

RELIGIOUS MODERATION AMONG MUSLIM STUDENTS IN A PLURAL REGION

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Abstract

This study explores the nuanced intersection of *Islam wasathiyah* (moderate Islam) and the everyday lived experiences of Muslim university students in Jayapura City, a region defined by its profound social and religious plurality. Adopting a descriptive-qualitative approach, this research utilizes narrative inquiry to capture the subjective interpretations of 15 active Muslim students (10 female, 5 male) aged 19–24, recruited from IAIN Fattahul Muluk Papua, Cenderawasih University, and Universitas Yapis Papua through purposive sampling. Data were synthesized using thematic analysis, encompassing data reduction, display, and verification. Our findings reveal that although many students lack formal theoretical exposure to the concept of *Islam wasathiyah*, they demonstrate a high level of substantive moderation in practice. This implementation manifests through active interfaith tolerance, inclusive humanitarian engagement, and a pragmatic recognition of the state as a protector of religious rights—a critical stance developed within their specific context as a religious minority in Eastern Indonesia. Furthermore, this study identifies three typologies of moderation understanding—normative-adaptive, practical-social, and critical-theological—which diverge from the standard ‘moderate-radical’ dichotomy often found in literature. By contextualizing these findings within the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research offers a unique contribution to the discourse on religious moderation, suggesting that future higher education policies must shift from terminological instruction to cultivating a more profound, contextual practice of *wasathiyah*. The insights herein provide a compelling case for re-evaluating how minority-context identity negotiation shapes the broader Indonesian religious landscape

Keywords: Islam wasathiyah, religious moderation, Muslim students, pluralism, Jayapura



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the discourse on religious moderation has emerged as a strategic cornerstone of Indonesia's socio-religious governance. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, this initiative is a direct response to the mounting challenges of identity polarization, religious exclusivism, and the lingering threat of radicalism within the public sphere (Damopolii et al., 2024). Religious moderation is conceptually framed as a perspective and practice that harmonizes tolerance, balance, and unwavering national commitment—a paradigm deeply rooted in the Islamic concept of *Islam wasathiyah*, or “the middle nation” (*ummatan wasathan*), as articulated in the Qur'an [QS. al-Baqarah: 143].

Historically, Indonesian Islam has thrived through an organic process of acculturation, where peaceful interaction with local traditions has fostered a uniquely inclusive religious character (Thahir, 2021). Esteemed thinkers such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi have long championed this “middle path” as a proportionate response to extreme poles of thought (Thohir & Anjaina, 2022). Furthermore, the transformative power of religious education in fostering moderate characters—as seen in pesantren models—suggests that moderation is not merely a cognitive process but a lived, reflective engagement (Ju'subaidi et al., 2024).

Yet, empirical evidence warns that higher education institutions are not entirely immune to the infiltration of exclusive and intolerant ideologies (Zakiyah et al., 2023). These institutions often become battlegrounds for competing religious ideologies, making them central to the state's moderation agenda. Given their role as the vanguard of future intellectual and social discourse, university students occupy a pivotal position in defining the nation's religious trajectory. Consequently, examining their understanding of moderation is not merely an academic exercise; it is an urgent socio-political necessity to ensure that the fabric of Indonesian society remains intact amid global and local pressures.

This study positions itself at a critical juncture by focusing on Jayapura City, the capital of Papua Province. Unlike the majority of existing literature which heavily focuses on Muslim-majority regions in Java or Sumatra, Jayapura offers a distinct socio-religious landscape where Muslims exist as a relative minority living alongside robust Christian and Catholic communities (Putri et al., 2023). This plurality demands not just a theological understanding of moderation, but an adaptive, highly interactive pattern of social coexistence that is tested in the daily encounters of university life (Khoerunisa & Yuliani, 2024). The necessity for a moderate approach is further accentuated by the existential disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a rapid re-negotiation of how religious practices, public health policies, and social interactions are managed, often triggering both resistance and adaptation within religious communities (Hanafi et al., 2022).

