The Role of Religious and Traditional Leaders in Maintaining Harmony Among Religious Communities: Strategy for Implementing the Religious Moderation Concept in Indonesia

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Abstract

Exploring the role of religious and traditional leaders in various aspects of life is always interesting and important, as religion is inseparable from the true meaning of life and human values. This article attempts to further explore the roles of these figures in establishing harmony between religious communities in Indonesia through the implementation of the concept of religious moderation. This article is an effort to raise awareness among religious and traditional leaders as well as Indonesian society in a wider scope so that they always maintain the values of unity amidst cultural, customary, and religious diversity. In an effort to explore the idea of moderation in various substantive ways, the researcher uses a philosophical hermeneutic study approach with the hope of being able to reflect critically and dialectically on capturing the objective geist and philosophical values contained in the concept of religious moderation as well as the actualization of moderate attitudes in the lives of the religious and multicultural communities in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Religious, Traditional Leaders, Harmony, Religious Moderation Concept, Strategy*

INTRODUCTION

As an archipelago, Indonesia is a diverse country, both in terms of ethnicity, religion or culture. From the side of ethnicity, Indonesia consists of more than 101 ethnics with diverse language they have. The ethnic spread from Sabang until Merauke. From the side of the religion, the religious diversity that exists in Indonesia can be seen from many religions that exist in Indonesia, they are: Islam, Catholic, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Konghuchu and various other local beliefs The diversity in one side is a huge potential for Indonesian progression, but in the other side it is vulnerable to the occurrence of social communal conflict (Masamah & Huda, 2016).

In Indonesia, several inter-religious conflicts such as the conflict that occurred in Poso between Muslims and Christians occurred several times, in 1992, 1995, 1998, 2000, and 2001. In addition, in East Java there was also a Sunni Shia conflict (between religious sects) in 2012 and there are many other cases such as cases in Ambon, Situbondo, burning of places of worship of the Ahmadiyah and Gafatar as well as cases in Tolikara Papua (Ulya, 2016).

Religious conflict itself does not mean conflict between religious teachings and religious scriptures, but rather conflict between followers of different religions, because religions and holy books should not teach their followers to hate each other (Engkizar et al., 2022). The anarchy did by a group society to other community is contradicted with the values of Indonesia that is civilized and fair humanity which becomes one of five basic platform of Indonesia (Pancasila). Besides contradicting with Pancasila, it also contradicted with the plurality of religion and culture (Miftah, 2016). The roots of intolerance and radicalism in the recent Indonesian context are heavily influenced by theological, doctrinaire, and literal religious discourses. Such religious discourses are

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limited to believers and non-believers, Muslim and non-Muslims, right and wrong, and me and you, which are practically ambiguous and uncertain (Rahman et al., 2022).

One of the efforts implemented to manage and improve religious harmony was the launching of the concept and policy of religious moderation by the Indonesian Ministry of Religion. Religious moderation aims to create a public attitude of a moderate, not extreme, understanding of religion and not glorify unlimited free-thinking in realizing a harmonious and peaceful life within the diversity in Indonesia (Subchi et al., 2022).

Religious Harmony is a condition of inter-religious relations characterized by an atmosphere of harmony, harmony, peace, familiarity, mutual respect, tolerance, and cooperation in the life of society, nation and state, both internally and between religious communities within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila and the Constitution (Salim, 2017).

Although conceptually every religious teaching advocates harmony, peace, concord, and mutual respect, in historical reality, it turns out that this concept has not been implemented as it is supposed to be (Forstman & Sagioglou, 2020). On the other hand, efforts to anticipate radicalism and intolerance in Indonesia are still limited to bureaucratic activities through conventional events, methods and media, such as declarations, counseling, recitations and seminars (Elvinaro & Syarif, 2021).

The internalization of the concept of religious moderation can be carried out by religious leaders and traditional leaders. Religious figures basically have a very important and strategic position and role, especially as a spiritual, moral and ethical foundation in the life and life of mankind. Religion as a value system must be understood, lived and practiced by all adherents in the life of each individual, family and community and animates the life of the nation and state (Umami, 2018). Likewise, traditional leaders who function as control and determinants of changes in community construction are needed (Amilia et al., 2017).

