

## THE DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND ISLAM NUSANTARA IN INDONESIA

\*Nurhanisah<sup>1</sup>, Afrizal Tjoetra<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Teuku Umar, Meulaboh, Aceh, Indonesia

\*Email: nurhanisah0628@gmail.com

### Abstract

The concepts of religious moderation and Islam Nusantara serve as fundamental pillars in the discourse of Indonesian Islam, both promoting values of tolerance, peace, and openness. Although frequently associated, their interplay has rarely been examined through a dialectical lens that highlights both their tensions and convergences. This study fills this gap by critically analyzing the discursive intersections and ideological frictions between these two concepts. Using a qualitative descriptive method based on extensive literature review, the article explores normative perspectives alongside critical debates within public and academic spheres. Findings reveal significant common ground in the contextualized Islamic praxis embodied by Islam Nusantara, yet misunderstandings persist due to low ideological literacy and politicization of religious narratives. The study positions Islam Nusantara as a localized manifestation of religious moderation capable of bridging religious and national identities. It contributes theoretically by broadening understanding of moderate Islam rooted in local culture and offers practical implications for strengthening inclusive, context-aware Islamic narratives that can counter ideological polarization and foster social cohesion in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Islam; Islam Nusantara; religious moderation

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### A. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of Indonesian Islam, two concepts have gained significant attention in both academic studies and public discussions, namely religious moderation and Islam Nusantara. Religious moderation is promoted as a framework to prevent extremism and radicalism while encouraging an inclusive, tolerant, and harmonious approach to faith. It is generally understood as a way of thinking, an attitude, and a set of behaviors that always seek the middle path, uphold justice, and avoid extremes in religious life (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019). Islam Nusantara, on the other hand, is a distinctive Indonesian narrative that presents Islam in a contextualized form, accommodating local culture and emphasizing the importance of diversity. Islam Nusantara does not aim to alter Islamic doctrine. Instead, it seeks ways to anchor Islamic teachings within the diverse cultural realities of Indonesian society (Luthfi, 2016).

Although both concepts share a foundation in moderation and tolerance, they are often perceived as separate and at times even contradictory, particularly regarding their application and acceptance in social and political contexts.

The urgency to examine the dialectical relationship between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara arises from increasing social tensions that result from misunderstandings of these two concepts. Some groups view Islam Nusantara as an ideological project that dilutes the purity of Islamic teachings, while religious moderation is sometimes seen as a state instrument intended to moderate critical Islamic movements. Amid this ongoing debate, there is a growing need for scholarly analysis that not only clarifies the conceptual positions of these terms but also explores their interactions, points of tension, and the potential for synthesis within the reality of Indonesian religious life. Differences of opinion are an inevitable part of a pluralistic society. Islam itself teaches that diversity, whether cultural, ethnic, or doctrinal, is a divine decree and a fundamental aspect of human existence. This diversity is intended to foster mutual understanding and meaningful social interaction (Abror, 2020).

This article explores these issues by applying a qualitative approach to the analysis of both discourse and practice related to religious moderation and Islam Nusantara. The analysis draws from a wide range of relevant scholarly journals and academic books. Previous research, including work by Syam and Nawai (2019), Fakhurokhman et al. (2022), Nasikhin et al. (2022), Mubarak and Rustam (2018), and Luthfi (2016), has generally studied religious moderation and Islam Nusantara in isolation from one another. For instance, Nasikhin et al. (2022) focus on a comparison between the teachings of moderation in Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah through the concepts of Islam Nusantara and Islam Berkemajuan, but their research does not address the discursive tensions or misunderstandings found within society. The studies by Luthfi (2016) and Fakhurokhman et al. (2022) primarily describe Islam Nusantara as a form of moderate Islam, although they tend to adopt a normative and descriptive stance without critically examining issues of ideological literacy or public perception. Similarly, Syam and Nawai (2019) and Mubarak et al. (2024) focus on Islam Nusantara as a strategy for da'wah or as a response to extremism, yet they do not discuss in depth the interactions between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara within the current sociopolitical context of Indonesia.

This article aims to address this gap by providing an analytical and critical perspective on the dialectical relationship between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara. Rather than treating them as separate constructs, this study places both concepts within a unified and interrelated conceptual framework. It analyzes how discourse construction, interpretive bias, and limited ideological literacy pose challenges to the implementation of moderate Islam in Indonesian society. In doing so, the article contributes a new perspective to academic discourse and strengthens the understanding of contextualized moderate Islam. It also reaffirms the role of Islam Nusantara as a local praxis that embodies the spirit of religious moderation within Indonesia's unique cultural environment.

