

THE URGENCY OF MODERATE RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING IN INDONESIA: A SYNTHESIS BETWEEN LIBERAL AND RADICAL RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

Nanang Hasan Susanto, Jauhar Ali
UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, Pekalongan
nananghasansusanto@uingusdur.ac.id, jauhar@ali.uingusdur.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study attempts to present the concept of the urgency of religious moderation in Indonesia, based on contemporary social facts. The approach used is qualitative. Data is taken from relevant literature, especially related to contemporary realities in Indonesia. This study shows that among the three major religious views in the Muslim world, namely radical, moderate, and liberal, moderate religious views are the right choice. This is based on several considerations. Among them are the entry of the digital era which brings together various differences; the plural condition of the Indonesian nation; a moderate attitude to life has a strong religious foundation; and the need for a clear religious identity in a disruptive era.

Keywords: Religious moderation, religious radicalism, liberalism, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Religion is an aspect that is always a main topic of discussion for a religious nation like Indonesia. Many scholars view religion from two aspects (Zaini 2022, 50). The first aspect considers religion to contribute to guiding an individual or society in performing social actions. The boundaries of right, wrong, good, and bad become the main reasons for a religious person to carry out certain social actions. The promise of heaven and the threat of hell often become powerful incentives for someone to behave. In addition, religion also contributes by being a spiritual guide for someone. In this regard, several studies often reveal that a person who believes in religion has relatively higher self-esteem than someone who does not believe in religion (Abbott, Harris, and Mollen 2016; Koenig 2015; Smith and Crosby III 2017).

The second aspect often blames religion for causing intolerant actions, conflicts, even anarchic actions, and terrorism. Although many religious people deny it by saying: "Do not blame the religion, these actions are taken because they

do not understand religion well," the fact is that various intolerant actions are carried out in the name of religion (Tito 2020; Revkin 2008).

Understanding religion has various forms that differ from one another. Abdullah Saeed, as quoted by Busyro, provides six classifications of Islamic thought: traditional, puritan, political, hard-line, secular, and progressive (Busyro 2017, 538). Similar to Saeed, Ayubi, as quoted by Ahyar, divides Muslim typologies into six: 1) Simplistic Muslim (nominal Muslims); 2) Mutadayyin Muslim (devout Muslims); 3) Islamic Modernist (Muslims who actively campaign for Islamic reform like Jamaludin Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh); 4) Salafism (always referring to the Qur'an and oriented to the early Muslim life, including dress codes, socializing, etc. such as Wahhabism, Sanusiyah, etc.); 5) Fundamentalism (similar to Salafism but tends to distrust Fiqh and sometimes radical, such as Takfiri ideology in Syria) (Ahyar 2017).

The classifications of Saeed and Ayubi justify the diversity of Muslim thoughts in defining Islam. Saeed and Ayubi are just examples that can be mentioned. Besides them, many other scholars state the diversity of Muslim thoughts in defining Islam. Although diverse, in general, religious views can be grouped into three forms: radical Islam, moderate Islam, and liberal Islam. Among these forms of religious views, the best form of religion, especially in Indonesia, is moderate religion. This paper will elaborate on the importance of moderate religious views based on various arguments.

DISCUSSION

Although Muslim religious views are diverse, they can be broadly divided into three major views: radical, moderate, and liberal. In the Indonesian context, after studying the various characteristics of these three views, the religious view that is relevant and needed by Indonesian society is the moderate religious view. This is based on social facts, namely: the inevitable entry of the digital era; the plural condition of the Indonesian nation; the strong religious foundation (Islam) to be moderate; and the need for a clear religious identity in a disruptive era.

Among radical and liberal religious views, moderate religious views are a middle way that can be an alternative, especially for a religious nation like Indonesia. Various arguments can be put forward to support this statement. Before that, the theoretical framework related to radical, liberal, and moderate religious views will be presented first.