The existence of these two elements is like a double-edged sword. If they fulfill their role by spreading messages of goodness, they will achieve peace and tranquility. On the other hand, if these two actually provoke and are tendentious, this will indirectly fuel the fire of division in the community. Therefore, religious and traditional figures should promote peace amidst diversity rather than inciting confrontation, which can lead to disintegration.

As informal leaders, these two figures have a significant impact on social life. Religious and traditional figures have a variety of instruments to affect society, including scientific expertise, authority, morality, and positive ties with the community. This makes them important people in society. They can determine situations since their words and commands will be followed. These possible roles and influences are frequently overlooked by religious and traditional authorities in Indonesia, prompting some individuals to instigate situations, resulting in horizontal conflict in society.

Conflicts, both great and minor, are frequently created by the incapacity and disinterest of religious and traditional leaders. They lack self-control and fail to read the situation correctly and effectively. The concept of religious moderation, as pushed by the Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Religion, is viewed as an alternate method for maintaining diversity. Religious and traditional leaders have an important role in ensuring this happens.

Engkizar et al. did a more profound study on a model aimed at reducing religious conflicts through community activities. Their findings demonstrate that engaging in inter-faith community activities is a highly successful means of conflict prevention. In addition, it is imperative for religious figures and government officials to elucidate the significance of interfaith discussion to the general public. The objective is to deter the mixing of beliefs (syncretism), a practice that is universally forbidden by all religions (Engkizar et al., 2022).

However, none of the previous researches have specifically examined the involvement of religious and traditional figures in fostering collaboration among Indonesian religious communities. Hence, the author undertook a study on this particular subject. Indonesia, being a multicultural nation with a propensity for violence, requires the active involvement of these two figures in order for them to serve as defenders and guides for the populace. This will be expanded upon through the presentation of strategies that can be implemented to actualize it to reality in daily life.

To this end, this paper aims to address the previously mentioned problem by proposing solutions that facilitates the seamless integration of diversity in Indonesia, using the influence of religious and traditional figures. The main focus of research is: What is the role of religious and traditional figure in constructing a moderate society? Second, what is the precise function of religious and traditional figures in fostering harmony among religious communities? Third, what are the strategies employed by religious and traditional figures to establish a society characterized by moderation? Fourth, what techniques do religious and traditional figures use to promote harmony among religious communities in Indonesia?

The article aims to increase cognizance among religious and traditional figures. Moreover, it is anticipated that this can yield advantages for several stakeholders, including scholars, the government, and the wider population. More importantly, this article can enhance the scholarly understanding, particularly for individuals with a keen interest in exploring the concepts of moderation and religious harmony and serve as a valuable academic reference for the government in developing policies that yield positive impacts for public awareness. This effort should serve as a benchmark for the community, ensuring a sense of togetherness in the midst of cultural, customary, and religious differences, dynamics and challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term moderation originates from the Latin word *moderatio*, which denotes the concept of maintaining a balanced and temperate approach, avoiding both excess and deficiency. Moderation has two meanings: the act of reducing violence and the practice of avoiding extremes. When someone is described as being moderate, it indicates that they are behaving in a natural and normal manner, without any extreme tendencies (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019).

The concept of religious moderation in Indonesia is commonly referred to as *Wasathiyah* which means Islam as a mediator or Islam in the middle. In Arabic, moderation is better known as *wasath* or *wasathiyah*, which has the equivalent words to *tawassuth* (middle), *i'tidal* (fair), and *tawazun* (balanced). Apart from that, *wasathiyah* is also interpreted as "the best choice" (Juwaini et al., 2023). *Wasathiyah* is an Islamic teaching that directs its followers to be fair, balanced, beneficial and proportional. This word is also often referred to as "moderate" in all dimensions of life (Muslim, 2022).

Religious moderation requires having "middle" attitude in religion, avoiding both the far-right (ultra-conservative) and far-left (secular) extremes. It is crucial to address societal disparities to prevent any misinterpretations that may result in religious community conflicts (Sutrisno, 2019). The four indicators of religious moderation are national commitment, tolerance, nonviolence, and accommodating local customs. These four indicators can be utilized to ascertain the degree to which an individual engages in religious moderation (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019).