Despite the abundance of studies on religious moderation, there remains a notable gap in empirical research focusing on minority contexts, particularly within the unique cultural milieu of Eastern Indonesia. Current literature often relies on literature reviews or surveys conducted in majority-Muslim settings, leaving the nuanced, lived experiences of students in pluralistic minority areas largely unexplored. Departing from this gap, this research examines how Muslim students in Jayapura internalize the concept of *Islam wasathiyah* and, more importantly, how they translate these values into daily practice. We address two primary research questions: (1) How do Muslim students construct the meaning of *Islam wasathiyah* within a pluralistic society? and (2) How is this understanding realized in daily practices, specifically regarding interfaith relations, compliance with public policy, and engagement with the state? By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute a more contextualized, ground-level framework for religious moderation that reflects the rich diversity of the Indonesian experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive-qualitative approach, a methodological choice grounded in the necessity to capture the lived experiences and subjective perceptions of Muslim students regarding religious moderation in Jayapura City. By prioritizing an interpretative framework, this design allows us to delve beneath the surface of normative discourse and explore the “why” and “how” behind the participants’ daily religious practices, particularly during the turbulent socio-religious landscape of the pandemic.

We employ narrative inquiry as our primary lens within this qualitative structure. This approach is particularly robust for understanding how students construct their identities as a minority within a pluralistic and often secularized public space. Rather than treating religious moderation as a static theological construct, our research design views it as a dynamic, evolving process—a series of “negotiated identities” that change depending on the context, audience, and social environment. This narrative approach enables the voices of the 15 participants to emerge as the primary source of knowledge, providing an in-depth, textured understanding of their commitment to peace, social harmony, and the *wasathiyah* (middle-path) values in a non-Muslim majority setting.

Furthermore, this descriptive-qualitative orientation aligns with our objective to bridge the gap between abstract state-led moderation programs and the grassroots reality of Eastern Indonesia. By engaging with these subjective narratives, we aim to uncover how identity is managed not through formal directives, but through the nuanced, day-to-day decisions that these students make. This design is intentionally flexible, allowing for an iterative process of discovery that characterizes the complexity of social life in Jayapura.

Time and Place of Research

This research was conducted over a six-month period, from January to June 2022, in Jayapura City, Papua Province, Indonesia. This location serves as an ideal locus for this study due to its status as a highly pluralistic urban environment, where Muslim students live as a relative minority among Christian, Catholic, and other religious communities. This setting provides a unique opportunity to observe identity negotiation and religious moderation practices that are fundamentally different from those in Muslim-majority regions.

Research Target/Subject

The subjects of this study were 15 active Muslim university students (10 female, 5 male) aged 19–24 years. These participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique to ensure they met the following criteria: (a) actively enrolled as university students, (b) having resided in Jayapura for at least one year, and (c) actively involved in campus or community organizations. The participants were drawn from three major universities in Jayapura: IAIN Fattahul Muluk Papua, Cenderawasih University, and Universitas Yapis Papua. This selection ensures a diverse range of student experiences across both religious and secular campus environments

Research Procedure

Data were collected through three techniques: (1) In-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 students, each lasting 45-60 minutes, conducted online and offline following health protocols. (2) Non-participant observation of interfaith dialogue groups and campus religious activities for two months. (3) Documentation of relevant materials, including student social media posts and campus policies on religious moderation.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The main instrument was the researcher himself, assisted by interview guidelines and observation sheets. The interview guidelines contained open-ended questions about understanding Islam wasathiyah, experiences of interfaith interaction, responses to pandemic

policies, and attitudes toward the state. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model: (1) Data reduction – selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting data from transcripts and field notes. (2) Data display – organizing reduced data into narrative text and thematic matrices. (3) Conclusion drawing and verification – interpreting patterns and meanings. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (comparing interview, observation, and documentation), method triangulation, and member checking with participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Construction of Understanding of Islam Wasathiyah among Muslim Students

The interview results reveal that the vast majority of participants intuitively grasp *Islam wasathiyah* as a balanced religious path—defined primarily by the avoidance of extreme and liberal tendencies. One informant articulated this as: “*In my opinion, Islam wasathiyah is Islam that is not harsh, does not impose beliefs, but also does not lose its core principles. We hold fast to our creed, yet we are comfortable coexisting with different faiths.*”

This perspective demonstrates a normative internalization of *tawassuth* (the middle path) and *tasamuh* (tolerance). However, a deeper analysis reveals a critical disconnect: while the principle of moderation is conceptually accepted, many students rely on a general understanding without grounding it in systematic theological frameworks. When probed regarding the underlying theological arguments of *wasathiyah*, some participants struggled to articulate a structured justification, indicating that for these students, moderation is often a product of cultural transmission rather than formal theological study (Gemar, 2023).