Radical Religious Views

"Radical" in the Indonesian dictionary (KBBI) means something fundamental (down to the smallest details), very strong in demanding changes (for example, in political aspects, legislative changes, etc.), and advanced in thinking or acting (KBBI, n.d.). The term "radical" brings overlapping terms among scholars. The abundance of articles discussing religious radicalism brings up similar terms, such as fundamentalism, hardline, scripturalism, Salafism, Wahhabism, revivalism, transnational Islam, etc. (Arifin and Bachtiar 2013; Esposito 1992, 7–8; Bakri 2004, 8). Meanwhile, due to the similar meaning, Thohir equates the terms radical with extremism, militancy, or fundamentalism (Thohir 2013, 8).

Although some scholars say there are overlapping terms, there are common characteristics that become common points among scholars in understanding radicalism. These common characteristics are absolutism, scripturalism, oppositionalism, puritanism, and radicalism (Asroni 2008). Other scholars such as Thohir and Nadia mention the characteristics of religious radicalism as oppositionalism, rejection of diverse interpretations (hermeneutics), rejection of religious pluralism, relativism, and rejection of various forms of historical and sociological developments (Thohir 2013, 9; Nadia 2012, 303–4).

Liberal Religious Views

The term "liberal" is derived from the Latin "liber," which means free. Free not only means not a slave or any condition entirely free from the ownership of others. In its development, the meaning of free here refers to educated society in the West that opens the door to freedom of thought (The old Liberalism). From the meaning of freedom of thought, the term liberal develops to have various meanings (Zarkasi 2014, 131).

According to Rachman, liberalism is an ideology that seeks to expand aspects of individual freedom while promoting social progress. As an ideology of freedom, liberalism means that humans have freedom or, in philosophical terms, liberalism manifests in an ideology of thought whose main basis is human freedom itself. Through the principle of freedom, liberalism can be interpreted as an ideology that places optimism in humanity. Through their freedom, liberalism believes that humans can determine the best things for their lives. Although there is a principle of freedom, another principle of liberalism is responsibility. Thus, the freedom meant by liberalism is a responsible freedom. Without responsibility, a liberal society will never materialize (B. M. Rachman 2015, 3).

Moderate Religious Views

Similar to liberal, the term "moderate" is derived from the Latin "moderatio," which means moderation. In the Indonesian dictionary (KBBI), moderation is defined as reducing violence and avoiding extremism. In Arabic, moderation is synonymous with wasath or wasathiyah. This word has a similar meaning to tawassuth (middle), i'tidal (just), and tawazun (balanced). The antonym of wasath is tatharruf (excessive), which in English corresponds to the words extreme, radical, and excessive (Tim Balitbang Kemenag RI 2019, 16; Hefni 2020). In English, moderation is often used in the sense of average, core, standard, or non-aligned. Various definitions above establish a concept that moderate means emphasizing balance in various aspects, such as beliefs, character, in treating others individually, or as part of the state institution.

Ibnu Asyur defines the term wasath in two aspects. First, wasath etymologically means middle, or something that has two ends, where the measurement between one end and the other is balanced. Second, terminologically, wasath means Islamic values that are straight, built on the principle of moderation, and not excessive. Similar to Ibnu Asyur, Al Asfahany defines wasath as middle between two boundaries or with middle justice. More than that, Washatan also means avoiding uncompromising attitudes (Wibowo 2019). Tholhatul Choir, quoting Merriam Webster Dictionary, emphasizes moderation as an action that

avoids extreme actions. A moderate person, according to him, is someone who avoids extreme behaviors and expressions. Furthermore, Khaled Abu el Fadl has a similar view on moderation, which is an ideology that is neither extreme right nor extreme left (Wibowo 2019, 88).

In Indonesia, the term religious moderation has become quite popular in recent years, following the massive promotion of the concept of religious moderation by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. On October 8, 2019, Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Syaifudin wrote the concept of religious moderation through his book. According to Syaifuddin, the essence of religious teachings is humanity. Syaifuddin believes that the main teachings of all religions call on humans to respect and protect human dignity. Thus, if there is a religious teaching that contradicts the main teaching of religion, namely humanity, it falls into the category of excessive and extreme (Wibowo 2019, 88).