To answer this research gap, the article focuses on a central question, which is how the dialectical relationship between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara is constructed within Indonesian Islamic discourse, and to what extent conceptual misunderstandings hinder the implementation of moderate Islamic values in society. This question is essential for tracing both the conceptual and practical contributions of these two major ideas in the dynamics of religiosity in Indonesia. The study seeks to critically examine the relationship between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara in the context of Indonesian society. It also highlights how biased perceptions, along with limited religious and cultural literacy, can create conceptual challenges for both concepts. Furthermore, this article proposes an interpretive approach that positions Islam Nusantara as a local practice of religious moderation and recommends strengthening contextual and inclusive Islamic narratives as a strategy for overcoming ideological polarization and religious identity conflict. By taking this approach, the study not only enriches academic discussion but also serves as a valuable reference for policy-making and the development of social and religious harmony in Indonesia.

## **B. Method**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the dialectical relationship between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara within the social and religious context of Indonesia. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to explore the meanings, values, and experiences embedded in both concepts, as well as to examine social and cultural phenomena as they

occur naturally (Hardani, 2023). The qualitative descriptive approach is focused on describing the characteristics or nature of a particular object or phenomenon (Rokhamah et al., 2024). Data for this research were collected through a literature review, drawing on relevant scholarly sources (Iba and Wardhana, 2023). The selection of literature was based on inclusion criteria, which required academic works published between 2015 and 2025 that are directly relevant to the concepts of religious moderation and Islam Nusantara and published in reputable national or international journals. Sources that did not meet academic standards or were thematically irrelevant were excluded from the analysis. Data analysis in this study was carried out using thematic analysis. This involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting the main themes that emerged from the reviewed literature. Themes such as tolerance, cultural diversity, ideological bias, and moderate Islamic narratives were analyzed to reveal the connections as well as the tensions between Islam Nusantara and religious moderation. The literature was analyzed through a deep and interpretive reading in order to discover interrelated conceptual patterns and to construct a dialectical understanding of both concepts.

## **C. Result and Discussion**

### **1. Convergence of Religious Moderation Values in the Practice of Islam Nusantara**

In practice, the values of religious moderation emphasize the importance of maintaining a balance between spirituality, morality, and engagement with worldly affairs. This concept encourages individuals to remain attentive to their social and environmental context (Kodim, 2023). Within this framework, Islam Nusantara emerges as one of the most relevant expressions of religious moderation, particularly in Indonesia's pluralistic society. Islam Nusantara is understood as the comprehension, practice, and application of Islamic teachings in the realm of social jurisprudence, where dialectical interactions take place between scripture, sharia, local customs, culture, and social realities (Nasikhin et al., 2022). This understanding reinforces the idea that Islam Nusantara is a way for Indonesian Muslims to nurture their national identity through moderate, inclusive, and culturally attuned religious practices (Alwi, 2021).

Furthermore, Islam Nusantara is a distinct manifestation and practice of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, shaped by ongoing interactions between Islamic texts, local realities, and indigenous cultures. Islam Nusantara reflects an Indonesian Islamic identity,

one that harmonizes theological values with tradition, culture, and community customs (Siregar, 2020). This approach demonstrates that Islam Nusantara views diversity not as a threat, but as an asset. Its da‘wah strategies are gentle and accommodative toward local traditions, emphasizing peaceful coexistence and respect for the plurality present in society. Thus, the Islamic experience in the archipelago does not stand apart from culture, but rather coexists with it, striving to foster social harmony in alignment with core Islamic principles.

In responding to contemporary challenges and the complexity of social change, Islam Nusantara also serves as both a medium and a solution for navigating issues such as ethnicity, religion, race, intergroup relations, radicalism, intolerance, and various extremist movements that threaten democracy and pluralism in Indonesia. Within this context, Islam Nusantara is fully aligned with the spirit of religious moderation, which stresses the significance of balance, tolerance, and respect for cultural and religious diversity. By taking a culturally sensitive and peaceful approach, Islam Nusantara provides a tangible model of religious moderation that is vital to maintaining national unity and reinforcing the character of Indonesian Muslims (Fakhurokhman et al., 2022).

This view is supported by the recognition that Islam Nusantara embodies an Islam that upholds tolerance and openness toward differences in faith, ethnicity, race, and culture. The doctrine of Islam Nusantara serves as a vanguard for inclusive values, including tawasuth (moderation), tasamuh (tolerance), ta‘awun (mutual assistance), and tawazun (balance). These core values have long been deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of Indonesian Muslims (Fakhurokhman et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, this connection is especially evident in the Islam Nusantara concept, in which Islamic teachings are harmonized with local culture while preserving the core of sharia. This approach resonates with the principles of religious moderation, highlighting the necessity of balance, tolerance, and adaptability in religious life. A healthy relationship between religion and culture not only strengthens a friendly Islamic identity but also safeguards the integrity of Indonesia’s diverse society (Supriadin and Pababari, 2024).

