious moderation to both national ideology and cultural heritage, this study contributes a fresh perspective that reinforces its relevance in contemporary Indonesia. Additionally, it offers a conceptual foundation for formulating inclusive educational and social policies aimed at sustaining national unity, making it a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and community leaders alike.

This study aims to critically explore public understanding and responses to the concept of religious moderation and to identify both the challenges and opportunities in its implementation. It also seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of religious moderation programs led by the government and religious organizations and to provide strategic recommendations for strengthening these efforts to better align with social realities. In doing so, this research hopes to bridge the gap between the ideal concept of religious moderation and the lived experiences of Indonesia's multicultural society

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the urgent issue of religious moderation within the context of Indonesia's social and religious diversity. This design was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of social actors' strategies, roles, and challenges in promoting religious moderation within a multicultural society.

2.2 Research Object

The focus of this research is the phenomenon of religious moderation in crisis, which includes instances of intolerance, religious polarization, and the efforts made by religious leaders, government institutions, and communities to promote the values of moderation. The study concentrates on several regions representing religious diversity.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using the following techniques: (1) In-depth Interviews, conducted with religious leaders, community figures, leaders of religious organizations, and representatives from government institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB); (2) Observation, direct observation of socio-religious activities, interfaith dialogue forums, and religious moderation campaigns; (3) Documentation, analysis of official documents, police reports, media coverage, and outreach materials related to religious moderation.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which included: (1) Data Reduction, selecting and simplifying relevant data from interviews, observations, and documentation; (2) Categorization organizing data into main themes such as forms of intolerance, moderation practices, and implementation challenges; (3) Drawing Conclusions, interpreting patterns and findings, and connecting them with relevant theories and social contexts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

The findings indicate that Indonesia is a multicultural nation with many ethnicities, tribes, languages, cultures, and religions. Geographic factors, historical developments, and external cultural influences have shaped this multicultural reality. Such diversity is a distinctive feature of the Indonesian nation, yet it also carries the potential for conflict if not managed properly.

Within multiculturalism, Indonesian society exists in a complex social landscape. The forms of multiculturalism that have developed can be categorized into five types: (1) Isolationist Multiculturalism is when cultural groups live autonomously with minimal interaction; (2) Accommodative Multiculturalism is when a dominant culture accommodates the needs of minority groups; (3) Automatic Multiculturalism occurs when minority groups attempt to align themselves with the dominant culture within a collective system; (4) Interactive Multiculturalism is when groups emphasize creating a collective identity that reflects their perspectives; Cosmopolitan Multiculturalism is when cultural boundaries are dissolved to allow for free interaction among individuals.

The results also reveal that religious moderation in Indonesia is a key strategy for maintaining harmony among religious communities. Core values of moderation, such as fairness, balance, and tolerance, are essential in a pluralistic society like Indonesia. Moderation is a centrist stance that avoids far-right and far-left extremes and does not enforce a single interpretation of religious teachings.

Schools and educational institutions are seen as effective platforms for promoting multicultural and religious moderation values. Multicultural and religious moderation education is vital in shaping a generation that respects diversity and avoids conflict based on religion or cultural identity

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1 Multiculturalism in Indonesian Society

Multiculturalism is a concept that reflects cultural diversity within a community or nation, where groups from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and traditional backgrounds coexist peacefully within a unified society. Etymologically, the term combines multi (meaning many) and cultural (meaning culture). Thus, multiculturalism refers to a condition in which multiple cultures exist side by side and engage in mutual interaction.

The concept of multiculturalism first gained prominence in the late 1960s in countries like Australia and Canada as a response to the growing influx of immigrants from various parts of the world (Safdar et al., 2023). The arrival of culturally diverse immigrants prompted these governments to adopt policies acknowledging and respecting cultural differences rather than enforcing assimilation. Over time, multiculturalism has received broader attention, especially in the context of globalization and advances in information technology, which have accelerated cross-cultural exchanges (Papadopoulos & Cleveland, 2023). The world has become more interconnected, making intercultural encounters increasingly inevitable.

Multiculturalism is not merely about acknowledging diversity; it also encompasses deeper political, social, and economic values. Politically, multiculturalism demands protection of minority rights and safeguards against discrimination and marginalization (Chen, 2024). Socially, the concept promotes harmonious relationships through tolerance, mutual respect, and intercultural dialogue. Economically, multiculturalism allows for the inclusive partici-

pation of all groups in national development, fostering distributive justice. As such, multiculturalism is closely aligned with democratic principles and universal human values (Sparkman & Hamer, 2020).