Previously, KH Abdurrahman Wahid also said that moderation ideally encourages efforts to realize equitable and balanced social justice. In religious perspective, it is known as *al-maslahah al-'ammah*. In the aspects of state and nation, religious moderation ideally becomes the foundation in the implementation of public policy so that every state official has a moral responsibility to translate the universal essence of religion into the public sphere (Wibowo 2019, 89).

Quraish Shihab describes religious moderation as an attitude that does not tend towards excessiveness (*ifrath*) or negligence (*tafrith*) regarding various issues. Therefore, people who are extreme in religion cannot be categorized as moderate. Religious moderation also combines two rights, namely the rights of the soul and body, by considering both important and not neglecting either. Likewise, in seeing something, they think objectively and comprehensively (Islam 2020, 43).

More specifically, Hilmy details the characteristics of moderate Islam, namely: 1) Not having a violent ideology in campaigning for Islam; 2) Adopting values derived from modernity, such as democracy, science and technology, human rights, etc.; 3) Using rational thinking; 4) Using a contextual approach in understanding Islam; 5) Making efforts to interpret religious doctrines and Islamic law through the principle of hermeneutics (*Ijtihad*). In addition, the characteristics

of moderate Islam can also be seen from several traits, such as tolerance, harmony, and willingness to cooperate with different groups (Hilmy 2013, 25).

The Urgency of Moderate Religious Views: A Synthesis between Radical and Liberal Religious Views

Based on the explanation of the three religious views above, through this paper, the author wants to convey that the promising religious view for the Indonesian nation is the moderate religious view. On one hand, the existence of religion has a long historical place for Indonesian society. Thus, religiosity is an identity as well as a characteristic of the nation that is difficult to abandon. On the other hand, as mentioned in the introduction, excessive religious fanaticism has the potential to cause social conflict, look down on differences, encourage anarchic actions, and even extremist and terrorist actions in the name of religion.

Here are some of the author's arguments that moderate religious views are the right choice for the continuity of the Indonesian nation:

1). The Digital Era Life that Unites Various Differences

The digital era is an era that emerges as a logical consequence of the development of information technology in the world. The entry of this era cannot be resisted by anyone, including religious people. Its presence permeates the narrow alleys of all dimensions of human life without exception.

In the digital era, all information can be accessed by anyone at a fast pace. As a result, there are no more boundaries that separate humans from all aspects, including religion. Adherents of various religions inevitably have to interact and communicate with followers of other religions in the digital space. In this aspect, any exclusive religion, value, or teaching will be left behind. An exclusive religious attitude will alienate a person from the increasingly practical global life in the digital space. The religious views of radicals, oriented towards the past in the Arab lands (purification), have the potential to collide sharply with contemporary realities that have significant differences.

On the other hand, the digital era also has the potential to degrade the role of religion. Various studies show the declining authority of traditional religion in

the digital era (Maemonah 2022). The religious authority in Indonesia, which has so far been held by organizations such as MUI, NU, and Muhammadiyah, or religious leaders who have long dedicated themselves to studying religion, is replaced by various social media posts. The more active an individual/group uses the digital space, the more potential they have to seize that religious authority. The problem is, exclusive religious views are often spread through the digital space. At this stage, the mainstreaming of religious moderation in the digital space is something that cannot be negotiated.

2). Indonesia is a Plural Society

The reality that Indonesia consists of various ethnic groups, languages, and cultures, including religions, is an undeniable fact. There are no fewer than 300 ethnic groups, each with its own culture, and no fewer than 250 languages are spoken in Indonesia (Zada 2006, 184). In the context of religion, the government officially recognizes six religions. This number does not include local religions that have unique theological values, built from local cultures. The number of local religions has not been definitively identified. Regarding culture, the practice of religion carried out by the Indonesian society is very diverse. The cultural diversity of Indonesian society greatly influences the practice of religion. On one hand, this condition is a unique richness, but if not managed carefully, it also has the potential to cause horizontal conflicts.

