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Religious Moderation and the Dynamics of Salafism in Muhammadiyah: Negotiating Purification, Modernity, and Indonesian Identity

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Abstract

Religious moderation has become a central discourse in contemporary Indonesian Islam, particularly within Muhammadiyah, one of the country's largest Islamic organisations. While Muhammadiyah emphasizes purification (*tajrid*) of Islamic practices from superstition and syncretism, it also advocates modernization (*tajdid*), education, and social reform. This dual orientation has led some to conflate Muhammadiyah with Salafism, a movement also concerned with purification. However, significant distinctions exist in their approaches to culture, modernity, and social engagement. This article analyzes Muhammadiyah's historical trajectory, its relationship with Salafism, and its role in fostering Islamic moderation.

Drawing on historical sources, organisational writings, and secondary scholarship, the article argues that Muhammadiyah embodies a uniquely Indonesian Islamic modernism that balances purification with adaptation, enabling it to promote religious moderation and social development while resisting rigid literalism. The study highlights Muhammadiyah's enduring contribution to Indonesia's pluralistic society and clarifies its position within global Islamic thought.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah, Salafism, Religious Moderation, Indonesia, Islamic Modernism, Wasatiyya

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Moderatisme Agama dan Dinamika Salafisme dalam Muhammadiyah: Menegosiasikan Pemurnian, Modernitas, dan Identitas Indonesia

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Abstrak

Moderatisme agama telah menjadi diskursus sentral dalam Islam kontemporer Indonesia, khususnya di Muhammadiyah, salah satu organisasi Islam terbesar di negara ini. Meskipun Muhammadiyah menekankan pembersihan (tajrid) praktik Islam dari superstisi dan sinkretisme, organisasi ini juga mengadvokasi modernisasi (tajdid), pendidikan, dan reformasi sosial. Orientasi ganda ini telah membuat beberapa pihak menyamakan Muhammadiyah dengan Salafisme, gerakan yang juga fokus pada pembersihan. Namun, terdapat perbedaan signifikan dalam pendekatan mereka terhadap budaya, modernitas, dan keterlibatan sosial. Artikel ini menganalisis jejak historis Muhammadiyah, hubungannya dengan Salafisme, dan perannya dalam mempromosikan moderasi Islam.

Dengan mengacu pada sumber-sumber historis, tulisan-tulisan organisasi, dan literatur sekunder, artikel ini berargumen bahwa Muhammadiyah mewakili modernisme Islam Indonesia yang unik, yang menyeimbangkan pembersihan dengan adaptasi, memungkinkan organisasi ini untuk mempromosikan moderasi agama dan perkembangan sosial sambil menolak literalisme yang kaku. Studi ini menyoroti kontribusi berkelanjutan Muhammadiyah bagi masyarakat pluralistik Indonesia dan memperjelas posisinya dalam pemikiran Islam global.

Kata kunci: Muhammadiyah, Salafisme, Moderasi Agama, Indonesia, Modernisme Islam, Wasatiyya

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1. Introduction

Religious moderation is a concept promoted by Muhammadiyah and later adopted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as part of efforts to promote harmony and tolerance amidst Indonesia's diversity (Kementerian Agama RI 2019). Muhammadiyah, with its long history of championing Islamic enlightenment and modernization, has positioned moderation as a central principle. This concept emphasizes balance between religious belief and openness to pluralism, avoiding extremism, and prioritizing dialogue across religious communities.

The Indonesian government's adoption of religious moderation underscores its relevance to public policy, aiming to promote tolerance, prevent polarization, and strengthen religious freedom (Kementerian Agama RI 2019). For Muhammadiyah, moderation finds practical expression in its concept of *Dar al-Ahdi wa al-Shahadah*—the idea that religion and state can coexist without domination, with religion inspiring ethical policies and the state guaranteeing religious freedom (Bachtiar and Baidhawiy 2022, Bachtiar 2020).

Yet, Muhammadiyah is often juxtaposed with Salafism because of its puritanical tendencies in creed and worship. This article examines the historical and doctrinal dimensions of Muhammadiyah's relationship with Salafism, while clarifying their divergences in methodology, culture, and modernization. It further explores Muhammadiyah's internal diversity, its engagement with pluralism, and its contribution to Indonesia's religious moderation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Salafism in Historical and Doctrinal Perspective

Salafism, derived from the expression *Salafus Salih* (the pious predecessors), refers to a reformist orientation in Islam that seeks to restore religious practice to the model of the earliest Muslim generations. These generations include the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (*Sahabah*), the followers of the companions (*Tabi'in*), and the followers of the *Tabi'in* (*Tabi' al-Tabi'in*). For Salafis, these early generations embodied the purest and most authentic form of Islam because of their temporal and spiritual proximity to the Prophet. The Salafi worldview is therefore marked by the conviction that subsequent historical accretions—whether philosophical speculation, mystical practices, or local traditions—represent distortions of the original message of Islam (Buthy 1990, Ali, Mohamed 2019).