Moderation is the core of Islamic teachings which requires respect for different groups. This applies in all aspects, including religion, customs, ethnicity and the nation itself (Sutrisno, 2019). The concept of religious moderation is known as Islam *Wasthiyyah*. This is as Allah says in the Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah Verse 143:

And so, We have made you ˹believers˺ an upright community so that you may be witnesses over humanity and that the Messenger may be a witness over you.......(Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 143)

According to Quraish Shihab, the term "*wasath*" in this verse denotes a state of being moderate, which encourages individuals to act justly (Shihab, 2002). Wahbah az-Zuhaili explained that *al-wasath* refers the middle of something or the axis of a circle. This term is used to express things that are praiseworthy. For example, courage is the middle point between two ends, *ifraath* (excess, going too far) and *tafrith* (negligence, carelessness) (Az-Zuhaili, 2013). Allah SWT in the Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Hujurat verse 13 says:

O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may ˹get to˺ know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware. (Q.S. Al-Hujurat: 13)

Wahbah az-Zuhaili explains the meaning of *lita'arafu* in the verse above is that Allah's purpose in creating mankind with diverse characteristics is to facilitate mutual recognition, foster interpersonal connections, and promote collaboration among humans. Allah does not view these disparities as justification for apathy, detachment, hostility, criticism, and insults, which may result in conflicts and animosities.(Wahbah Az-Zuhaili, 2013). Ibnu Kathir asserted that, fundamentally, all individuals are equal, when seen from a human standpoint. What sets them apart is their unwavering devotion to Allah. Therefore, Allah prohibits the act of insulting other human beings (Ghoffar, 2004).

Both individuals have a significant role and exert influence in social interactions, relying on their expertise and moral character (Juwaini et al., 2023). These roles mentioned in the Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Maidah, verse 63, is elucidated as follows:

Why do their rabbis and scholars not forbid them from saying what is sinful and consuming what is unlawful? Evil indeed is their inaction! (Q.S Surah Al-Maidah: 63)

The term "*rabbaani*" refers to individuals who have positions of power and authority within the Jewish community, such as leaders, prominet figures, and chiefs. Meanwhile, "*al-Ahbaar*" is refered to the Jewish scholars. They did not prohibit or hinder; rather, they permitted and endorsed the Jews to engage in malevolent actions. Consequently, the *Rabbanis* and *al-Ahbaar* are regarded as more culpable than the individuals who directly engage in wicked acts (Wahbah Az-Zuhaili, 2013). According to Hamka, these individuals were accountable for the harm caused by the people under them (Hamka, 2001).

METHOD

This qualitative study design can be categorized into text analysis and hermeneutics approach. The data is derived from the findings of prior study that is available in various relevant and representative library literature. The research employed the philosophical-hermeneutic study method. Philosophical hermeneutics is an interpretive approach utilized to comprehend the significance of texts or phenomena. Philosophical hermeneutics diverges from traditional hermeneutics by encompassing a broader scope of interpretation beyond religious or legal texts. The research focuses on the study of philosophical hermeneutics, which explores the profound and analytical understanding of concepts by considering various factors such as context, history, culture, language, and current problems and challenges.

Key figures in the field of philosophical hermeneutics include F.D.E. Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jurgen Habermas, Paul Recour, and Jacques Derida. They have divergent perspectives on the methods of analyzing texts, symbols, or phenomena and their implications for the advancement of philosophy, social science, and the humanities (Sumaryono, 1993). Philosophical hermeneutics also challenges us to think reflectively and dialogically about the hidden meaning behind phenomena or reality (Kamelia, 2018). This research use the philosophical hermeneutic study method to comprehensively understand and interpret the objective *geist* of adopting religious moderation. It does so by critically and dialectically reflecting on its genuine meaning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A role is a distinct behavioral pattern that characterizes a person's work or position in society (Sari, 2017). Meanwhile, strategy is a method or plan used to successfully attain objectives or achieve goals. Strategy is the practice of effectively utilizing and enhancing one's strengths in order to accomplish a set objective (Chaniago, 2014). Understanding the roles and strategies of religious and traditional figures is crucial to effectively contribute to promoting religious moderation and fostering harmony among religious communities in Indonesia.