Responding to the plural reality of the Indonesian nation, the right religious view is a moderate religious view. If religion is understood rigidly, then the nation's plurality can become a serious problem because it gives rise to a truth-claim attitude. Through the truth-claim view, various differences will be considered heretical, *bid'ah*, not allowed to interact with those who are different, and even must be opposed. Plurality will be rejected through a homogenization project (borrowing Al Makin's term) (Makin 2017). Conversely, a moderate religious view can make plurality a means to explore the nation's various potentials. Thus, the cultural diversity of the nation can become a spirit to develop the existing potentials, rather than a threat to exclusive religious views.

3). A Moderate Attitude to Life has a Strong Religious Foundation

Various sources of Islamic law, both the Qur'an and Hadith, are often interpreted in completely different aspects from one another. Regardless of these differences, a moderate religious view has a strong foundation in Islam.

One example is the content of QS. Al-Baqarah (2): 143. This verse states that Muslims are a middle (moderate) nation to be witnesses over mankind. Besides, various other moderate values are also mentioned in the Qur'an, such as the promise of salvation to other people outside Islam, like Jews, Christians, Sabians, etc., as long as they believe in God and the Day of Judgment (Q.S. A-Baqarah: 62). Moreover, the authentic Hadith of Bukhari, which tells about the Prophet standing to honor the funeral of a Jew, can also be a basis for the need for a moderate religious attitude.

Regarding the religious basis that often becomes the foundation for radicals in committing anarchic actions, some scholars state that it is due to errors in interpreting religion. According to Muta'ali, these errors revolve around the grammatical aspects of Arabic and cultural (sociological) aspects. Muta'ali continues that there are 90 verses in the Qur'an that are misinterpreted, leading to a wrong understanding of Islam. These misinterpreted verses generally discuss the meaning of Islam, various issues about non-Muslims, and the evil of disbelievers (Muta'ali 2014, 59–60).

On the aspect of religious foundations that support a moderate attitude, the examples of religious foundations mentioned above are just a few from many existing religious foundations related to moderate religious views. Thus, religious understanding not only aligns with human intellect and reason but also has a strong theological foundation in Islam.

4). The Need for a Clear Religious Identity in a Disruptive Era

The three reasons for the importance of religious moderation mentioned above primarily convey the need for flexible and inclusive religious understanding in facing reality. However, on the other hand, flexible and inclusive religious attitudes could potentially erode religious identity, which is a characteristic of the

nation. In this aspect, maintaining religious identity is something that needs to be done.

Moreover, the development of the digital era is said to potentially degrade the role of religion. Modernity, as Daulay mentions, has the potential to foster hedonism, materialism, and individualism (Daulay 2004, 35). At this stage, religion is considered to have an important role in maintaining traditions and cosmological-transcendental values (T. A. Rachman 2022). Cosmological-transcendental values themselves are one of the great forces in creating social harmony (Beck 2002).

For quite some time, several scholars have harshly criticized modernity and rationality for eliminating the role of religion. For instance, J.J. Rousseau (1712-1778) revealed that, based on the various damages caused by modernity and rationality, he believed that simple societies are better than those infected by science and modern civilization (Rousseau 2016). Nietzsche (1844-1900) also blamed modernity and rationality as the causes of chaos. He harshly criticized the rationality and moral development of Western society (Nietzsche 2013). Heidegger also believed that modernity, especially in terms of technological advances, has caused alienation, distancing humans from their essence and existence (Heidegger 2003).

The various criticisms of scholars against modernity and rationality, which lead to the advancement of empirical-secular science, seem to be based on contemporary facts. The various environmental damages caused by the advancement of secular-empirical science, global warming continues to rise. Environmental damage due to natural exploitation occurs massively everywhere. Humanitarian disasters seem endless. Rapid development in various parts of the world increases the gap between the bourgeois and proletariat classes.

