

# STUDIA ISLAMIKA

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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF FATWAS ON AHMADIYYA

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# **STUDIA ISLAMIKA**



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## Whither Religious Moderation? The State and Management of Religious Affairs in Contemporary Indonesia

**Ismatu Ropi**

The extent of religious values and symbols in encompassing the direction of Indonesian nation state from the beginning of modern Indonesian history was the most popular determinant contestation in Indonesian political activism along with the emergence of the new sentiments of nationalism and anti-colonialism. Following the embracement of *Pancasila* (the Five Principles) as the state socio-political foundation, Indonesia would be neither a secular state in which religion was absolutely separated from the state, nor a religious one where the state was organized on one particular faith.

Bearing in mind that religion is very important in the state system, the state normatively defines its role on religious affair, as clearly outlines in the Constitution, paving the way for the government to take religious affairs as part of its service. For many decades, the government is very active to promote religious toleration among the communities given to the heterogeneities of religious groups in Indonesia. Implicit here is the importance of a well-grounded policy that continually balances the degree of level of contribution of religious groups in forming a



unique Indonesian identity. Hence when Indonesian people identify themselves with particular religious grouping, it does not mean that they have less loyalty to Indonesian nation-statehood. It seems clear that retaining religious (and cultural identity) is not the same thing as political allegiance to a country. Ethnic or religious loyalties do not detract from wider loyalties to the country. For them both loyalties are mutually defining their very existence.

### **Why Religious Moderation**

Following the reformation era, Indonesia has witnessed new waves of religious revivalism and sentiment putting religious symbols into the very center of the stage. To some extends, this such revivalism tends to undermine the common values of the state system and to expose differences within religious groups glorifying the supremacy of a particular religious outlook and practices, and opposing a more tolerant and inclusive understanding of religion. In turn, it also leads to reject the notion of a peaceful co-existence between different faith-based communities.

At the same time, Indonesia also witness the emergence of religious liberalism undermining the existing religious symbols and texts that has served as the basic social norms and conducts. At the end the contests between these opposing values are inevitable creating confusion and unrest in the community. Those with different backgrounds will be positioned as the 'other' or 'them' rather than 'us'. To that stance, religious groups tend fall into the trap of extremism and truth claiming.

Thus, the current religious backgrounds pose serious challenges for the government, not only on how they should manage those differences in building the nation but also in ensuring a harmonious life before becoming the main ingredient for new tension and conflict in the community. Given this current unfortunate situation of religious life in addition to the steady rise of uneasy majority-minority relations, it seems important for Indonesian to ensure that societies with different backgrounds embrace a sense of unity so that everyone shares their pride and attachment to their community and the nation. It is the also important to reinforce its society's long experiences and communal values based on moderation by recognizing the true spirit of religious values of all existing religions, and creating ample rooms to realize social justice in community. Moderation in religious ideas and practices means that

every group shares the same origin and destination inherently rooted in the awareness of the necessity of humanity. From it, the meaning of life can be attained together serving as the main teachings and practices of various religions.

In addition, religious moderation may be understood as a balanced religious attitude between exclusively practicing one's own religion and inclusively respecting the religious practices of others of different faiths. This balanced or middle way in the religious practices will be inevitably effective to prevent someone from overreacting to extremism, fanaticism, and radical attitudes in practicing religious ideas and teachings. As stated earlier, religious moderation serve as a solution to the existence of the two extreme poles in religiosity: the ultraconservative or extreme right pole on one side, and the liberal or extreme left pole on another. This is the essence of religious moderation in contemporary Indonesia.

### **Whither Religious Moderation?**

Conceptually, the word 'moderation', coming from Latin word, *moderatio*, means justice (not 'over' and not 'lacking') and is related to self-control (from excess and depleted attitudes). In *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian Official Dictionary), the word has a strong association with 'reducing violence', and avoiding extremism. So if one says, 'that man is being moderate', it would mean that the person is behaving naturally, is usually normal, and is not having extreme attitudes. This notion fits with Arabic word for moderation: *wasat*, or *wasatīyah*, which is equivalently associated means with the words *tawassut* (middle), *i'tidal* (just), and *tawāzun* (balanced). People who apply the principle of *wasatīyah* can be called *wasīth*. In English, the word moderation itself is often used exchangeable with some other words like 'average', 'core', 'standard', or non-aligned. In general, moderate means promoting balance in terms of beliefs, moral values, and also characters, particularly in treating others as individuals and in dealing with various institutions including the state.