Classical Foundations: Hanbali Jurisprudence and Ibn Taymiyyah

The doctrinal and methodological roots of Salafism can be traced to Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855), the founder of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence. Ibn Hanbal's approach was characterized by strict textualism, a suspicion of rationalist theology, and an insistence on the primacy of the Qur'an and Sunnah over human reasoning (Hasyim 2022). His resistance to the Mu'tazila and their rationalist theology during the *mihna* (inquisition) in the Abbasid period is remembered as a formative moment for literalist and traditionalist Islam (Nawas 1996).

Several centuries later, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) systematized these orientations in his theological

writings, critiquing not only speculative theology (*kalam*) but also popular Sufi practices, saint veneration, and philosophical interpretations of revelation (Lauzière 2010). For Ibn Taymiyyah, the way back to authentic Islam was through a direct return to scripture, rigorous adherence to the Prophet's example, and the rejection of *bid'ah* (innovations). His polemics against excessive rationalism and mystical speculation would provide the intellectual foundations for later Salafi currents.

The Wahhabi Revival of the 18th Century

In the 18th century, Salafi puritanism was revived by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–1792), whose reformist preaching in the Najd region of Arabia sought to eradicate practices considered heretical, particularly shrine visitation, grave veneration, and the use of intermediaries in worship. His alliance with the House of Saud provided a political base for his movement, which became known as Wahhabism. This movement institutionalized Salafism as a socio-political force, linking theological reform with state-building and later global influence (Solihin and Winarto 2023).

Wahhabism was not merely a local reform; it became, over time, the dominant religious orientation in Saudi Arabia, shaping the curricula of its institutions and the preaching of its clerics. Through oil wealth in the 20th century, Wahhabism acquired unprecedented global reach, funding mosques, schools, and publications across Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Choksy, C. E. B. and Choksy, J. K. 2015). Thus, the Wahhabi revival

ensured that Salafism would not remain a marginal movement but rather a global religious force.

Salafism's Entry into Indonesia: The Padri Movement

Salafism entered Indonesia in the early 19th century, carried by West Sumatran scholars returning from the Hijaz after study in Mecca and Medina (Azra 2005). Figures such as Haji Miskin, Haji Abdurrahman, and Haji Muhammad Arif were deeply influenced by Wahhabi teachings, which they sought to implement upon their return. Their efforts ignited what came to be known as the Padri movement, a puritan reform that sought to eradicate local practices deemed un-Islamic (Sanusi 2018).

The Padri reformists opposed gambling, cockfighting, tobacco use, and ritual offerings at graves, condemning these as violations of *tawhid*. They also sought to reform Minangkabau adat (customary law), which allowed for matrilineal inheritance and practices perceived as incompatible with Islamic orthodoxy. Their reformist zeal, however, quickly generated conflict with local adat leaders, who saw the Padri movement as an assault on Minangkabau identity and cultural autonomy (Sanusi 2018).

The ensuing Padri War (1803–1837) thus represented not merely a religious conflict but also a confrontation between universalist Islamic reform and local cultural traditions. Eventually, after years of conflict and Dutch colonial involvement, reconciliation was reached through the famous formula: *adat basandi syara', syara' basandi Kitabullah*—custom is based on sharia, and sharia is based on the Qur'an

(Shafiq and Ali, Mohd 2022). This compromise symbolized a uniquely Indonesian synthesis between puritan reformism and cultural preservation, marking an early example of how global Salafi thought was adapted to local contexts.

Negotiating Puritanism and Local Traditions

The Padri compromise reflects the enduring negotiation between puritan reform and local traditions in Indonesian Islam. While the reformists succeeded in embedding stricter forms of worship and legal practice, adat leaders preserved elements of cultural identity by framing them within Islamic legitimacy. This synthesis became a hallmark of Indonesian Islam: reformist yet accommodating, puritan yet localized. It also foreshadowed the later success of organisations like Muhammadiyah, which would balance purification with modernization rather than wholesale rejection of culture.

Contemporary Variants of Salafism

In modern scholarship, Salafism is often divided into three currents: quietist, political, and jihadist. Quietist Salafis focus on personal piety, education, and da'wa (preaching), often avoiding direct political involvement (Amghar 2023). Political Salafis advocate for the implementation of sharia through non-violent political engagement. Jihadist Salafis, represented by groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, embrace militant struggle to establish an Islamic state. Despite their divergent strategies, these strands share the same doctrinal emphasis on *tawhid*, rejection of *bid'ah*, and fidelity to the Salaf.