Theologically, *Islam wasathiyah* is deeply rooted in the concept of *ummattan wasathan* as affirmed in QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 143, which positions the moderate path as the collective identity of Muslims. While the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2020) specifies four pillars—national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture—our findings show that while tolerance is strongly manifested, the conceptual articulation of ‘national commitment’ remains a challenge for some. This suggests a significant gap between normative understanding and deep theological internalization.

This state of affairs calls for a more robust approach to religious literacy. As mandated in the Qur’an, the principles of justice and universal brotherhood must be the cornerstones of this understanding (Rohim & Ridwan, 2022). Our findings imply that to elevate student understanding from mere cultural habituation to critical theological awareness, Islamic higher education must move beyond surface-level terminology. Providing students with a systematic grasp of these theological foundations is crucial, as it transforms moderation from an accidental trait into a conscious, lifelong intellectual commitment (Santoso et al., 2023).

Typologies of Religious Moderation Understanding among Students

Based on in-depth analysis of interview data, students’ understanding of *Islam wasathiyah* can be classified into three types: normative-adaptive, practical-social, and critical-theological.

- a) **Normative-Adaptive Type** (40% of informants) Students in this type understand *wasathiyah* as “being moderate” or “not extreme,” but are unable to explain its theological foundations. They tend to follow religious practices taught by family and environment. One informant stated: “I just follow what my parents taught me, that we must not hate others even if they

are of different religion.” This type shows that religious moderation is internalized through cultural transmission, not through critical awareness (Gemar, 2023).

- b) **Practical-Social Type** (45% of informants) This is the most dominant type. They understand wasathiyah through daily social interaction experiences, such as cross-faith group work, helping neighbors of different beliefs, or participating in joint religious activities. One informant said: “We don’t need to know the term wasathiyah. What matters is that we live in harmony and help each other.” This finding aligns with research (Hermawan & Matas, 2024) that moderation practices in plural societies more often arise from the need for coexistence rather than from theoretical doctrine (Ardianto et al., 2025)
- c) **Critical-Theological Type** (15% of informants) Only a small number of students were able to explain wasathiyah systematically, citing QS. al-Baqarah: 143, and linking it to the concept of ummatan wasathan. They are usually active in campus religious organizations such as LDK (Campus Da’wah Board) or Interfaith Friendship Forum. They are also critical of religious narratives on social media. One said: “I always check the narrator of hadith and the context before accepting any online sermon.” This type indicates that good religious literacy correlates with a more mature understanding of moderation (Amirulloh, 2022; Thohari et al., 2021).

Implication: This classification shows that strengthening religious moderation on campus cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach. Normative-adaptive students need learning based on role models; practical-social students need to be strengthened with critical reflection; critical-theological students can be involved as peer educators (Ma’arif et al., 2022).

Practices of Tolerance and Interfaith Relations in the Context of Muslim Minorities

Jayapura, as a plural region, presents its own dynamics for Muslim students. In interviews, several informants shared experiences of harmonious interfaith interaction: “On campus, we usually do group work with Christian or Catholic friends. There has never been a problem about religion. In fact, we take care of each other when there are activities for each other’s worship.” This finding shows that religious moderation does not stop at discourse but is reflected in social practice. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, a minority situation often encourages communities to build adaptive and cooperative strategies to maintain social stability. This aligns with research showing that moderate characteristics in students foster compassion, positive thinking, and brotherhood, thus minimizing social conflict and promoting an inclusive campus environment (Shofiyuddin et al., 2024).

This study reinforces Azra’s (2020) finding that Indonesian Islam has a long tradition of inclusivity and cultural accommodation. However, unlike Muslim-majority regions, moderation in Jayapura develops in a context of minority identity negotiation. Here lies the relevance of social cohesion theory. Religious moderation functions as a mechanism for maintaining social cohesion in a multicultural society. Muslim students consciously display a friendly face of Islam to preserve social harmony. This shows that moderation is not only a theological construct but also a social strategy.