Indonesia is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, with over 1,300 ethnic groups, hundreds of regional languages, and six officially recognized religions (Raihani, 2018). The nation is a true reflection of extraordinary diversity. This richness has become an integral part of the national identity, as reflected in the country's motto, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, which means "Unity in Diversity." This motto describes Indonesia's social reality and serves as a moral and philosophical guide for building a peaceful and equitable shared life.

Indonesia's high level of cultural diversity is influenced by various factors (Lin et al., 2020). First, its strategic geographic location made it a hub for international trade since ancient times. Interaction with traders from India, the Arab world, China, and Europe brought significant cultural influences. Second, intermarriage between local populations and newcomers led to cultural acculturation that enriched local traditions. Third, diverse climates and geographic conditions helped shape distinct lifestyles and cultural expressions in different regions. Fourth, centuries of colonialism left complex cultural legacies and social structures.

Education plays a vital role in preserving and strengthening the spirit of multiculturalism (Pratama et al., 2023). Educational institutions such as schools and universities are both centers for transmitting knowledge and social spaces for shaping character and national values. Through multicultural education approaches, students are encouraged to recognize, understand, and appreciate cultural diversity as an asset rather than a threat this kind of education fosters tolerance, empathy, and cross-cultural communication skills. Inclusive curricula, teacher training for managing diverse classrooms, and intercultural extracurricular activities can all serve as effective tools to develop a generation that is open-minded, critical, and aware of the richness of Indonesia's pluralism.

3.2.2 Religious Moderation in Indonesia

Indonesia has an exceptionally high degree of ethnicity, linguistics, cultural, and religious diversity. This diversity is a valuable asset that forms part of the country's identity, but it also presents a significant challenge in maintaining unity and social harmony. In this context, religious moderation has become an urgent necessity, especially amid the growing signs of intolerance, radicalism, and the misuse of religious interpretations for the interests of specific groups. Religious moderation is not merely a concept but a necessary principle that must be internalized in community life, national governance, and citizenship.

Religious moderation refers to viewing and practicing a religion that emphasizes balance, justice, and respect for diversity. The term derives from the English word moderation and the Arabic word wasatiyah, both of which signify a middle path or avoidance of extremes. In the Indonesian context, religious moderation aims to position religion as a source of moral values and goodness, not as a tool for conflict (Faisal et al., 2022). It is not an attempt to dilute religious teachings but rather an effort to present religion in an inclusive, compassionate, and contextually relevant way in a pluralistic nation.

A moderate attitude is characterized by openness, tolerance, and a strong commitment to peace. A religiously moderate person does not impose their beliefs on others and can appreciate differences in opinion, religious schools of thought, and faith traditions. Religious moderation rejects violence in the name of religion and avoids the kind of social polarization caused by narrow-minded fanaticism (Subchi et al., 2022). All segments of society must embrace this mindset, especially religious leaders, educators, and national figures, so they can serve as role models in managing diversity wisely.

Religious moderation has several key goals (Aruman et al., 2024). First, it aims to prevent the spread of religious extremism and radicalism that threaten social and political stability. Second, it seeks to foster harmonious living in a pluralistic society. Third, it reinforces humanitarian values that are central to all religious teachings. Fourth, it strengthens national insight so that people are not easily influenced by transnational ideologies that conflict with the spirit of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution.

In the Indonesian context, religious moderation holds significant importance because the nation is built upon a foundation of pluralism (Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025). With more than 1,300 ethnic groups, over 700 regional languages, and various religions and belief systems, Indonesia is a true home to diversity. If this diversity is not managed wisely, the risk of social fragmentation is substantial. Therefore, religious moderation must become part of the national vision to build unity and cohesion. The government, educational institutions, religious leaders, and civil society must collaborate to promote the narrative of moderation as a pillar of national life.

The importance of religious moderation becomes even more apparent when religion is frequently used as a tool for identity politics or to justify acts of violence. In such situations, moderation is a moral and spiritual filter to ensure religious teachings are not misinterpreted. It is also essential in preserving universal human values such as justice,

compassion, and peace. Amid the rise of divergent religious interpretations, moderation defuses conflict and fosters interfaith communication. Furthermore, religious moderation helps strengthen the national character based on Pancasila as a unifying ideology (Faisal et al., 2022).