In Indonesia today, Salafi influence can be seen in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), mosques, and online platforms promoting puritanical interpretations. Some groups remain quietist, focusing on religious instruction, while others have intersected with radical currents advocating political change (Krismono 2017). Yet, Salafism continues to be a minority compared to the broader reach of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which embrace local culture and modernist interpretations.

2.2 Muhammadiyah and Islamic Modernism

Founded in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta, Muhammadiyah represents one of the most influential reformist organisations in Southeast Asia. From its inception, Muhammadiyah embodied Islamic reformist ideals shaped by Middle Eastern modernists such as Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, whose ideas emphasized rational engagement with scripture, rejection of superstition, and the harmonization of Islam with modern sciences and social progress (Azra 1998, Scharbrodt 2022).

Ahmad Dahlan, influenced by his studies in Mecca, returned to Java with a vision of Islamic reform that combined purification with adaptation. On the one hand, he rejected practices he considered superstitious, such as excessive ritualism and syncretic Javanese customs. On the other hand, he recognized the cultural sensibilities of Javanese society and sought ways to contextualize reform without alienating local Muslims (Burhani 2006). This approach distinguished Dahlan's leadership from more radical puritan

currents, as it sought to balance authenticity and contextual relevance.

Educational Reform as the Core of Modernism

One of Dahlan's most enduring contributions was his reform of Islamic education. At a time when traditional *pesantren* curricula focused largely on Qur'an, Hadith, and jurisprudence, Dahlan integrated modern sciences, mathematics, geography, and foreign languages into the curriculum of Muhammadiyah schools. These institutions became laboratories for Islamic modernism, producing graduates who could navigate both the Islamic tradition and modern knowledge (Noer 1973, Faizi 2022).

The Muhammadiyah schools also emphasized discipline, organisation, and standardized teaching methods, contrasting with the more informal pedagogy of traditional *pesantren*. In this sense, Muhammadiyah positioned itself at the forefront of Islamic educational reform in Indonesia, bridging the gap between Islamic values and modern learning.

Purification and Social Modernization

While Muhammadiyah emphasized *tajrid* (purification) of creed and worship, its agenda extended far beyond doctrinal concerns. The organisation became deeply involved in healthcare, establishing hospitals, clinics, and maternal health centers. It also invested heavily in social services such as orphanages, welfare programs, and community development projects (Arifin 2018). This dual focus—purification of religious life and modernization of social institutions—

was unprecedented in Indonesia's Islamic landscape.

Through these efforts, Muhammadiyah constructed a holistic vision of Islamic reform: a community faithful to Qur'an and Sunnah but also committed to social progress and modernization. This synthesis reflected the influence of Abduh's insistence that Islam was not opposed to reason and science but rather demanded their pursuit as a religious duty.

Distinguishing Muhammadiyah from Salafism

The dual orientation of Muhammadiyah sharply distinguishes it from Salafism. While both share a concern for purification, their approaches to modernity diverge significantly. Salafism, particularly in its Wahhabi-influenced strand, often rejects cultural adaptation and views secular sciences with suspicion, preferring an insular religious life centered on scriptural literalism (Nasir 2023).

Muhammadiyah, by contrast, has consistently embraced modernization as integral to its mission. Its schools and hospitals are not peripheral but central expressions of its reformist identity. Where Salafism tends to universalize Islam in a transnational puritanical mold, Muhammadiyah contextualizes reform within Indonesian society, integrating national identity, *Pancasila*, and civic engagement into its religious mission (Kusumawati 2019).

2.3 Islamic Moderation (Wasatiyya)

The concept of *wasatiyya* (moderation) is central to Islamic thought and practice. Derived from the

Qur'anic description of Muslims as *ummatan wasatan* (a middle or balanced community) in Q. 2:143, the idea of moderation emphasizes balance, justice, and the avoidance of extremism in religious belief and social practice (Al-Qaradawi 2010). Within Islamic discourse, *wasatiyya* functions both as a theological principle and as a social ethic, calling Muslims to embody fairness, inclusivity, and equilibrium in navigating the demands of religion and worldly life.

Historical Roots of Moderation

Moderation has deep historical roots in Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions. From the early centuries of Islam, scholars grappled with the tension between strict textualism and practical adaptation. One way in which moderation was preserved was through what Thomas Bauer has called Islam's "culture of ambiguity," an interpretive ethos that tolerated a wide range of views and practices without demanding rigid uniformity (Bauer et al. 2021). This culture allowed multiple schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*) to coexist, often with significant differences in ritual practice, legal reasoning, and theological interpretation.