Islam Nusantara is therefore recognized as a tolerant, peaceful, and diversity-affirming expression of Islam that remains anchored in local cultural roots (Hasan, 2017). It represents a way of thinking and practicing Islam that is both moderate and able to

guard the community against the excesses of fundamentalism on one hand and liberalism on the other. Islam Nusantara provides an alternative approach by treating tradition and local culture as legitimate expressions of religiosity, so long as they do not conflict with basic Islamic tenets (Mubarok and Rustam, 2018).

Living in a country marked by remarkable ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, Indonesians regard this pluralism as a gift from the Creator, something to be accepted and not to be negotiated. In the context of Islam Nusantara, moderation is not an abstract concept but a lived reality for Muslims who share their daily lives with those of different backgrounds (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

Religious moderation contains values and practices that are ideally suited to promoting the welfare of Indonesia. A moderate, just, and balanced mindset is essential to navigating the complexities of a diverse society (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019). Every Indonesian citizen holds both rights and obligations to foster a peaceful and prosperous collective life. These values reach their point of convergence in the practice of Islam Nusantara, which has historically presented a peaceful face of Islam, one that honors local traditions and upholds tolerance. Through a humanistic cultural approach, Islam Nusantara transforms moderation into more than just a religious ideal and establishes it as a social strategy for sustaining harmony in Indonesia's pluralistic society.

On a practical level, Islam Nusantara can be described as an "everyday Islam," meaning the embodiment of Islamic teachings not only in acts of worship and ritual, but also in longstanding traditions that have been practiced and passed down through generations (Luthfi, 2016). Within this context, religious moderation finds its expression. The values of tolerance, balance, and respect for difference have long flourished within Indonesia's local Islamic traditions, shaping a society that lives out its faith peacefully and in ways that are responsive to cultural realities.

Islam Nusantara thus stands as a clear example of how the values of moderation can converge with grounded religious practice. Rather than rejecting local culture, Islam Nusantara absorbs and integrates it into Islamic life as long as it does not violate sharia. This accommodating attitude reflects the principles of religious moderation, which emphasize the necessity of balance, tolerance, and diversity in fulfilling Islamic teachings. For this reason, the practice of Islam Nusantara represents a meeting point between moderate values and Indonesia's rich social and cultural landscape.

In the national context, a commitment to the nation's founding values is an essential aspect of moderate religious practice. National commitment is a key indicator for assessing how religious perspectives, attitudes, and practices contribute to loyalty toward the state's foundational consensus, especially acceptance of Pancasila as the national ideology, attitudes toward ideologies opposed to Pancasila, and expressions of nationalism (Prakosa, 2022).

Religious moderation is also required as a cultural strategy for preserving Indonesian unity and pluralism. The founding fathers of the nation successfully established a foundational agreement in the form of Pancasila within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. This agreement has enabled the integration of various ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious groups across Indonesia (Abror, 2020). These foundational values provide the basis for harmonious social interactions and strengthen a national identity that is tolerant and receptive to difference. This is evident in the spirit of Islam Nusantara, where Islamic teachings are practiced in harmony with local culture, ensuring that religion is not alienated from the lives of the people (Khoiruddin, 2023; Islamy, 2022). Islam Nusantara enhances the principle of nationality by reconciling Islamic values with local culture and by fostering peaceful and pluralistic religious life (Arifinsyah et al., 2023).

However, an excessive emphasis on religious identity within Indonesian society can sometimes result in rigid, exclusive, and less tolerant religious practices. The shift from a value-based and wise approach to religion toward a more symbolic and identity-driven one presents a significant conceptual challenge to religious moderation. Within this context, Islam Nusantara, which emphasizes harmony between Islamic teachings and local culture, is sometimes misunderstood as a deviation. In reality, it is through the approach of Islam Nusantara that the values of moderation can be cultivated and maintained in a plural society (Malik and Busrah, 2021).

Religious moderation remains a highly relevant idea in today's Indonesia, particularly as the country navigates the challenges of diversity and the risks of identity-based conflict. When linked to Islam Nusantara, moderation values such as tolerance, balance, and openness find clear and practical expression. Rooted in local wisdom and culture, Islam Nusantara has always embodied an inclusive and peaceful religious spirit. For this reason, religious moderation and Islam Nusantara can reinforce each other as

essential foundations for harmonious religious life within Indonesia's diverse society (Kamal, 2022).