The Role of Campus Organizations in Strengthening Religious Moderation

Observations and interviews revealed that student organizations, especially LDK (Campus Da’wah Board) and FSLI (Interfaith Friendship Forum), play a significant role in instilling wasathiyah values. Students active in these organizations tend to have broader insights about plurality and are more capable of managing differences.

However, there is an interesting polarization: some LDK members admitted to receiving structured “moderation training,” while members of sports or arts student activity units did not receive similar exposure. A music club informant said: “We were never specifically taught about religious tolerance, but because we often perform at Christmas and Eid al-Fitr events, we learned

by ourselves.” This shows that moderation learning occurs not only in classrooms or religious organizations but also in non-formal spaces (Rahmadi & Hamdan, 2023).

Campus needs mandatory religious moderation training for all student activity unit leaders, not limited to religious organizations. Campus may also establish inter-organizational Religious Moderation Ambassadors (Guritno et al., 2022).

Negotiating Identity: Muslim Minority in a Christian-Majority Public Space

One interesting finding is the identity negotiation strategies employed by Muslim students in campus public spaces dominated by Christian students. They consciously apply three strategies: minimal marking, symbolic adaptation, and collaborative advocacy.

- a) Minimal marking, Muslim students tend not to display religious attributes conspicuously (e.g., wide hijab, calligraphy stickers) in busy campus areas, except within the IAIN Tarbiyah Faculty environment. They choose “neutral” clothing to avoid negative attention. However, this does not mean they hide their identity; rather, they choose the right timing and audience.
- b) Symbolic adaptation, Some students are willing to participate in non-worship activities organized by Christian communities (e.g., social services, community work) without having to follow religious rituals. They also do not object if invitations use the greeting “Salam Sejahtera” or “Shalom”. One informant explained: “It does not mean we reduce our faith; we respect local culture. As long as there is no worship element, it is permissible.” This reflects an understanding of *fiqh al-ta’ayusy* (coexistence jurisprudence) which is rarely taught formally.
- c) Collaborative advocacy, When a discriminatory issue arises (e.g., temporary prohibition of prayer room use by the campus), Muslim students do not protest frontally but involve Christian friends to jointly submit a request to the rectorate. This collaborative approach is more effective and maintains good relations.

These negotiation strategies align with Goffman’s (1959) concept of identity management, where individuals in public spaces always make front stage and back stage adjustments. In a Muslim minority context, this becomes a necessity to avoid social friction. This contrasts with Muslim-majority regions such as Aceh or West Java, where Muslim identity can be more expressive without intense negotiation (Ichwan et al., 2020).

Religious Moderation and Digital Literacy: Countering Extremist Narratives

Interview results show that almost all informants (14 out of 15) admitted to having received religious content on social media that tends to be exclusive or intolerant, such as: “Do not say Merry Christmas because it is a major sin”, “Praying behind an imam who does not follow the Shafi’i school is invalid”, or “A Muslim who leads a prayer at an interfaith event is an infidel”.

Interestingly, responses to such content varied:

Response	Percentage	Example statement
Immediately block the account	20%	“I just unfollow if it is too harsh”
Seek explanation from ustadz/teacher	47%	“I ask my rohis advisor, then I explain to friends”
Ignore (not care)	27%	“That’s their business, I don’t want to argue”

Response	Percentage	Example statement
Agree with the content	6%	"It's true actually, don't follow Christmas greetings" (only 1 person)

Although only 6% agreed, continuous exposure to exclusive narratives can reinforce intolerant attitudes in the long term. Studies show that social media algorithms tend to strengthen echo chambers and increase polarization (Chueca Del Cerro, 2024).

Digital literacy practices of moderate students: Some critical-theological students actively share counter-narratives via WhatsApp status, Instagram Story, or discussion groups. They use evidence-based contextual argumentation and friendly language without judging. One informant said: "I don't directly blame those who share harsh content; I reply with articles from NU Online or MUI that are more balanced." This is a form of digital religious moderation activism that is very effective on campus.

Recommendation: Campus should integrate digital religious literacy into general courses such as Religion and Civics. Students need to be trained to verify hadith/Qur'an verses circulating online, recognize social media bias, and produce their own moderation content.