Classical Islamic jurisprudence developed tools to manage this diversity. Methods such as *istihsan* (juridical preference), *maslaha* (public interest), and *urf* (custom) provided jurists with mechanisms to balance strict adherence to texts with pragmatic concerns of justice, welfare, and social harmony (Kamali 2015). These tools institutionalized moderation by embedding flexibility into the law, preventing the sharia from becoming static or excessively rigid.

Moderation as a Theological and Ethical Principle

In addition to jurisprudence, moderation has been articulated as a theological and ethical principle. (Al-Qaradawi 2010), for instance, frames *wasatiyya* as a central characteristic of Islam itself, manifesting in balance between this world and the next, between individual rights and communal obligations, and between continuity of tradition and adaptation to changing circumstances. Moderation, in this sense, is not a concession to modernity but a core feature of Islamic authenticity.

This understanding of moderation resonates with the Qur'anic ideal of *adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion), as well as with the prophetic example of avoiding extremes in worship, asceticism, and worldly indulgence. Historically, movements that rejected moderation—whether through excessive rationalism or excessive literalism—were often criticized for distorting the balanced path of Islam.

Contemporary Applications of Wasatiyya

In contemporary contexts, the discourse of moderation has gained prominence as a counter-narrative to extremism and violent radicalism. Scholars such as Abdullah Bin Bayyah (2018) argue that moderation is essential to preserving global peace, preventing the misuse of religion for political violence, and fostering coexistence among diverse religious and cultural communities.

In many Muslim-majority societies, *wasatiyya* has been institutionalized through educational programs, government policies, and

civil society initiatives aimed at promoting pluralism and tolerance. For example, moderate Islamic organisations frame their engagement with democracy and human rights as expressions of *wasatiyya*, demonstrating that Islam can support inclusive governance. This aligns with findings in social science research that moderation fosters social trust and reduces intergroup conflict (Cherney & Murphy 2016).

Debates and Critiques of “Moderate Islam”

Despite its positive connotations, the concept of moderation is not without controversy. Some critics argue that the discourse of “moderate Islam” has been co-opted by Western governments and think tanks as part of a geopolitical agenda to divide Muslims into “good” moderates and “bad” extremists (Muqtedar Khan 2007). In this critique, moderation becomes less about authentic Islamic values and more about external labelling, imposed from outside rather than developed from within.

Others note that the invocation of moderation can sometimes suppress legitimate dissent or alternative interpretations by branding them as “extremist.” This raises questions about who defines moderation and for what purpose. Nonetheless, even critical scholars acknowledge that moderation remains a vital paradigm within Islamic thought, provided it is grounded in internal theological and ethical principles rather than external political agendas.

Moderation in Diverse Societies

In plural societies such as Indonesia, moderation serves not only

as a religious ideal but also as a practical necessity. The vast diversity of ethnic, cultural, and religious communities requires frameworks of coexistence that prevent sectarian conflict. By promoting moderation, Islamic movements like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama affirm their commitment to pluralism, democracy, and social welfare while maintaining fidelity to Islamic tradition.

Moderation in this context becomes a way of managing diversity, mediating between purification and adaptation, and sustaining the legitimacy of Islam in a modern, democratic nation-state. It also aligns with broader global discourses on interfaith dialogue, human rights, and sustainable development, positioning Islam as a constructive partner in addressing universal challenges.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, relying on historical analysis and textual interpretation of Muhammadiyah’s documents, classical Islamic thought, and secondary scholarship. The analytical framework contrasts purification (*tajrid*) and modernization (*tajdid*) to explore Muhammadiyah’s relationship with Salafism and its role in promoting religious moderation.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Muhammadiyah and State–Religion Relations

Muhammadiyah advocates a cooperative yet distinct relationship between religion and state through *Dar al-Ahdi wa al-Shahadah* (Bachtiar 2020). Religion inspires ethics, while the state ensures freedom, forming what Bachtiar calls “theologising democracy” (Bachtiar and Baidhawiy 2022). This

principle reflects Muhammadiyah's commitment to moderation, positioning it against both secularism and theocratic domination.

Muhammadiyah's conception of the relationship between religion and state is neither rigidly secular nor theocratic, but rather characterized by what it calls *Dar al-Ahdi wa al-Shahadah*—the “House of Consensus and Witnessing” (Bachtiar 2020). This notion represents an attempt to frame Indonesia as a nation founded on a social contract among its diverse communities, while at the same time positioning Muslims as witnesses to the ethical and spiritual dimensions of public life. In practice, this means that Muhammadiyah views religion as a source of ethical inspiration for governance, while respecting the neutrality of the state in guaranteeing religious freedom for all citizens.