## **2. Conceptual Challenges between Religious Moderation and Islam Nusantara**

One of the main conceptual challenges in understanding the relationship between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara lies in the widespread misunderstanding of both concepts. Religious moderation is highly relevant for maintaining a balance between deeply rooted religious traditions and the evolving demands of modernity. Amid threats such as religious radicalism and ideological liberalism, a strategy of moderation is needed that is not only theological but also contextual and rooted in local culture. Islam Nusantara in this sense serves as a tangible example of religious moderation that is grounded in the values and traditions of Indonesian society. This approach strengthens the pursuit of moderation by offering a peaceful and tolerant path that remains relevant within Indonesia's plural social reality (Sirait, 2024).

Misunderstandings about the meaning of Islam Nusantara have led to instances of public rejection. For example, when Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) formally introduced the concept of Islam Nusantara at its 33rd National Congress in Jombang in 2015, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) openly opposed the term. HTI labeled Islam Nusantara as a deviation from universal Islamic principles, accusing it of syncretism and religious liberalism. HTI then actively promoted narratives of rejection through online media, building a rhetorical opposition to the government and NU's version of Islam Nusantara. This conflict escalated into a rhetorical battle in social media and in official NU versus HTI forums, where NU defended Islam Nusantara as a moderate and contextualized Indonesian Islam, while HTI insisted on anti-pluralism and opposed any local cultural expressions of Islamic identity (Safitri, 2015).

Transnational Islamic groups such as HTI criticize Islam Nusantara for allegedly deviating from "pure" Islam by blending religious teachings with local culture. They reject nationally grounded interpretations of Islam and view them as part of a secularization project. However, from an academic perspective, this stance disregards the historical reality that Islam has always engaged and adapted to local cultures throughout its spread. Islam Nusantara actually affirms the principles of balance and *maqasid al-shari'ah* in the Indonesian context, contributing to social harmony and national unity. The



rejection by HTI at the 2015 NU Congress illustrates that challenges to religious moderation often arise from contesting interpretations of Islam that fail to value cultural diversity as a valid form of Islamic expression. In reality, religious moderation aligns with the values of Pancasila and with the practices of Islam Nusantara, emphasizing justice and demonstrating that moderation is not a static principle, but one that evolves dynamically in response to social diversity and new challenges (Putri, 2025).

This rejection of Islam Nusantara by groups such as HTI contradicts the very history of Islam itself. As Karen Armstrong notes in her book “Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence,” before the rise of modern nation states, Islam served as a unifying principle and showed a remarkable capacity for managing diversity peacefully. Historical figures such as Ibn ‘Arabi, Jalaluddin Rumi, and Salahuddin al-Ayyubi demonstrate that Islamic spirituality is deeply rooted in tolerance and inclusivity (Mrahorovic, 2016).

Inclusivity is a vital principle for both religious moderation and Islam Nusantara. When this is realized, it leads to the recognition that religious moderation is both a value and a practice that must be actualized for the common good of Indonesia. A moderate, just, and balanced mindset is essential for nurturing and managing the nation’s inherent diversity (Faisal, 2020). In practice, conceptual challenges persist alongside the complexities of modern society and the diversity of religious interpretations. Classical works in Arabic, which were once the standard reference, do not always provide answers for Indonesia’s increasingly plural and dynamic context. Interpretations of religious texts have become diverse and are sometimes manipulated for group or political interests. This trend contradicts the inclusive and dialogical spirit of Islam Nusantara. In Indonesia, religious moderation should serve as a cultural strategy for maintaining national unity, with religious values integrated into local wisdom. However, without a strong conceptual understanding and a critical reading of social and cultural contexts, religious moderation may be misinterpreted as theological compromise rather than a humanistic and national principle consistent with Islam Nusantara.

In Indonesia, a moderate form of Islam that genuinely embodies the principle of Ummatan Wasathan is clearly reflected in the two major organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Both represent the teachings of Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah, promoting peace, tolerance, and dialogue. NU is widely known for its cultural approach

that aligns with the spirit of Islam Nusantara, while Muhammadiyah emphasizes rationality and renewal in religion without neglecting the essence of moderation. Both serve as real-life proof that religious moderation can thrive in the daily practices of Indonesian Muslims (Fahri and Zainuri, 2019).

