



AMBIVALENCE IN RELIGIOUS MODERATION AMONG ISLAMIC EDUCATION TEACHERS IN TULUNGAGUNG, INDONESIA

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Abstract: Religious moderation programs have become an important instrument for the Indonesian government to strengthen tolerance and combat radicalism and extremism. However, existing studies on religious moderation tend to focus on the normative acceptance of tolerance and the rejection of radicalism, while limited attention has been paid to how this agenda is translated into educational practices involving minority belief groups, particularly adherents of local belief systems (*aliran kepercayaan*). This article examines the ambivalence surrounding the implementation of religious moderation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at five public and private secondary schools in Tulungagung, East Java. It explores how PAI teachers understand religious diversity and respond to students who practice local belief traditions. This study employs an ethnographic approach involving participatory observation in religious education classes, in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of educational documents. The findings reveal that PAI teachers' acceptance of religious moderation is conditional and ambivalent. Although they acknowledge Pancasila, tolerance, and interfaith coexistence as normative principles, adherents of local beliefs continue to be positioned outside recognized religions and, in some cases, as targets of proselytization (*dakwah*) under the framework of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. This ambivalence limits the ability of students who follow indigenous beliefs to access religious education that corresponds to their own beliefs. The article argues that the central challenge of religious moderation in schools lies not merely in the acceptance of diversity but also in the gap between the normative endorsement of tolerance and the substantive recognition of minority belief groups' rights. By shifting the focus from religious moderation as a policy discourse to its implementation as a practice of recognition, equality, and rights fulfillment in public education, this study contributes to a more critical understanding of religious moderation in Indonesia.

Keywords: Religious moderation, secondary schools, *aliran kepercayaan*, minority groups

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Introduction

THE FALL of the New Order regime in 1998 marked the beginning of a new political era characterized by democratization and expanded opportunities for religious expression in Indonesia.¹ The post-Reformasi period also renewed debates over the relationship between Islam, the state, and Pancasila, as various Islamic organizations and groups articulated diverse political and religious agendas.² These developments formed part of a broader negotiation over the role of religion in public life, including debates concerning the place of Islamic principles in the state and the political sphere.³ At the same time, the Indonesian government strengthened its counterterrorism and deradicalization policies through institutional approaches combining security and prevention strategies.⁴ The interaction between expanded religious expression, debates over the position of Islam in the state, and

¹ Muhammad Ansor, "Post-Islamism and the Remaking of Islamic Public Sphere in Post-Reform Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 23, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v23i3.2412>.

² Muhammad Najib Azca, Rani Dwi Putri, and Pam Nilan, "Gendered Youth Transitions in Local Jihad in Indonesia: Negotiating Agency in Arranged Marriage," *Journal of Youth Studies* 28, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2248894>; Kirsten E. Schulze, "From Ambon to Poso: Comparative and Evolutionary Aspects of Local Jihad in Indonesia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs41-1c>.

³ Muzayyin Ahyar and Ni'matul Huda, "Islamic Constitutionalism: Social Movement and the Framework of the Indonesian Constitution," *Constitutional Review* 7, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.31078/consrev726>; Zuly Qodir et al., "The Formalization of Sharia in Aceh to Discipline the Female Body," *Al-Jami'ah* 60, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2022.601.63-90>.

⁴ Faridi and Umiarso, "Deradicalization in Islamic Education in Indonesia: A Phenomenological Study," *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 2024, no. 109 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2024.109.005>; Ali Muhammad and Eric Hiariej, "Deradicalization Program in Indonesia Radicalizing the Radicals," *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1905219>; "Deradicalization In Indonesia : Implementation And Challenge," *Journal of Terrorism Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7454/jts.v2i1.1016>.

government responses to extremism provides the broader historical context for examining religious moderation in contemporary Indonesia. This evolving relationship between religion and the state has also been discussed in terms of an “adaptation scale.”⁵

This transformation has also taken place in the socio-religious sphere. The rise of public piety, which has been developing since the 1980s, has driven a process of “*santrification*”, the increasing spread of expressions of piety and adherence to Islamic practices within Indonesian society.⁶ However, this rise in religiosity has not always gone hand in hand with greater acceptance of diversity. A number of studies indicate increasing pressure on religious minority groups and non-mainstream Muslim groups in the post-Reform era.⁷ This phenomenon is often understood as part of a “conservative turn” in Indonesian Islam.⁸ Some analyses even link it to a weakening of the image of moderate Indonesian Islam.⁹ Thus, Indonesia faces not only the challenge of maintaining religiosity within a democratic framework but also the challenge of ensuring that the rise of religious identity does not undermine the rights of diverse groups.

⁵ Syaifudin Zuhri, “Regimented Islamophobia: Islam, State, And Governmentality in Indonesia,” *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v9i2.8249>.

⁶ Greg Barton, Matteo Vergani, and Yenny Wahid, “Countering Violent and Hateful Extremism in Indonesia Islam, Gender and Civil Society,” *Disengagement, Deradicalisation, and Rehabilitation*, 2021; Greg Barton, Ihsan Yilmaz, and Nicholas Morieson, “Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia,” *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080641>.