This dual orientation has often been described by Muhammadiyah scholars as *theologising democracy*, a phrase coined by Bachtiar and Baidhaw (2022) to capture how religious principles can reinforce democratic values without undermining pluralism. Unlike secularist models, which tend to exclude religion from the public sphere, Muhammadiyah emphasizes that religion—especially Islam—can and should inform public morality, lawmaking, and social justice. At the same time, unlike Islamist movements that demand a fully sharia-based state, Muhammadiyah accepts Indonesia's *Pancasila* as the philosophical foundation of the nation.

Historically, Muhammadiyah's approach can be traced back to Ahmad Dahlan, its founder, who emphasized that Islam should guide Muslims in contributing positively to society rather

than withdrawing into dogmatism or pursuing domination. For Dahlan, Islamic values such as justice (*‘adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and public interest (*maslahah*) were fully compatible with Indonesia's nation-building project. This perspective distinguished Muhammadiyah from more rigid Islamist organisations in the early 20th century, which called for an explicitly Islamic state.

Theologically, Muhammadiyah interprets the Qur'an and Sunnah in a way that supports civic cooperation across religious boundaries. Its emphasis on *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) has allowed the organisation to adapt to Indonesia's plural and democratic context (Rohman 2021). In this view, the state is not an enemy of religion but rather a partner in ensuring social justice, education, and welfare. This vision is consistent with the concept of *wasatiyya* (moderation), in which balance is maintained between divine revelation and the practical needs of diverse societies.

Politically, Muhammadiyah has demonstrated this moderate stance through its consistent engagement with state institutions without subsuming itself under partisan politics. While its members have participated in political parties, the organisation as a whole has maintained independence, focusing instead on education, healthcare, and social services (Tanthowi 2019). This independence reinforces its ability to act as a moral compass for the state rather than as a competitor for political power.

By rejecting both extremes—on one hand, secularist tendencies that would privatize religion, and on the other hand, theocratic ambitions that would monopolize the state in the name of Islam—Muhammadiyah offers a

middle path. This positioning is not only theological but also strategic, ensuring that the organisation can thrive in a plural society and contribute constructively to Indonesia's democratic consolidation.

Thus, Muhammadiyah's understanding of state-religion relations reflects a synthesis: Islam as an ethical inspiration for public life, and democracy as the institutional framework that protects religious freedom and diversity. This synthesis is a hallmark of Muhammadiyah's commitment to religious moderation, positioning it as a unique actor within both Indonesian Islam and the wider Muslim world.

4.2 Muhammadiyah and Salafism: Convergences and Divergences

The comparison between Muhammadiyah and Salafism is both inevitable and complex. Both movements emphasize *tajrid* (purification) of Islamic practices from what are perceived as un-Islamic accretions, such as mystical rituals, folk practices, and cultural innovations (*bid'ah*). This shared concern for "purity" in faith and practice has led some observers to conflate Muhammadiyah with Salafism, at times labeling Muhammadiyah as a "Salafi movement" within the Indonesian context (Boy ZTF 2019). Such a designation, however, risks oversimplification. Although Muhammadiyah and Salafism share certain surface-level similarities, their underlying philosophies, methodologies, and historical trajectories diverge significantly.

Shared Emphasis on Purification and Tawhid

At the doctrinal level, Muhammadiyah shares with Salafism a deep commitment to *tawhid* (divine unity). Both movements strongly oppose practices considered forms of *shirk* (associating partners with God), including saint veneration, ritual offerings at graves, and the mediation of religious authority through intermediaries. Similarly, both reject forms of superstition, magical practices, and syncretic rituals that compromise the centrality of Qur'an and Sunnah in Muslim life (Boy ZTF 2019). In this respect, Muhammadiyah resonates with the Salafi insistence that Islam must be cleansed of historical accretions to restore its original vitality.

However, while these similarities are visible in creed (*aqidah*) and ritual (*ibadah*), they do not extend seamlessly into Muhammadiyah's broader engagement with culture, society, and the modern nation-state. Here, profound differences emerge.

Cultural Context versus Transnational Universalism

Salafism, particularly in its Wahhabi-influenced strand, adopts a universalist and transnational outlook. It prioritizes a "pure Islam" stripped of local variation, often seeking to minimize or abolish indigenous cultural expressions in favor of uniform orthodoxy (Nasir 2023). This explains the Salafi critique of local customs in Indonesia, from the Padri movement in West Sumatra to contemporary Salafi pesantren that reject Javanese traditions, local clothing styles, or festive rituals.