The alienation of humans and various environmental damages caused by modernity might find their solution in strengthening religion, which has cosmological and transcendental values. Thus, compared to liberal religious views, moderate religious views can be a choice to maintain traditions while continuing to produce social harmony in national life.

Conclusion

Religious views, including Islam, have many variants. In simple terms, these variants can be categorized into radical, moderate, and liberal religious views. Compared to radical and liberal religious views, moderate religious views are more promising to be chosen in living national life. This is due to several reasons, including: the entry of the digital era that unites various differences; the plural condition of the Indonesian nation; a moderate attitude to life has a strong religious foundation; and the need for a clear religious identity in a disruptive era.

This study frames religious views in Indonesia based on still general thoughts and uses library data. In-depth studies are needed on the importance of mainstreaming the concept of religious moderation in Indonesia. The mainstreaming of religious moderation should ideally not stop at the normative level but be applicable in national life in Indonesia. Therefore, real research is needed to observe social phenomena related to internal relations, inter-religion, and religion and state in Indonesia. This is urgently needed, considering Indonesia is a country with a religious character on one side and various diversities, including religion and beliefs, on the other side.

References

- Abbott, Dena M., Jeff E. Harris, and Debra Mollen. "The impact of religious commitment on women's sexual self-esteem." *Sexuality & Culture* 20 (2016): 1063-1082.
- Abdul Muta'ali, The Repercussion of Gramatically and Cultural Culpability of the Holy Qur'an Translation to Religious Harmony in Indonesi. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 8, No. 1, June 2014, 59-60
- Ahyar, Muzayyin "Islamic Clicktivism: Internet, Democracy and Contemporary Islamist Activism in Surakarta." *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 24 No. 3, 2017.
- Ali, Muhammad "Moderate Islam Movement in Contemporary Indonesia," in *Islamic Thoughts and Movements in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. oleh Rijal Sukma dan Clara Joewono)Jakarta: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007.
- Arifin, Syamsul dan Hasnan Bachtiar. "Deradikalisasi Ideologi Gerakan Islam Transnasional Radikal." *Harmoni* Vol. 12 No. 3 2013, 19-36

- Asroni, Ahmad "Radikalisme Islam di Indonesia: Tawaran Solusi untuk Mengatasinya, *Jurnal Religi*", Vol VII No. 1, 2008, 15-34
- Beck, Herman L. "A pillar of social harmony: The study of comparative religion in contemporary Indonesia." *Modern societies & the science of religions*. Brill, 2002. 331-349.
- Burhani, Ahmad Najib "Al-Tawassuṭ wa-l I'tidal: The NU and Moderatism in Indonesian Islam," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 40, no. 5–6 , 2012,
- Busyro. "Female Imam And Khatib": The Progressive Tradition of Gender-Responsive Practices in Balingka, West Sumatera." *Journal of Indonesian Islam*", Vol. 11 No. 2, 2017
- Daulay, Haidar Putra. 2004. *Pendidikan Islam*. Jakarta: Kencana, 2004).
- Esposito, John L. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7–8; S. Bakri, Islam dan Wacana Radikalisme Agama Kontemporer. *Jurnal Dinika*, Vol. 3 No. 1 2004,
- Farida, Umma. "Radikalisme, Moderatisme, dan Liberalisme Pesantren: Melacak Pemikiran dan Gerakan Keagamaan Pesantren di Era Globalisasi." *Edukasia: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Islam* 10.1 (2015).
- Hefni, Wildani. "Moderasi Beragama Dalam Ruang Digital: Studi Pengarusutamaan Moderasi Beragama Di Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri." *Jurnal Bimas Islam* 13.1 (2020): 1-22.
- Hilmy, Masdar "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 7, no. 1)Juni 2013(: 25.).
- Islam, Khalil Nurul. "Moderasi Beragama di Tengah Pluralitas Bangsa: Tinjauan Revolusi Mental Perspektif Al-Qur'an." *KURIOSITAS: Media Komunikasi Sosial Dan Keagamaan* 13.1 (2020).
- Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) online, <https://kbbi.web.id/radikal>
- Koenig, Harold G. "Religion, spirituality, and health: a review and update." *Advances in mind-body medicine* 29.3 (2015): 19-26;
- Maemonah, Maemonah, et al. "The Shift in the Authority of Islamic Religious Education: A Qualitative Content Analysis on Online Religious Teaching." *Qualitative Report* 27.9 (2022)
- Makin Al. Homogenizing Indonesian Islam: Persecution of the Shia Group in Yogyakarta. *Studia Islamika*. (2017) Jan 1;24(1).
- Marci, Tito. "The Concept of Radicalism and Religious Recognition." *Religions* 13 (2020): 67-130; Revkin, Mara. "Modern History And Politics-Islamic