⁷ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *When Muslims Are Not Muslims: The Ahmadiyya Community and the Discourse on Heresy in Indonesia* (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2013).

⁸ Martin Van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn,”* in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn”* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2013.850644>.

⁹ Wahyudi Akmaliah, “The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i1.1-24>.

It is in this context that the Indonesian government has prioritized a program of religious moderation as one response to radicalism, extremism, and rising religious conservatism. From a more critical perspective, this project can also be understood as a form of state management of religion through affective governance, regulating religious subjectivity to make it compatible with the interests of state governance.¹⁰ The Ministry of Religious Affairs identifies four indicators of religious moderation: national commitment, tolerance, nonviolence, and accommodation of local culture.¹¹ These indicators provide an official framework for understanding religious moderation in Indonesia and assessing how its principles are translated into educational practices. Institutionally, religious moderation has since become a national religious development priority, including in the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional or RPJMN).¹²

The national dimension of religious moderation also highlights Indonesia's unique relationship between religion and the state. Unlike secular nationalism, which separates religion from national political identity,¹³ Indonesian nationalism continues to give religion a significant role in constructing citizenship. In this context, Menchik uses the concept of “godly nationalism” to describe a national community built through divine orthodoxy

¹⁰ Lorenz Trein, “Governing the Fear of Islam: Thinking Islamophobia through the Politics of Secular Affect in Historical Debate,” *ReOrient* 4, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.13169/reorient.4.1.0044>.

¹¹ Kementerian Agama, *Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2018).

¹² Bappenas, *Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional 2020-2024* (Jakarta, 2019), https://perpustakaan.bappenas.go.id/e-library/file_upload/koleksi/migrasi-data-publikasi/file/RP_RKP/Narasi%20RPJMN%20IV%202020-2024_Revisi%2014%20Agustus%202019.pdf.

¹³ R. Michael. Feener, David. Kloos, and Annemarie. Samuels, *Islam and the Limits of the State: Reconfigurations of Practice, Community and Authority in Contemporary Aceh* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Robert W. Hefner, “Islam, State, and Civil Society: ICMI and the Struggle for the Indonesian Middle Class,” *Indonesia* 56 (1993), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3351197>.

and cooperation between the state and religious organizations.¹⁴ Consequently, religious moderation aims not only to prevent extremism but also to foster religious subjects who are both tolerant and committed to the state. This framework positions educational institutions as a key arena for implementing religious moderation.

Schools play a particularly strategic role because religious educators not only impart religious knowledge but also shape how students understand different groups. Numerous studies and surveys on religious education indicate that issues of intolerance are not solely tied to the curriculum but also to teachers' interpretations of religious material. A 2018 national survey by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta examined the religious attitudes and behaviors of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and lecturers in Indonesia. The report addressed attitudes toward religious diversity, intolerance, and radicalism in educational settings.¹⁵ This article uses the 2018 PPIM survey as a starting point to show that intolerance among PAI teachers requires deeper examination in local school practice.

Although research on religious moderation in Indonesia has expanded considerably, three important limitations still require attention. First, most discussions frame religious moderation at the level of policy, state discourse, or general attitudes toward tolerance, but they have not always examined in depth how these policies translate into daily educational practice. Second, research on tolerance in schools more often employs the Muslim-non-Muslim or moderate-radical dichotomy, resulting in the experiences of groups outside mainstream religious categories receiving less attention. Third, adherents of local belief systems present a more complex issue because they face not only

¹⁴ Jeremy Menchik, "Productive Intolerance: Godly Nationalism in Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 3 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417514000267>.

¹⁵ Rangga Eka Saputra et al., *Sikap dan Perilaku Keberagamaan Guru dan Dosen Pendidikan Agama Islam: Survei Nasional Sikap dan Perilaku Keberagamaan di Sekolah dan Universitas*, CONVEY Report, vol. 1, no. 9 (Jakarta: Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM), UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2018).

theological differences but also a long history of challenges to social and institutional recognition. Therefore, teachers' general acceptance of tolerance does not necessarily indicate the same level of acceptance of the rights of students who adhere to local belief systems.

This gap matters because religious moderation cannot be assessed solely through normative agreement on tolerance, Pancasila, or the rejection of violence; it must also be examined through how educational actors treat minority groups and understand their rights. Using ethnographic fieldwork, including participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, the study identifies not only what purposively selected teachers say about tolerance but also how those understandings appear in daily educational interactions. The research locations and participants were selected through purposive sampling, considering the presence of students from diverse religious or faith backgrounds and the relevance of these locations to implementing religious education and religious moderation.

The study included 5 secondary schools, including public and private schools in Tulungagung, 10 PAI teachers, while supporting informants included 10 students (including students who practice *aliran kepercayaan*), 5 school principals, and 5 other relevant informants. Special attention was given to participant protection. Before interviews and observations, participants were informed of the research objectives and asked to provide written or verbal informed consent.