By contrast, Muhammadiyah situates its reform within the cultural and political realities of Indonesia. While it opposes syncretic practices, it

does not reject culture wholesale. Instead, Muhammadiyah promotes *tajdid al-thaqafa* (cultural renewal), a selective accommodation whereby elements of local traditions are reinterpreted and harmonized with Islamic values (Burhani 2018). For instance, Muhammadiyah may oppose grave veneration but does not oppose batik as a cultural expression; it may critique mystical rituals yet embrace Indonesian nationalism, *Pancasila*, and the modern sciences. This contextualism explains Muhammadiyah's ability to remain rooted in Indonesian society while still pursuing purification.

Institutional Divergence: Bureaucracy versus Decentralization

Another crucial divergence lies in institutional structure. Salafism, both historically and in its modern iterations, often manifests in decentralized and loosely organized networks of scholars, preachers, study circles (*halaqah*), and madrasas. Its strength lies in personal charisma and local authority rather than bureaucratic organisation. Salafis frequently resist centralized structures, seeing them as potential sites of corruption or compromise.

Muhammadiyah, by contrast, is highly institutionalized. Since its founding in 1912, it has developed a sophisticated organisational hierarchy, with clearly defined leadership structures, congresses, and committees. Today, Muhammadiyah oversees thousands of schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, and social welfare programs (Latief and Nashir 2020). This bureaucratic modernity allows Muhammadiyah to function not only as a religious reform movement but

also as a powerful civil society actor embedded in Indonesia's nation-building project. Unlike Salafi networks, Muhammadiyah's legitimacy does not depend solely on charismatic leaders but on institutional continuity and service delivery.

Hermeneutics: Literalism versus Rationalized Modernism

Salafism is characterized by a hermeneutic that privileges literal and direct textual readings of the Qur'an and Hadith. Salafis resist allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) and are suspicious of rationalist theology (*'ilm al-kalam*) and philosophical speculation. Their epistemology is largely transmission-based (*naql*), with limited scope for reasoning (*'aql*) beyond the strict textual framework (Ali, Mohamed 2019). This explains their insistence on following "what the Prophet and his companions did" in minute ritual details, from clothing to mosque architecture.

Muhammadiyah, while rejecting speculative mysticism and syncretism, does not entirely repudiate rationality. Influenced by the reformist genealogy of Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and other Middle Eastern modernists, Muhammadiyah embraces *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) as a tool for addressing contemporary challenges (Azra & Umar 1998). This allows Muhammadiyah to justify the integration of modern sciences into Islamic education, the use of technology in worship (such as loudspeakers for the call to prayer), and the establishment of hospitals, orphanages, and universities as Islamic obligations. In this sense, Muhammadiyah's hermeneutic is closer to Islamic modernism than to strict Salafism.

Attitudes toward the State

Salafism, particularly in its Wahhabi strand, historically emerged in alliance with political authority, specifically the House of Saud (Choksy, C. E. B. and Choksy, J. K. 2015). Yet, Salafis are ambivalent about modern nation-states, often vacillating between political quietism, opposition to secular governance, and, in some cases, radical rejection of democratic systems. In Indonesia, Salafi groups have often distanced themselves from formal politics, preferring instead to cultivate small, tightly controlled communities.

Muhammadiyah, in contrast, has consistently engaged with the Indonesian state as a partner in nation-building. Its acceptance of *Pancasila* as the state ideology reflects a willingness to embed Islamic values within a pluralistic framework rather than demanding an explicitly Islamic state. Through its concept of *Dar al-Ahdi wa al-Shahadah*, Muhammadiyah frames the Indonesian state as both a covenant to be honored and a platform for Muslims to bear ethical witness. This political theology diverges sharply from Salafi suspicion of democracy and underlines Muhammadiyah's distinctive model of Islamic modernism.

Global versus Local Orientation

Salafism, especially through its Wahhabi variant, promotes a global orientation. It often discourages national loyalties, encouraging Muslims to see themselves as part of a universal *ummah* with a single orthodoxy. This transnationalism can lead to tensions with local contexts, as Salafi movements criticize or even condemn national

holidays, constitutions, or symbols of civic identity.

Muhammadiyah, conversely, embraces Indonesian nationalism as compatible with Islamic identity. Its leaders played active roles in the independence movement, and today the organisation continues to support the Republic of Indonesia as a legitimate expression of Muslim aspirations. This local orientation does not diminish Muhammadiyah's Islamic identity; rather, it strengthens its ability to mediate between global Islamic ideals and national realities.