Moderation serves as a solution to the two extreme poles in religious practice: ultra-conservatism, which tends to be rigid and exclusive, and extreme liberalism, which interprets religion without limits. Moderation does not occupy the middle as a passive compromise but as an active stance that upholds truth with peace and fairness. In the digital age flooded with information and misinformation, religious moderation also functions as a tool to filter religious content that may divide communities. It is an approach that encourages dialogue rather than debate, cooperation rather than confrontation, and inclusion rather than exclusion.

3.2.3 The Urgency of Religious Moderation in Indonesia's Diverse Society

Indonesia is well known for its rich diversity in ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group relations. With over 270 million people embracing various religions and belief systems, the country holds significant potential to serve as a model for how diversity can be managed peacefully and harmoniously (Hutabarat, 2023). However, in practice, this diversity also carries the potential for social conflict, discrimination, and violence in the name of religion, especially when not accompanied by tolerant and inclusive attitudes.

Religious moderation has become an urgent need, even reaching an emergency level, as Indonesian society faces a growing wave of radicalism, intolerance, religious identity polarization, and hate speech that has infiltrated many aspects of life, from educational institutions and social media to politics. Extremist groups that claim exclusive truth over religious interpretations have become increasingly aggressive, posing a threat to national peace and unity (Gregg, 2016).

This situation highlights the immediate need for a balanced, fair, and tolerant approach to religious life (Nugroho, 2024). The term "emergency of religious moderation" refers to a condition in which, without a collective awareness and commitment to religious moderation, the very foundation of national life could be shaken by identity-based conflicts and religiously motivated violence.

If religious moderation is not promoted and internalized seriously, a range of negative consequences may emerge on individual, social, and national levels: (1) Increased Social Polarization and Intergroup Conflict. Without moderation, society may become fragmented into exclusive groups that harbor suspicion and hostility toward one another. This polarization can spark conflicts between religious communities or sects, undermining national unity; (2) The Rise of Radicalism and Terrorism. Unchecked religious extremism can open the door to radicalization and acts of terror, endangering public safety and damaging the image of religion itself; (3) Decline in Tolerance and National Unity. When religion is used as a political tool or to serve group interests, citizens' sense of national unity and brotherhood weakens noble values like cooperation, deliberation, and social justice risk being replaced by narrow-minded fanaticism; (4) Obstacles to Social and Educational Development. Intolerance in schools and universities disrupts the learning process, lowers the quality of social interaction, and stifles critical and open thinking; (5) Damage to Indonesia's International Reputation. As the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia has a moral responsibility to exemplify peaceful religious life. When religious conflict escalates, it tarnishes Indonesia's image as a pluralistic nation in the eyes of the global community.

Religious moderation should no longer be viewed as merely an ideal concept. It must become a national movement involving all societal elements: the government, religious leaders, educational institutions, the media, and civil society. By strengthening religious moderation, Indonesia protects its national unity and upholds the values of justice, brotherhood, and peace that lie at the heart of all religious teachings (Muliadi et al., 2024).

One of the most effective ways to respond to multiculturalism and ensure it thrives in Indonesia is to position educational institutions, from elementary schools to universities, as centers for promoting and instilling these core values. Through multicultural education, students and future generations can better understand the importance of religious moderation. Both multiculturalism and religious moderation offer solutions to conflict by fostering multicultural awareness and supporting inclusive policies that accommodate diverse interests (Sulaiman et al., 2022). As future leaders of the nation, it is our responsibility to practice the values of diversity, to understand differences, and to cultivate tolerance and mutual respect not only in religious matters but in all aspects of life.

The unity and integrity of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) are in the hands of the millennial generation. In this regard, millennials can actively promote religious moderation throughout society, helping to build a peaceful, harmonious, and cohesive life together. Several strategic steps should be taken to create a truly inclusive society: (1) Integrate religious moderation into the national education curriculum; (2) Promote multicultural and multireligious awareness through a bottom-up community approach; (3) Encourage interfaith dialogue at the community level; (4)

Involve all segments of society in organizing cross-cultural and interfaith social-economic activities, especially among the younger generation and millennials. If carried out collectively, these actions can help shape a resilient and united Indonesia based on respect and harmony in diversity

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implications

Social Implications: The findings of this research indicate that without the application of religious moderation values, Indonesia's diversity, which should be a strength, can instead become a source of conflict. Therefore, society must instill tolerance, inclusivity, and mutual respect in daily life. A moderate attitude can buffer against social tensions stemming from belief differences.