This study examines how PAI teachers understand religious diversity and how their understandings shape educational practices involving students who follow *aliran kepercayaan*. It focuses on secondary schools in Tulungagung, East Java, where religious and belief diversity makes it possible to observe directly the intersection of state moderation policy, teachers' religious understandings, and students' experiences. Through these two above inquiries, this article argues that the main challenge of religious moderation in schools is not only promoting tolerance but also navigating the potential tension between normative acceptance of diversity and substantive recognition of minority belief groups.

The article is structured as an introduction, which highlights the historical background of why Indonesia needs religious moderation. The second part presents a literature review and theoretical framework of religious moderation and its objectives of reducing radicalism and extremism among Muslims. The third part, after the methods, deals with the elaboration of the findings about the perception and reception of teachers and students in public schools towards religious moderation. Last, but not least, is the discussion of the findings and their implications for religious moderation agendas in the country before the conclusion.

Religious Moderation: From Counter-Extremism to the Politics of Recognition

Religious moderation in Indonesia initially developed against the backdrop of an intensifying debate over conservatism, liberalism, and religion's role in public life. In official government documents, moderation is positioned as a middle ground between religious tendencies deemed too conservative and too liberal.¹⁶ This polarization has a longer history. Liberal Islamic activism, which developed primarily among educated younger Muslims within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, for example, once clashed directly with conservative groups in debates over pluralism, secularism, and liberalism.¹⁷ The contestation intensified after the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) issued a fatwa in 2005 regarding secularism, pluralism, and liberalism,¹⁸ which subsequently gained political resonance among groups advocating for a greater role for sharia in Indonesian public life.

In this context, religious moderation cannot be understood merely as the theological concept of *wasatiyyah*. It is also an institutional project that seeks to define a form of religious practice

¹⁶ Kementerian Agama, *Moderasi Beragama*.

¹⁷ La Mansi et al., "Transcending Proportional Boundaries: A Study on the Shifting Thoughts of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah Muslims in Gorontalo, Indonesia," *Mankind Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.46469/mq.2025.65.4.3>.

¹⁸ Norshahril Saat, "Theologians 'Moralising' Indonesia?: The Case of the Post-New Order Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI)," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 44, nos. 4–5 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-04404005>.

deemed compatible with Indonesia's pluralism, national identity, and democratic way of life. The Ministry of Religious Affairs identifies four indicators of religious moderation: national commitment, tolerance, nonviolence, and accommodation of local culture.¹⁹ These indicators provide a framework for understanding religious moderation and promoting tolerance and coexistence in a multicultural society. Indonesia's political and religious history underscores the importance of this agenda. The case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who in 2017 was sentenced to two years in prison on charges of blasphemy, served as a pivotal moment that highlighted the tensions between religion, politics, majority-minority identity, and pluralism in Indonesia's public sphere. However, framing moderation solely as a response to radicalism and political conflict risks narrowing the issue. An equally important question is how moderation functions when the majority group interacts with structurally weaker religious and belief groups.

Recent literature reinforces the need for this shift. Wijaya Mulya, Aditomo, and Suryani show that tolerance among Muslim teacher candidates does not develop linearly, but results from contestations among discourses about Islam, pluralism, conservatism, and socio-political life. Thus, while an individual may accept tolerance as a universal value, how they apply it still depends on the discursive boundaries used to define other groups.²⁰ Sirry et al. also found that secondary school teachers in Indonesia have not yet fully internalized tolerance. In a study of 152 teachers at 28 secondary schools in East Java, they found that the limited scope of interfaith education is one challenge in fostering substantive tolerance.²¹ These studies are central to the

¹⁹ Kementerian Agama, *Moderasi Beragama*.

²⁰ Teguh Wijaya Mulya, Anindito Aditomo, and Anne Suryani, "On Being a Religiously Tolerant Muslim: Discursive Contestations among Pre-Service Teachers in Contemporary Indonesia," *British Journal of Religious Education* 44, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2021.1917338>.

²¹ Mun'im Sirry et al., "Teachers' Perspectives on Tolerance Education in Indonesian High Schools," *British Journal of Religious Education* 46, no. 4 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2024.2345213>.

shift in focus from the presence of tolerance in policy to how teachers interpret and put it into practice.

Therefore, this article views religious moderation not merely as a middle ground between liberalism and conservatism, but as a practice of recognizing the existence and rights of different groups. This shift is particularly important in the case of the *Aliran Kepercayaan*: a teacher may accept pluralism and reject violence but may not necessarily recognize minority beliefs as having equal rights to education and freedom of belief. This is where the potential ambivalence of moderation arises: the distinction between a normative acceptance of tolerance and a substantive recognition of minority groups. This literature shows that religious moderation operates both as a policy framework and as a set of everyday practices. The following sections examine how these dimensions shape teachers' responses to minority beliefs.

PAI Teachers: From Agents of Moderation to Mediators of Religious Boundaries

Within the Islamic educational paradigm, teachers are not merely conveyors of knowledge but agents who shape students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development based on Islamic values.²² Their competencies extend beyond mastery of subject matter to pedagogical, personal, professional, and social competencies, the last of which requires inclusiveness, objectivity, non-discrimination, and the capacity to adapt to social and cultural diversity.²³ Social competencies require the ability to be inclusive, objective, and non-discriminatory, as well as the capacity to adapt to social and cultural diversity.