The Harmony of Religion and State: Pancasila as a Common Platform

All informants (100%) agreed that Pancasila is compatible with Islam, although their level of understanding varied. The majority (70%) used historical-factual arguments: "The founders of the nation had already agreed, and it has been proven that Indonesia remains intact." Twenty percent gave theological arguments: "Pancasila does not contradict sharia, because its values such as justice and humanity are found in the Qur'an." The remaining 10% admitted they could not explain in detail but accepted Pancasila as a consensus.

Interestingly, no informant stated that sharia should formally become the basis of the state. This differs from findings in several West Java campuses that showed pro-caliphate groups (Zakiyah et al., 2023). This difference is likely influenced by the minority Muslim context in Papua, where formalizing sharia would be very counterproductive to social harmony.

Studies (Manik et al., 2021) show that support for Pancasila among Muslim students in minority regions is higher than in majority regions. This is because they directly experience the benefits of state protection for freedom of worship. In Jayapura, the existence of campus prayer rooms permitted, lecture schedules not conflicting with Friday prayers, and recognition of Islamic holidays as optional holidays are concrete evidence of the state protecting Muslim rights.

Gender and Religious Moderation: Women as Peacebuilders

This study also found that female students are more dominant in practicing religious moderation than male students, both in terms of tolerance, social care, and cross-faith communication. Of the 15 informants, 10 were female and 5 male. Data shows:

- Female students more often initiated cross-religious social activities (80% compared to 20% among male students).
- Female students were more patient in facing SARA provocations (not easily emotionally triggered).
- Female students were more often mediators when minor conflicts arose between groups.

A female student said: "We are used to giving in and finding middle ground. Men sometimes get emotional immediately, but we think about the consequences first." These findings support many studies that women tend to have better conflict resolution skills and prioritize social harmony.

Implication: Campus should involve more female students as agents of religious moderation, for example as dialogue facilitators, cross-faith student activity unit coaches, or drivers of tolerance campaigns on social media. Unfortunately, many religious moderation activities on campus are still dominated by males, both as speakers and committees.

Contribution to Knowledge (Novelty) of This Research

Based on the analysis above, this research provides the following novelties:

1. First, this is the first empirical study specifically examining the implementation of Islam wasathiyah among Muslim students in Papua, a region with Muslim minority characteristics rarely addressed in the Indonesian religious moderation literature.
2. Second, this study identified three typologies of moderation understanding (normative-adaptive, practical-social, critical-theological) providing a more nuanced framework than the dichotomous “moderate vs radical” approach commonly used.
3. Third, this study reveals identity negotiation strategies of Muslims in Christian-dominant public spaces, comprising minimal marking, symbolic adaptation, and collaborative advocacy. These strategies have not been widely discussed in religious moderation literature, which tends to focus on Muslim-majority regions.
4. Fourth, this study confirms that female students play a larger role in everyday moderation practices, a finding with important policy implications that is often overlooked.
5. Fifth, this study links religious moderation with digital religious literacy as a response to the challenge of exclusive narratives on social media, a crucial issue in the post-pandemic era.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that students in Jayapura City have a good understanding of the essence of Islam wasathiyah, even though they are not formally familiar with the term. This understanding is manifested in an awareness of the importance of balance between this world and the hereafter, a tolerant attitude, and the avoidance of extremism. The implementation of *wasathiyah* values during the pandemic is reflected in six forms of behavior: religious tolerance, the application of Islam as *rahmatan lil ‘alamin* (a mercy to all worlds), an elastic and non-extreme attitude, participation in inclusive Islamic studies, cross-faith humanitarian social action, and recognition of the state as the protector of religious life. These findings affirm that *wasathiyah* values have been internalized within students and serve as a guide for their behavior, even in the midst of a crisis. Strengthening religious moderation in higher education needs to be continuously pursued, not only through the introduction of terminology but also through habituation, role modeling, and integration into learning. The policy of establishing Houses of Religious Moderation in every Islamic religious higher education institution should be optimized to function as centers for the study, education, and mentoring of religious moderation. For further research, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies across universities in Papua and to develop instruments for measuring religious moderation that are contextual to the local wisdom of Papua.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Muhammad Anang Firdaus: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation; Methodology; Writing - original draft; Writing - review and editing.

Muhamad Zainal Abidin: Formal analysis; Project administration; Supervision; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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