Convergence and Divergence in Practice

The practical outcomes of these differences are significant. Where Salafi groups may remain small, insular, and often contentious with local society, Muhammadiyah has grown into one of the largest Islamic organisations in the world, with over 30 million members and a vast institutional network. Its combination of purification and adaptation has allowed it to remain relevant across generations and social classes.

Thus, while Muhammadiyah and Salafism converge on surface-level commitments to *tawhid* and the rejection of superstition, their divergences are far more profound. They differ in methodology (literalism vs. *ijtihad*), cultural orientation (rejection vs. renewal), institutional structure (decentralized vs. bureaucratic), political engagement (ambivalence vs. constructive partnership), and scope (transnational universalism vs. contextual nationalism).

For this reason, Muhammadiyah should not be reduced to a "Salafi

movement.” Rather, it represents a uniquely Indonesian form of Islamic modernism—contextualized, adaptive, and institutionally grounded—that integrates purification with modernization. In doing so, Muhammadiyah provides a model of religious reform that is distinct from Salafism and perhaps more sustainable in pluralistic societies.

4.3 Internal Dynamics within Muhammadiyah

Muhammadiyah is not a monolithic organisation. Like many large religious movements, it contains diverse currents of thought, ranging from puritanical to progressive, often reflecting broader tensions within Indonesian Islam and society. These internal dynamics illustrate Muhammadiyah’s ability to accommodate difference while sustaining unity, a characteristic that has contributed to its endurance for more than a century.

Typologies of Muhammadiyah Thought

One widely cited typology distinguishes between *Muhammadiyah Salafi* (MUSA) and *Muhammadiyah Nahdliyin* (MUNU) (Huda 2016). The MUSA faction adheres to strict purification, seeking to align Muhammadiyah more closely with global Salafism. These members prioritize *aqidah* (creed) and ritual orthodoxy, often emphasizing conformity to Qur’an and Hadith while criticizing syncretic or cultural practices. In their discourse, the central problem of Indonesian Islam is “contamination” by pre-Islamic or local traditions, which must be purged to restore authentic Islam.

By contrast, the MUNU faction, so called because of its resemblance to *Nahdlatul Ulama* orientations, accommodates local traditions and emphasizes tolerance in religious practice. MUNU-oriented Muhammadiyah members are more willing to contextualize doctrine, showing greater openness to interfaith and intercultural engagement. They may accept traditional rituals such as communal prayers for the dead (*tahlilan*), or they may downplay polemics against local customs in favor of broader social cooperation.

Progressive and Modernist Currents

Beyond this binary of MUSA and MUNU, Muhammadiyah also contains modernist-progressive factions that extend the reformist legacy of Ahmad Dahlan into new domains. These groups are influenced by global discourses on democracy, human rights, gender equality, and environmental ethics (Bruinessen 2018). They argue for a more contextual interpretation of Islam, positioning Muhammadiyah within transnational reformist currents that dialogue with global Muslim intellectuals as well as secular civil society.

Examples of this progressive strand include initiatives in women’s leadership within Muhammadiyah’s autonomous organisation *Aisyiyah*, engagement with interfaith dialogue, and advocacy on issues such as climate change and sustainable development. Scholars such as Abdul Munir Mulkhan and Syafiq A. Mughni have promoted readings of Islam that emphasize inclusivity and pluralism, pushing Muhammadiyah beyond the narrow

confines of ritual reform into the realm of social transformation.

Tensions and Negotiations

The coexistence of these diverse currents naturally produces tension. For example, debates frequently emerge over the permissibility of cultural practices, approaches to jurisprudence, and the role of Muhammadiyah in politics. The puritanical factions may criticize progressive tendencies as “too liberal” or “Westernized,” while the progressives may view the puritans as rigid and unable to address modern challenges.

Yet, despite these disagreements, Muhammadiyah has largely avoided destructive internal fragmentation. This cohesion can be attributed to several factors. First, decision-making in Muhammadiyah is embedded in deliberative processes (*musyawarah*), which prioritize consensus-building over authoritarian leadership. Second, Muhammadiyah emphasizes collective discipline (*jam'iyah*), which requires members to submit to organisational decisions even when they disagree personally. This culture of deliberation and discipline prevents factional disputes from escalating into schism.

Institutional Integration as a Source of Unity

Muhammadiyah's vast institutional network also serves as a powerful unifying force. By operating thousands of schools, universities, hospitals, clinics, orphanages, and charities, Muhammadiyah provides a common platform for service delivery that transcends ideological differences. Members from puritanical, moderate, and progressive factions may disagree

on theology but still collaborate in managing hospitals or teaching in schools. This shared institutional responsibility channels internal diversity into practical service, reinforcing cohesion through action rather than abstract agreement.