The literature on religious moderation accordingly positions teachers as agents of moderation. Sayekti shows that moderation education can increase prospective PAI teachers' awareness of

²² Rumadani Sagala and Iin Kandedes, "The Role of Islamic Education Teachers in Addressing the Negative Impact of the TikTok on Teenagers in Lampung, Indonesia," *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* 23, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol23.iss2.art14>.

²³ Zulfikar Ali Buto Siregar and Jarudin, "Evolution of Islamic Education Teachers' Competence in Indonesia," *International Journal of Religion* 5, no. 4 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.61707/km08qc95>.

tolerance and their readiness to serve as tolerant educators.²⁴ A cross-national study of Indonesia and Malaysia highlights the importance of teachers' experiences and interpretations in translating moderation into the classroom.²⁵ Research on moderation curricula in higher education shows that education can institutionalize knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to tolerance, nonviolence, commitment to the nation, and cultural acceptance.

Moderation is therefore not a stable identity that a person acquires automatically after embracing the value of *wasatiyyah*, but a negotiated practice, especially when teachers work with groups outside the dominant religious category.

These interpretations matter most in how teachers treat religious difference. Educational practice can create a paradox: a teacher may embrace tolerance toward other groups while still upholding an epistemic hierarchy that treats certain beliefs as less legitimate, deviant, or even targets for proselytization. Sirry et al. point out that schools cannot resolve the issue of tolerance through normative statements about harmony alone, because the absence of interfaith education limits opportunities for teachers and students to understand others' perspectives.²⁶ However, teachers do not simply transmit moderation; they interpret it. They bring theological backgrounds, organizational affiliations, religious knowledge, and specific understandings of who counts as a legitimate adherent. Mulyana likewise suggests that tolerant teachers' subjectivity is shaped by diverse and sometimes

²⁴ Siskha Putri Sayekti, "Systematic Literature Review: The Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Instilling Religious Moderation in Elementary Schools," *Bulletin of Islamic Research* 1, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.69526/bir.v1i2.343>.

²⁵ Muslih et al., "Religious Moderation in Primary Education: Experiences of Teachers in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 21, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpai.v21i2.10009>.

²⁶ Mun'im Sirry, "Muslim Student Radicalism and Self-Deradicalization in Indonesia," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 31, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1770665>.

competing discourses.²⁷ Kimanen adds, from international studies of religious education, that an emphasis on interfaith harmony and understanding risks overlooking power dynamics and structural inequalities; from a social justice approach, education about diversity should also help students recognize subordination and the structures that produce inequality.²⁸

This approach is relevant to this article. If moderation is measured solely by a person's willingness to coexist peacefully, discriminatory practices that occur without open conflict may go unnoticed. When moderation is viewed through the lens of recognition and equality, the analytical question shifts from "Are teachers tolerant?" to "To what extent does teachers' tolerance result in the recognition of minority groups' identities and rights?"

Aliran Kepercayaan, Religious Education, and the Problem of Substantive Recognition

The educational experiences of adherents of *aliran kepercayaan* must be understood through three related dimensions: the social recognition of their beliefs, their legal position, and the availability of appropriate educational services. The first concerns how religion and belief are defined and socially recognized. The definitions of religion and belief are, by their very nature, never entirely neutral. The definitions of religion and belief are, by their very nature, never entirely neutral. Religion is tied to deeply personal spiritual experiences and is also shaped by social institutions that define what counts as religion.²⁹ In the Indonesian

²⁷Rohmat Mulyana, "Religious Moderation in Islamic Religious Education Textbook and Implementation in Indonesia," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.4102/HTS.V79I1.8592>.

²⁸Vander Tavares and Thor-André Skrefsrud, eds., *Critical and Creative Engagements with Diversity in Nordic Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9781666925869>.

²⁹ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003127017>; Timothy O. Benedict, *Spiritual Ends: Religion and the Heart of Dying in Japan*, in *Spiritual Ends: Religion and the Heart of Dying in Japan* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.136>; David B. Yaden and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience: 21st Century Research and Perspectives*, in *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience: 21st Century Research and*

context, the term “followers of local belief traditions” encompasses a wide range of traditions, from local and mystical beliefs to organized communities with distinct histories and structures.³⁰ Belief in the One Supreme God is understood as an attitude and worldview regarding the existence of a divine power rooted in inner experience and Indonesian culture.³¹

This diversity indicates that “*Aliran Kepercayaan*” should not be understood merely as an administrative category situated outside the major religions.³² The history of these organizations reveals a strong sense of ethical, spiritual, and civic identity. The formation of the Association of Believers in the One Supreme God, for example, demonstrates the community’s efforts to organize their identity and participation within a national framework based on Pancasila.³³ Thus, these believers are not merely a group seeking “tolerance” from the majority, but citizens demanding recognition of their beliefs and rights.

Perspectives (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190665678.001.0001>; Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen, *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (2006), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203001073>.