To this sense, one may argue why Indonesian government should play larger part in promoting the middle way in understanding and practicing religious life in Indonesia. The answer for this is that not only that the state role in religious affair has been clearly outlined as constitutional values in Indonesian state system so the government should take religious affairs as part of its service, but also that the

idea of middle way in religious life would be of importance to ensure healthy relationship among communities particularly diverse religious communities. Hence religious moderation is indeed the main foundation in creating tolerance and harmony, both at the local and national levels.

By this way, each religious community should treat others respectfully, accept differences, and live together in peace. Diversity requires differences. Any differences potentially give rise to friction or conflict, which can cause imbalances. Multiculturalism and pluralism in Indonesia are bound in the motto of principle of national unity, *'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika'* (Unity in Diversity). For Indonesia, the multicultural context of its society is like a fertile ground to sow the seeds of moderation and democracy. At the end, it is about mutual recognition, mutual respect, honest appreciation of diversity, balance of rights and responsibilities, and importantly 'equality' with fairness. The word 'equality' in this sense should always be incorporated with fairness. Being moderate, which in this sense may mean rejecting both extremist and liberal attitudes in religiosity, is the key to preserve civilization and create peace and the people. This is one of the public good the government should deliver to all citizens.

Thus in multicultural societies like Indonesia, religious moderation may not be a choice, but in fact a necessity, the government undoubtedly play significant role to ensure it immediate result in the society. Thus, religious moderation is a way in creating the authentic 'Indonesian-ness' (*keindonesiaan*) by integrating religious values and local wisdoms into one of development cultural strategies. In addition to this, in Indonesian context, religious moderation is strongly inclined with the *idea of nationality* or loyal commitment to Indonesian's nation-state, *tolerance*, *anti-violence*, and *acceptance to local traditions*. Those are 4 explicit indicators of Indonesian's religious moderation.

This is one of the reasons why religious moderation has been incorporated into Indonesian's National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) for 2020-2024 by the National Development Planning Agency (BAPPENAS RI). The Ministry of Religious Affairs is key institution in conceptualizing the main ideas and implementing the programs on moderation. The inclusion of religious moderation as *Priority Program* on RPJMN 2020-2024 would be a milestone from which will be mainly utilized into the five Priority Activities (*Kegiatan*

*Prioritas*): *first* is strengthening the perspective, attitude and practice of religious moderation; *the second* is strengthening harmony and harmony of religious communities; *the third* is strengthening religious and cultural relations; *the forth* is improving quality of religious life services; and *the last* is developing economic capacity religious community and resources.

Given the important nature of religious moderation for current Indonesia, it is expected that the Ministry of Religious Affairs will play the major roles in mainstreaming religious moderation and work together with some other ministries, such as: Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Youth and Sports in making religious moderation as an inseparable part of the cultural strategies in advancing Indonesia's human resources. It should be borne in mind that efforts to strengthen religious moderation in the country in order to preserve harmony and peaceful religious life should always be based on the idea of provision of constitutional guarantees on religious freedom and the proportional freedom in religious life. And in the some token, any effort to strengthen religious moderation would not sufficiently effective without community's participation and commitment.

Broadly speaking, the acceptance of religious moderation should be put as a celebration of the current and future identity of Indonesian society allowing for the expression of plurality and the co-existence of different communities based on religion, ethnicity and culture. This hopefully becomes an effective national-wide program that has been taken within its setting that accepts, encourages, and respects the diversity for our future generation.

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2. Booth, Anne. 1988. "Living Standards and the Distribution of Income in Colonial Indonesia: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(2): 310–34.
3. Feener, Michael R., and Mark E. Cammack, eds. 2007. *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia: Ideas and Institutions*. Cambridge: Islamic Legal Studies Program.
4. Wahid, Din. 2014. *Nurturing Salafi Manhaj: A Study of Salafi Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia*. PhD dissertation. Utrecht University.
5. Utriza, Ayang. 2008. "Mencari Model Kerukunan Antaragama." *Kompas*. March 19: 59.
6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
7. Interview with K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, Kajen, Pati, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

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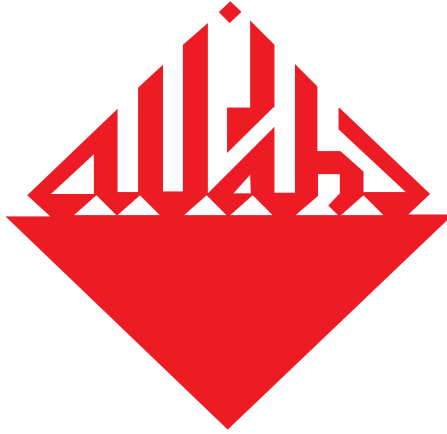


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