Radicalism and Political Violence: The Templars of Islam and Sheikh Ra'id Salah." *The Middle East Journal* 62.4 (2008)

Nadia, Zunly *Akar-Akar Radikalisme Islam Dalam Tafsir Fi Zillal Al-Qur'an Karya Sayyid Qutb*, Jurnal Mukaddimah, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2012, 303-304.

Nata, Abudin "Islam Rahmatan li al-'Alamin sebagai Model Pendidikan Islam Memasuki Asean Community")Kuliah Tamu Jurusan Pendidikan Agama Islam Fakultas Ilmu Tarbiyah dan Keguruan UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Malang, 7 Maret 2016.

Pabbajah, Mustaqim, et al. "Internet of religion: Islam and new media construction of religious movements in Indonesia." *Proceedings of the 19th Annual International Conference on Islamic Studies, AICIS 2019, 1-4 October 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia*. 2020.

Rachman, Budhy Munawar *Argument Islam Untuk Liberalisme*, (Jakarta: PT Grasindo, 2015)

Rachman, Budhy Munawar *Reorientasi Pembaharuan Islam, Sekularisme, Liberalisme, Dan Pluralisme, Paradigma Baru Islam Indonesia* (Malang: Pusam UMM, 2018).

Rachman, Taofik Andi, et al. "Islamic Value Education and Reconstruction of Civilization in Disruptive Era." *Islamic Research* 5.2 (2022): 177-184.

Smith, Erin I., and Robert G. Crosby III. "Unpacking religious affiliation: exploring associations between Christian children's religious cultural context, God image, and self-esteem across development." *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 35.1 (2017): 76-90.

Suharto, Toto. "Indonesianisasi Islam: Penguatan Islam Moderat dalam Lembaga Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia." *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 17.1 (2017): 155-178,

Sutrisno, Edy. "Aktualisasi Moderasi Beragama di Lembaga Pendidikan." *Jurnal Bimas Islam* 12.2 (2019): 323-348, 334

Tanjung, Akbar. *Pemikiran Islam Liberal Dalam Perspektif Pendidikan Islam (Telaah Buku Reorientasi Pembaharuan Islam, Karya Budhy Munawar Rachman)*. Diss. Uin Raden Intan Lampung, 2019.

Thohir, Mudjahirin *Multikulturalisme Agama, Budaya dan Sastra*, (Semarang: Gih Pustaka Mandiri 2013).

Tim Balitbang Kemenag RI, *Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

Türk, Lilian, and Jesse Cohn. "Yiddish Radicalism, Jewish Religion: Controversies in the Fraye Arbeter Shtime, 1937–1945." (2018).

Wibowo, Ari. "Kampanye Moderasi Beragama di Facebook: Bentuk dan Strategi Pesan." *Eduagama: Jurnal Kependidikan dan sosial keagamaan* 5.2 (2019): 85-103.

Zada, Hamami "Agama dan Etnis: Tantangan Pluralisme di Indonesia," in Sururin and Maria Ulfa (eds), *Nilai-Nilai Pluralisme dalam Islam* (Jakarta: Nuansa-Fatayat NU Ford Foundation, 2006).

Zarkasyi, Hamid Fahmi Misykat Refleksi Tentang Islam, Westernisasi & Liberalisasi, (Jakarta: INSISTS, 2014).