³⁰ Yessy Markolinda et al., “Indigenous Knowledge for Disaster Mitigation and Climate Threats in Mentawai, Indonesia,” *Jamba: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies* 17, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.4102/jamba.v17i1.1877>; Cindy Vebyola Batubara, Alwi Dahlan Ritonga, and Sakti Ritonga, “Indigenous Theologies in Indonesia: Syncretism, State Recognition, and the Resilience of Aliran Kepercayaan,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 106, no. 5 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.521>; Samsul Maarif, “Human (Relational) Dignity: Perspectives of Followers of Indigenous Religions of Indonesia,” *Religions* 14, no. 7 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070848>.

³¹ Moh Zaenal Abidin Eko Putro and Kustini, “Ecotourism of Cireundeu and Basic Sundanese’ Way of Life,” *Jurnal Manajemen Hutan Tropika* 28, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.7226/jtfm.28.2.141>; Muhammad Daffa and Indra Anggara, “The Position of Local Religions in Interfaith Relations as a Form of Religious Moderation in Indonesia,” *Indonesian Journal of Religion and Society* 5, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.36256/ijrs.v5i2.369>.

³² Victor Imanuel W. Nalle, “The Politics of Intolerant Laws against Adherents of Indigenous Beliefs or Aliran Kepercayaan in Indonesia,” *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 8, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/als.2020.54>.

³³ Robert Setio, “The Persistence of Ancestor Veneration: A Dialogical Relationship between Christianity and Indigenous Religions in Indonesia,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 29, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.2143/SID.29.2.3287307>.

The second dimension is their legal position. Indonesia's history of religious regulation has long created a hierarchy between religion and belief.. Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 and subsequent policies are part of the history of establishing institutional boundaries between "religion" and "belief." Efforts to challenge these laws before the Constitutional Court in 2009–2010 also revealed the ongoing debate regarding the definition, protection, and limits of religious freedom in Indonesia (Koban 2011). Although Article 29(2) of the 1945 Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and belief, translating this constitutional principle into public policy and services has not always been consistent.³⁴ Although legal recognition has developed, the extent to which it translates into appropriate educational provision remains an empirical question. The findings below examine how this relationship is experienced in the schools studied. The third dimension, the availability of appropriate educational services, is where these tensions are especially visible.. Utami, through research on multireligious public schools in Indonesia, argues that limited teachers, resources, regional conditions, and the weak position of minority groups can hinder equality in religious education. Interestingly, minority groups sometimes accept this inequality in order to maintain harmony within the school.³⁵ Therefore, a situation that appears "tolerant" and conflict-free is not necessarily synonymous with equality of rights. Another study on Muslim students' access to religious education in predominantly non-Muslim areas also found a gap between legal

³⁴ Syahril Siddik, "The Origin of the Indonesian Blasphemy Law and Its Implication towards Religious Freedom in Indonesia," *Tebuireng: Journal of Islamic Studies and Society* 3, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.33752/tjiss.v3i1.3648>; Noorhaidi Hasan, "Religious Diversity and Blasphemy Law: Understanding Growing Religious Conflict and Intolerance in Post-Suharto Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah* 55, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2017.551.105-126>; Daniel. Peterson, *Islam, Blasphemy, And Human Rights in Indonesia: the Trial of Ahok* (Routledge, 2022).

³⁵ Annisaa Dina Utami, "Strengthening the Value of Religious Moderation To Improve The Religious Character Of Students In The Era Of Society 5.0," *Annual International Conference on Islamic Education for Students* 1, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.18326/aicoies.v1i1.270>.

guarantees and the actual availability of religious education services.³⁶

These findings have important theoretical implications. Tolerance may allow different groups to coexist, but it does not necessarily transform majority-minority relations. The majority group can still set the boundaries regarding who is considered legitimate, while the minority group accepts unequal conditions to maintain harmony. A social justice perspective in religious education also reminds us that harmony without analyzing power relations can conceal subordination.

Taken together, these three dimensions show why the educational experiences of these students offer a critical case for studying religious moderation. If moderation is assessed solely by the absence of violence or conflict, institutional and symbolic discrimination against adherents of these belief systems may go unnoticed. Conversely, when moderation is assessed through students' right to receive an education in accordance with their beliefs and through teachers' willingness to recognize adherents as equal subjects, the limitations of the normative tolerance approach become more apparent.

From Normative Tolerance to Substantive Recognition

Based on the literature cited above, this study proposes an analytical framework that distinguishes between normative tolerance and substantive recognition. Normative tolerance refers to the acceptance of general principles such as harmony, nonviolence, Pancasila, religious freedom, and coexistence. In contrast, substantive recognition refers to the extent to which these principles are translated into recognition of the identity, agency, and rights of minority groups in institutional practice.

³⁶ Tracey Yani Harjatanaya, "Contextualising Religious Education in Multi-Religious Indonesia to Achieve Unity-in-Religious Diversity," in *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, vol. 46, no. 3, preprint, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2025.2450958>; Pratiwi Tri Utami, "Raising Religious Inherency: The Role of Interreligious Competence in Achieving Religious Education Equality in Multireligious Public Schools in Indonesia," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 9, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01298-y>.

This distinction yields three levels of analysis. First, discursive moderation: how teachers define tolerance, moderation, religion, and belief. Second, pedagogical mediation: how these definitions are translated into learning interactions and relationships with minority students. Third, rights recognition: whether these practices guarantee the rights of minority groups to receive religious education services based on their beliefs without pressure to conform to the beliefs of the majority.