Educational Implications: This study highlights the importance of character education based on religious moderation within formal and informal educational curricula. Schools and universities should become spaces that promote interfaith understanding, strengthen national values, and encourage the adoption of democratic principles in religious life.

Policy Implications: The research provides a foundation for policymakers to design national programs that promote religious moderation. These programs include training for religious leaders, developing peaceful and tolerant religious discourse materials, and oversight of religious narratives that could potentially lead to radicalism.

4.2 Research Contributions

Conceptual Contribution: This study makes a theoretical contribution by enriching the discourse on religious moderation in response to the challenges of pluralism and radicalism in Indonesia. Exploring the urgency of moderation in a diverse society builds a strong conceptual understanding of the relationship between diversity and social stability.

Practical Contribution: The study offers practical recommendations for stakeholders, educators, religious leaders, and government officials to implement moderation values in real-world social and religious contexts. This ensures that moderation becomes more than a slogan, transforming instead into a deeply rooted cultural norm within the nation.

Strategic Contribution: In the context of national development, this research shows that religious moderation is not merely a religious issue. It is also a strategic approach to strengthening national unity, resilience, and the integrity of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) in the face of globalization

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

4.1 Research Limitation

This research primarily relied on a literature review and a descriptive qualitative approach. As such, it did not explore interdisciplinary methods that could connect religious moderation with sociological, psychological, or economic dimensions. Additionally, the absence of comprehensive field data collection, such as quantitative surveys or in-depth interviews with religious leaders, educators, and community members, limits the extent to which the findings reflect real-world dynamics.

4.2 Recommendation for Future Researxh Directions

AFuture studies are encouraged to adopt quantitative or mixed-method approaches to generate more comprehensive and representative data on religious moderation within Indonesian society. Further research could explore the strategic roles of religious figures, religious organizations, and preaching institutions in consistently internalizing moderation values amid contemporary challenges, including those in digital spaces.

6. CONCLUSION

Within the Republic of Indonesia, Indonesian society is a vibrant tapestry characterized by profound diversity, encompassing various ethnicities, languages, religions, cultures, and social statuses. This rich diversity can act as an integrating force that binds communities together, fostering unity in the face of differences. However, it also has the inherent risk of clashes between cultures, races, religions, and value systems, particularly when mismanaged or ignored. The challenges posed by such diversity can strain social harmony, necessitating mechanisms that promote peaceful coexistence.

Cultural diversity, or multiculturalism, is a natural phenomenon that arises from the interactions between different cultures and the coexistence of individuals and groups with distinct lifestyles, behaviors, and belief systems. In a multicultural society like Indonesia, where numerous ethnic groups and religious communities live side by side, religious exclusivism, the belief that one religion alone holds the truth and the path to salvation, can often spark tensions. These exclusive attitudes can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, as they create divisions that disregard the pluralistic nature of society. In many instances, religious conflicts in Indonesia have been triggered by such exclusivist mindsets, which are compounded by competition among religious groups to claim followers. Unfortunately, these struggles for dominance are frequently pursued without the foundational principles of tolerance and mutual respect, further exacerbating societal divisions.

In this context, religious moderation plays a critical role as a middle path that can help mitigate the tensions arising from Indonesia's rich religious diversity. Religious moderation, deeply rooted in Cultural heritage, bridges differing religious practices and local wisdom. It encourages peaceful coexistence, fostering harmony rather than division. This moderate approach to religion does not advocate for conflict or opposition but seeks solutions through dialogue, compromise, and tolerance.

The values of moderation in religion are not new to Indonesia. They have been exemplified throughout history, particularly within the Islamic tradition. The Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and generations of Islamic scholars modeled religious moderation by upholding principles of justice, fairness, and respect for diversity. They practiced an inclusive approach to religion, treating others equitably regardless of their religious affiliations, ethnicity, or language. This inclusive mindset allowed Islam to spread peacefully, creating a lasting coexistence legacy deeply embedded in Indonesian society.

Thus, religious moderation is a theoretical concept and a practical framework that facilitates peaceful coexistence in a diverse society. By embracing religious moderation, Indonesia can nurture a culture of tolerance and respect that serves as a model for the world, ensuring that its diversity remains a source of strength rather than division. In doing so, the nation will continue to uphold the values of justice, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence that are integral to Indonesia's National identity and its future as a harmonious, pluralistic society.

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Author Contribution Statement

All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript. The first author contributed to the data collection and the second author contributed to the drafting of the research framework.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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