Indonesia's status as a nation state is unique, marked by an extraordinary diversity of ethnic groups, customs, traditions, languages, beliefs, and religions that all coexist under the unifying ideology of Pancasila. This diversity is a tremendous asset that must be preserved and protected from fragmentation caused by the spread of extremism and radicalism through globalization and open information. Within this context, religious moderation becomes a strategic solution for instilling national values and preserving social cohesion. However, conceptual challenges remain in reconciling the spirit of religious moderation with the perceptions of Islam Nusantara held by some groups. There are those who consider Islam Nusantara as a compromise or dilution of Islamic values, even though it is actually a local expression of Islam that prioritizes peace, tolerance, and cultural wisdom. Overcoming this challenge requires strengthening contextual religious literacy so that religious moderation is understood as an integral part of both Islamic and national identity in Indonesia (Hasan, 2021).

Some communities perceive elements of tradition and local culture as acts of shirk or bid'ah that threaten the purity and authenticity of their religious doctrine. They argue that customs and local traditions are devoid of religious value and do not reflect Islamic principles, so these should be rejected. This rejection is often based on the belief that traditional practices are in conflict with scripture, theology, or prophetic traditions. Within the context of the conceptual challenges between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara, such views are a major obstacle. Islam Nusantara, in contrast, embraces local values as long as they do not contradict fundamental Islamic principles, considering this a part of da'wah and social engagement. This challenge highlights the importance of building a more inclusive and moderate understanding, so that differences in religious expression are viewed as assets rather than threats, all within the framework of Islam as a mercy to all creation (Mubarak et al., 2024).

Another challenge is seen in some groups who pit Pancasila against religious teachings. This mindset often stems from a rigid and exclusive interpretation of Islam, which creates friction between conceptualizations of religious moderation and Islam

Nusantara. Addressing this issue requires efforts to strengthen ideological and religious literacy, so that society does not perceive moderation and nationalism as threats to faith, but rather as vital elements for safeguarding a religious and pluralistic Indonesia (Islamy, 2022).

A further obstacle in strengthening Islam Nusantara and religious moderation is the persistence of radical Islamic ideologies among certain segments of society. These ideologies tend to be exclusive, rejecting cultural diversity and viewing local traditions as deviations from pure Islam. Such perspectives not only hinder acceptance of Islam Nusantara but also undermine key moderation values such as tolerance, balance, and openness. As a result, inclusive and contextually relevant religious practices struggle to develop and are even labeled as deviant. There is an urgent need to improve moderate religious literacy and promote Islamic narratives that align with Indonesia's national identity and cultural diversity (Syam and Nawai, 2019).

Challenges also arise from Indonesia's ideological position in the global context. Indonesia occupies a moderate position between the religious and secular extremes that dominate world ideologies. Indonesia is neither a religious state nor a secular or atheist nation. This middle ground is a unique and ideal position for a country that brings together a multitude of religions, ethnicities, and cultures. Islam Nusantara stands as a concrete representation of Islam that fits Indonesia's ideological stance. It strengthens national principles by reconciling Islamic teachings with local cultures and encouraging a peaceful, plural religious life (Arifinsyah et al., 2023).

Misunderstandings about inclusivity within religious moderation are also a significant conceptual challenge. Some conservative groups continue to reject moderation because of misconceptions, often believing that inclusivity is a compromise of religious truth, or thinking that moderation weakens Islam. This challenge for Islam Nusantara and religious moderation centers on communicating that openness to local culture and diversity is not a deviation, but an authentic realization of Islam as a blessing for all creation (Khoiri, 2019).

#### **D. Conclusion**

This article demonstrates that the relationship between religious moderation and Islam Nusantara is dialectical and mutually reinforcing within the Indonesian religious

context. The novelty of this study lies in its critical examination of interpretive biases and discursive tensions that have been insufficiently explored in prior research. Islam Nusantara is affirmed as a local praxis of religious moderation that has long been embedded in the cultural consciousness of Indonesian Muslims, rather than merely a political product or narrow ideological narrative.

Theoretically, this study broadens understanding of contextualized Islam that is deeply rooted in local culture and resists simplistic binaries between universal and local Islam. Practically, it underscores the urgent need to enhance religious literacy and strengthen moderate Islamic narratives through education, media, and religious forums that reach diverse social strata. This is essential to counter persistent misunderstandings that cast Islam Nusantara as deviant, instead promoting its recognition as a legitimate and contextualized form of Islamic religiosity. Future research should explore how the meanings of Islam Nusantara are constructed among younger Muslim generations and investigate how ideological biases form and spread in public discourse regarding religious moderation. Such studies are vital for building more inclusive, reflective, and nationally coherent Islamic narratives. Consequently, Islam Nusantara and religious moderation emerge not only as normative ideals but as effective cultural strategies to foster social cohesion and reinforce a peaceful and inclusive Indonesian Islamic identity.

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