Within this framework, this article does not assume that teachers' acceptance of moderation automatically results in inclusive education. Rather, this article examines what is termed here the "ambivalence of religious moderation": a condition in which an actor accepts tolerance and diversity at the normative level but simultaneously limits recognition of the legitimacy and rights of minority groups in practice. This concept expands the study of religious moderation from questions regarding moderate versus extreme attitudes to the issue of who is recognized as an equal subject within the regime of moderation.

The article's theoretical contribution thus lies in shifting from "moderation-as-tolerance" to "moderation-as-recognition." This study brings these three debates together through the case of PAI teachers and adherents of the *Aliran Kepercayaan*. Thus, religious moderation is analyzed not only by what teachers say about tolerance but also by whether that tolerance results in equal recognition for groups that, theologically and institutionally, fall outside the majority religion.

Social Harmony and the Limits of Normative Tolerance

Research findings reveal a paradox between Tulungagung's relatively strong social harmony and the limited substantive recognition of adherents of local belief systems within the education system. In daily life, relations between religious and belief groups are not always marked by open conflict. In an interview, Akhol Firdaus, for example, describes Tulungagung as a kind of "living laboratory" for diversity, where people from different religious and belief backgrounds can live side by side. This harmony is rooted not only in formal policies but also in Javanese social traditions that create space for different groups to

coexist. This data is important because it shows that acceptance of diversity has grown at the level of social relationships.

However, the absence of open conflict does not necessarily indicate equality. Behind this coexistence lies a perspective that places these belief systems outside the category of legitimate religions. Some informants still view adherents of these belief systems as a group that has not yet attained religious truth or “guidance.” Thus, the boundary between “religion” and “belief” is not merely an administrative classification but functions as an epistemic boundary that determines which groups are viewed as possessing full religious legitimacy. The findings suggest that acceptance of social harmony does not necessarily imply equal recognition of minority beliefs. This distinction becomes visible when teachers’ normative statements are compared with their understandings of religious legitimacy. This finding reinforces the normative tolerance–substantive recognition framework developed in this article. Normative tolerance allows different groups to coexist without violence or open conflict, while substantive recognition requires acknowledging minority groups’ identity, agency, and rights in institutional practices. This article has emphasized from the outset that the effectiveness of moderation cannot be assessed solely by approval of Pancasila, tolerance, or rejection of violence, but also by how minority groups are treated and whether their rights are recognized.

In this regard, the findings from Tulungagung expand upon the research by Mulya, Aditomo, and Suryani, which shows that the subjectivity of tolerant Muslims is shaped through the interplay of various discourses on Islam, pluralism, conservatism, and sociopolitical conditions.³⁷ The findings of this study reveal a more specific consequence: an individual may accept tolerance as a general principle but still maintain an epistemic hierarchy when dealing with groups that do not fall under the majority religion.

In this respect, social harmony in Tulungagung is better understood as coexistence that has not yet fully evolved into equal recognition. This argument also aligns with Utami, who found that

³⁷ Mulya, Aditomo, and Suryani, “On Being a Religiously Tolerant Muslim...”

unequal conditions in religious education are sometimes accepted by both majority and minority groups to maintain a peaceful school environment.³⁸ From this perspective, harmony is not synonymous with justice: a school may appear tolerant because there is no conflict, while its structure of recognition continues to place minority groups in an unequal position.

Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar as a Discursive Boundary in Teachers' Accounts of Moderation

The link between social harmony and the theological legitimacy of other beliefs becomes more apparent when PAI teachers explain the relationship between religious moderation and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. Badri, one of the PAI teachers, views the obligation to enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil as an inseparable part of Muslim identity. In his view, da'wah to non-Muslims is a consequence of this religious obligation; a person's failure to accept Islam does not indicate a failure of da'wah, but rather that the person has not yet received hidayah. A similar understanding emerged in an interview with Hainun, who linked faith to the obligation to engage in jihad, understood as striving to promote good and prevent evil. The methods of implementation may vary according to one's authority and knowledge: through political power, teaching, verbal da'wah, or inner conviction. Zamahsari Abdul Azis also emphasized that "*amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*" is a crucial component of Islamic religious education because it is viewed as the foundation for preserving faith and ensuring the religion's continuity.

The data does not indicate that teachers reject tolerance altogether. On the contrary, the teachers accept Pancasila, *tasamuh*, *tawazun*, and *wasatiyyah*, but this acceptance coexists with a theological obligation to guide others toward the truth as they understand it. This is where the ambivalence of religious moderation arises: tolerance is accepted at the normative level, while the theological legitimacy of other groups remains hierarchical. In the accounts examined here, particular interpretations of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* appear to establish

³⁸ Utami, "Raising Religious Inherency..."

boundaries between beliefs considered legitimate and those regarded as requiring correction. For these teachers, moderation is acceptable as long as it does not negate the obligation of da'wah. Consequently, adherents of local beliefs can be accepted as citizens and members of the social community, yet at the same time be positioned as objects of da'wah. This dual position helps explain why social acceptance does not automatically lead to recognition of their beliefs as equally legitimate.