In fact, many scholars argue that Muhammadiyah's institutions function as the “glue” holding together its diverse constituencies (Latief and Nashir 2020). The organisation's emphasis on education and healthcare not only serves society but also anchors members in concrete, mission-oriented work. The result is a pragmatic form of unity: while theological debates persist, they do not paralyze the organisation's practical contribution to society.

Pluralism as Resilience

The internal pluralism of Muhammadiyah should not be understood as a weakness but rather as a source of resilience. This diversity allows Muhammadiyah to appeal to multiple constituencies simultaneously: puritans find a home in its emphasis on purification, moderates in its cultural accommodation, and progressives in its social activism. The organisation's ability to house these different orientations reflects its adaptability in navigating Indonesia's complex religious landscape.

Moreover, Muhammadiyah's pluralism resonates with Indonesia's own plural character. Just as the nation is built on diversity under the unifying philosophy of *Pancasila*, Muhammadiyah is built on diversity under the unifying mission of Islamic renewal (*tajdid*). This alignment reinforces Muhammadiyah's legitimacy as a national organisation.

Comparative Insights

In comparison with other Islamic movements, Muhammadiyah's management of internal diversity is notable. Many Salafi groups fragment over minor doctrinal disputes, while certain Islamist organisations collapse when faced with political disagreements. Muhammadiyah, by contrast, has maintained unity for over a century despite profound internal differences. Its model suggests that large Islamic movements can sustain pluralism without sacrificing coherence, provided they are anchored in strong institutions, collective discipline, and mission-oriented service.

4.4 Muhammadiyah and Islamic Moderation

Muhammadiyah's contribution to Islamic moderation (*wasatiyya*) is multifaceted, encompassing theology, education, social welfare, and interfaith engagement.

Theologically, Muhammadiyah embodies moderation by balancing purification with adaptation. In ritual matters, it insists on fidelity to Qur'an and Hadith. In social affairs, however, it embraces pragmatic reasoning, science, and cultural accommodation. This balance prevents it from drifting into either rigid literalism or uncritical cultural syncretism (Abdul Munir Mulkhan 2021, Arifin et al. 2022).

In education, Muhammadiyah has pioneered the integration of Islamic and modern sciences. Its universities and schools not only teach Qur'an and Hadith but also medicine, engineering, and social sciences (Ilham and Syamsuddin 2021). This model reflects moderation in knowledge, rejecting the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences.

In healthcare and social services, Muhammadiyah operates hospitals, clinics, and orphanages open to all, regardless of religion or ethnicity (Samsudin and Prabowo 2022). This inclusive service provision translates theological moderation into tangible social welfare. The organisation's role in disaster relief, poverty alleviation, and community development further demonstrates its commitment to social justice as an Islamic imperative (Pangeran Bungsu 2023).

In interfaith relations, Muhammadiyah actively promotes dialogue and cooperation with Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and other communities. Its leaders have emphasized that moderation requires engaging pluralism constructively, not merely tolerating it. This stance aligns with Indonesia's broader efforts to promote religious harmony under the framework of *Pancasila*.

Conceptually, Muhammadiyah's moderation resonates with Yusuf al-Qaradawi's articulation of *wasatiyya* as balance and justice (Al-Qaradawi 2010). It also reflects Bauer's idea of Islam's "culture of ambiguity," which sustains diversity of interpretation (Bauer et al. 2021). By institutionalizing these principles in education, healthcare, and civic engagement, Muhammadiyah operationalizes moderation as both a theological and social reality.

In sum, Muhammadiyah exemplifies Islamic moderation not only in its rhetoric but also in its structures and practices. It demonstrates that moderation is sustainable when anchored in strong institutions, adaptive theology, and inclusive social service. This model offers a valuable contribution to global

debates on how Islam can coexist with democracy, pluralism, and modernity.

5. Conclusion

Muhammadiyah represents a reformist-modernist Islamic movement that balances purification and modernization. While sharing some puritanical elements with Salafism, it diverges significantly in its embrace of culture, education, and pluralism. Its concept of *Dar al-Ahdi wa al-Shahadah* demonstrates a moderate vision of state–religion relations, supporting democracy and religious freedom. Internally, Muhammadiyah accommodates diverse tendencies while maintaining institutional cohesion.

By clarifying the distinctions between Muhammadiyah and Salafism, this study highlights Muhammadiyah's role in shaping Indonesia's Islamic identity as inclusive, moderate, and socially engaged. Its synthesis of tradition and modernity ensures continued relevance in addressing contemporary challenges, making it a vital contributor to both Indonesian society and global Islamic thought.

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