This finding closely relates to research by Sirry et al., which found that tolerance has not yet been fully internalized among Indonesian high school teachers and that the lack of interfaith education limits the development of more substantive tolerance.³⁹ This study goes further by identifying the discursive mechanisms that produce these limitations. The issue is not merely that teachers lack an understanding of tolerance, but rather that tolerance is negotiated against the theological obligation to safeguard and disseminate religious truth.

Therefore, teachers should not be understood merely as agents of moderation. They are also mediators of religious boundaries. This article's theoretical framework shows that teachers' theological backgrounds, organizational affiliations, and religious understandings can create a paradox: a teacher may accept tolerance while maintaining an epistemic hierarchy that views certain beliefs as less legitimate or as targets for proselytizing. Field findings provide empirical evidence of this mechanism.

From Washatiyyah to Conditional Moderation

At the discursive level, PAI teachers demonstrate strong acceptance of the principle of moderation. They associate moderation with two main normative sources: Pancasila as the state ideology and the principles of *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah*, particularly 'adl, tasamuh, tawazun, and the stance of avoiding extremism. Within this framework, moderation is understood as a stance that rejects imposing religion and acknowledges the importance of coexistence.

³⁹ Sirry et al., "Teachers' Perspectives on Tolerance..."

However, the data show that this acceptance shifts when teachers determine the epistemic status of belief systems. Some teachers still view adherents' practices primarily as cultural expressions or traditional knowledge, rather than as belief systems with legitimacy equivalent to religion. The administrative categories of "religion" and "belief" thus reproduce a normative hierarchy within the educational space.

This finding is pivotal because it demonstrates that the problem of moderation does not lie in the absence of a vocabulary of tolerance. Teachers, in fact, are familiar with and use the language of moderation such as *Pancasila*, *wasatiyyah*, and *tasamuh*. The issue lies in the limits of applying these principles. Moderation becomes "conditional moderation": other groups can be tolerated as long as their existence does not demand epistemic recognition deemed to contradict the teachers' definition of religion.

In this context, the study's findings align with Nalle's analysis, which shows that religious denominations' position in Indonesia has been shaped by a long history of political and legal practices that resulted in discriminatory treatment, before some of these barriers were eased through legal developments and court rulings.⁴⁰ Therefore, teachers' classifications of belief systems cannot be viewed merely as individual perspectives. They also reproduce, within the school setting, the institutional boundaries between "religion" and "belief," which have a long history in Indonesia's governance of religion.

Here, the research findings clarify the dimension of discursive moderation within the article's analytical model. The theoretical framework distinguishes discursive moderation, how teachers define tolerance, religion, and belief, from pedagogical mediation and rights recognition. The data indicate that ambivalence is already evident at the first level: teachers may define moderation inclusively, but they define the groups that are the objects of moderation through hierarchical categories.

⁴⁰ Nalle, "The Politics of Intolerant Laws against Adherents of Indigenous Beliefs or Aliran Kepercayaan in Indonesia."

Thus, this finding shifts the analytical question from “Are PAI teachers moderate?” to “Who can be recognized as equal subjects in PAI teachers’ understanding of moderation?” This shift is important because the binary category of moderate–intolerant does not sufficiently account for teachers who support Pancasila, reject violence, and accept coexistence, while simultaneously limiting the legitimacy of certain beliefs.

From Tolerance to Recognition of Rights: Pedagogical and Institutional Gaps

The significance of these discursive boundaries becomes clearer when examined alongside classroom interactions and the provision of religious education for students who follow *aliran kepercayaan*. According to the data gathered in this study, the ambivalence found at the discursive level appears to carry consequences for educational practice. The findings point to problems in providing appropriate religious education for these students, including a shortage of teachers aligned with their beliefs, a lack of learning materials that support a deeper understanding of their teachings, and a tendency for these students to participate in the religious education programs provided by the school. Thus, the issue of recognition extends beyond how teachers define religious categories; it also affects how students’ educational rights are fulfilled. These findings highlight a crucial distinction between pedagogical inclusion and the recognition of substantive rights. A student may be accepted into a school, free from overt violence, and interact normally with peers and teachers, yet still fail to receive religious or faith-based educational services that align with their identity. In such circumstances, social inclusion does not equate to institutional equality. This pattern aligns with Utami, who found that equality in religious education in Indonesia’s multireligious schools can be hindered by teacher availability, resources, budgets, and regional conditions.⁴¹ The study also indicates that inequalities are sometimes tolerated in order to maintain a peaceful school environment.

⁴¹ Utami, “Raising Religious Inherency...”

The findings extend the discussion beyond the availability of educational services by asking whether those services recognize students' beliefs on terms of equality. Previous studies have largely treated inequalities in religious education as a matter of service provision, such as teacher availability, resources, and budgets. The Tulungagung data suggest that barriers to equality can also be epistemic and theological: a shortage of teachers or materials is not merely a technical issue when it occurs alongside the view that students' beliefs lack equal epistemic status. A school may therefore appear peaceful and tolerant while minority students remain unequal in the recognition they receive. Moderation should accordingly be evaluated not only by the absence of conflict, but also by the presence of recognition.

From Moderation-as-Tolerance to Moderation-as-Recognition

This article's findings reveal three layers of ambivalence. At the level of discursive moderation, teachers accept *Pancasila*, tolerance, and *wasatiyyah*, yet continue to establish an epistemic boundary between religions deemed legitimate and other belief systems. At the level of pedagogical mediation, this boundary is articulated through the narrative of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, which allows adherents to be accepted as individuals who must be respected while simultaneously being positioned as the objects of *da'wah*. At the level of rights recognition, this ambivalence becomes tangible when students who follow alternative belief systems have not yet fully received educational services consistent with their beliefs.

In this article, ambivalence refers to the coexistence of stated commitments to tolerance and practices or assumptions that limit the recognition of minority beliefs. It is not ordinary inconsistency or indecision: the teachers are not unsure of their position, nor do they simply contradict themselves. Rather, two logics operate side by side within the same actor in a patterned way, namely acceptance of the existence of minority groups and limitation of their legitimacy and rights. Teachers may support *Pancasila*, reject violence, and affirm tolerance, yet simultaneously maintain a hierarchy that restricts the recognition of those groups.

This is where the article's theoretical contribution becomes clearer. Previous research on teacher tolerance has shown that tolerance is shaped through discursive contestation⁴² and has not yet been fully internalized in secondary school education.⁴³ Meanwhile, research on religious education reveals disparities in service provision across religious groups,⁴⁴ while Nalle highlights the historical and legal roots of discrimination against religious denominations.⁴⁵ This study brings these four issues together by demonstrating that discursive tolerance, theological boundaries, and institutional inequality are part of an interconnected process.

In this context, the study's findings support the conceptual shift proposed in the article from "moderation-as-tolerance" to "moderation-as-recognition." The success of religious moderation in schools cannot be measured solely by whether teachers accept diversity or whether conflicts can be avoided. A more substantive measure is whether students who fall outside the majority religious category are recognized as equal religious subjects with identities, agency, and educational rights that must be fulfilled.

This study shows that the implementation of religious moderation among Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in the five junior high schools examined in Tulungagung is conditional and ambivalent. Although teachers generally expressed acceptance of Pancasila, tolerance, interfaith coexistence, and *wasatiyyah* as normative principles, this acceptance did not always translate into equal recognition of different religious traditions. In some teachers' narratives, adherents of local belief traditions were positioned outside the boundaries of what was considered a legitimate religion and could be viewed as subjects of religious proselytization through interpretations of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. These findings reveal a gap between the discursive

⁴² Mulya, Aditomo, and Suryani, "On Being a Religiously Tolerant Muslim..."

⁴³ Sirry, "Muslim Student Radicalism and Self-Deradicalization in Indonesia"; Sirry et al., "Teachers' Perspectives on Tolerance Education in Indonesian High Schools."

⁴⁴ Utami, "Raising Religious Inherency..."

⁴⁵ Nalle, "The Politics of Intolerant Laws ..."

acceptance of diversity and the recognition of minority groups' identities and rights.

This gap was also reflected in the educational experiences of students who follow indigenous beliefs. The findings indicate limitations in the availability of teachers and learning materials appropriate to their beliefs, as well as instances in which these students participated in the religious education programs available at their schools. These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that all the schools examined were intolerant. Rather, they demonstrate that social coexistence and the normative acceptance of tolerance can exist alongside limitations in the substantive recognition of minority groups. Religious moderation, therefore, needs to be examined not only through expressions of tolerance or the absence of conflict but also through educational practices and the extent to which students' rights are respected.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of religious moderation by distinguishing normative tolerance from substantive recognition. The three dimensions of the analytical framework, namely discursive moderation, pedagogical mediation, and rights recognition, do not necessarily develop together. Acceptance of moderation at the discursive level does not automatically produce inclusive pedagogical practices or equal recognition of students' rights. The concept of the "ambivalence of religious moderation" helps explain how tolerance toward the existence of other groups may coexist with limitations on the recognition of their identities and rights. The study's main contribution is therefore to show how religious moderation may coexist with limited recognition of minority belief groups, making educational rights an important dimension for evaluating how moderation is practiced.

Within the schools examined, these findings point to the importance of strengthening PAI teachers' understanding of religious diversity, minority students' educational rights, and the implications of moderation for everyday pedagogical interactions. Attention should also be given to the availability of appropriate educational services and learning materials for students from different belief backgrounds. Such efforts would help translate

normative commitments to tolerance into educational practices that respect students' diverse identities and rights.

These conclusions must be understood within the study's empirical limits. The research was conducted ethnographically in five junior high schools in Tulungagung and involved a limited number of informants. Its findings are therefore not intended to represent all PAI teachers or schools in Indonesia. Future research could examine the relationship between normative tolerance and substantive recognition across different regions, school types, and religious communities, with greater attention to the experiences of students who practice indigenous beliefs. Such comparative research could help establish whether the ambivalence identified in this study also occurs in other contexts or is shaped primarily by Tulungagung's specific social, institutional, and religious conditions.

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