Role in Building Attitudes of Moderate Community

Religious and traditional figures play a crucial role in implementing the concept of religious moderation in Indonesia by establishing a community that embraces moderation. This function typically exists within the internal dynamics of a community, where religious or traditional figures assume the position of informal leaders and guide the communities they oversee. The presence of this figures will facilitate a thorough understanding,

enabling their adherents to practice moderation and demonstrate respect towards individuals holding different beliefs.

Religious figures are individuals who are highly respected due to their beliefs and religious practices. Religious figures play a crucial role in promoting religious moderation by serving as protectors, guides, and supervisors of religious communities, ensuring mutual understanding and respect among them (Syauqani, 2023). Similarly, traditional figures possess the ability to determine the communal groupings they govern. By employing a dialogue and discussion technique, traditional figures can effectively convey comprehensible and practical knowledge. Religious and traditional leaders serve multiple responsibilities in constructing a moderate society: Narrator, religious and traditional figures in building a narrative of religious moderation for society.

Promoters, religious and traditional leaders play a role in raising public awareness for religious moderation.

Executors, religious and traditional figures play the role of becoming examples and role models to the community on how to act moderately, both through words and actions.

Role in Building Harmony among Religious Communities

Harmony refers to the state of being in conformity or in a pleasing combination. Within the framework of religious disparities in Indonesia, it might be interpreted as the pursuit of harmonious coexistence across different factions, characterized by mutual respect, appreciation, and a commitment to equality. Interfaith harmony is a crucial basis for establishing a cohesive multicultural society (Krismiyanti and Kii, 2023). Harmonizing divergent viewpoints, particularly in religious topics, is crucial for creating a safe and tranquil life in Indonesia.

To foster tolerance across religious communities, it is crucial that religious figures take a prominent role in promoting understanding within their own communities (Hasanah dkk, 2023). Similarly, it is essential for traditional figures to take a leading role in fostering tolerance, particularly due to their capacity to build harmony among groups with diverse religious beliefs. The functions of these two characters are mostly focused on external matters, necessitating that religious and traditional figures establish effective communication and foster connections with other religious counterparts. This proactive approach aims to mitigate any misinterpretations or misunderstandings that may arise among different religious communities.

Religious and traditional figures have several roles in establishing harmony among religious communities, including:
Connector, religious and traditional figures play a role in building connectivity with religious figures and people of other religions.

Negotiator, religious and traditional figures play the role of accommodating interests and bringing about the common good between religious communities.

Mediator, religious and traditional figures play a role in mediating conflict occurred between religious communities.

Strategy for Actualizing the Implementation of Religious Moderation

In order to foster religious moderation within a society, religious and traditional figures could take numerous strategies, including the following:

Disseminating the concept of religious moderation to the community through lectures or religious sermon, as well as through the celebration of religious or cultural holidays. Religious and traditional figures should actively participate in promoting the idea of religious moderation during religious events or customary celebrations. Due to the broader audience reach, delivering the message collectively will result in a wider public reception compared to individual delivery. The narratives should use simple language and be feasible or straightforward to implement.

Encouraging society to appreciate and respect differences and view diversity as a *sunnatullah* (Devine law) that must be embraced, rather than perceived as a threat to be avoided. Furthermore, it is imperative to comprehend

that the 1945 Constitution acknowledges the fundamental right to adopt and practice religion and belief. Hence, it is vital that individuals demonstrate respect for the beliefs of others.

Providing practical examples to the society on how to conduct oneself towards people of different beliefs in day-to-day interactions. This is an exceedingly efficient method. The psychological state of society can be influenced by the views of religious authorities. Thus, individuals will imitate or replicate the manner in which a prominent figure interacts with individuals of different religious beliefs.

Strategy for Establishing Harmony among Religious Communities

Here are some strategies that religious and traditional figures may use to promote harmony in a multicultural society.

Getting involved in collaborative efforts with other religious communities in social and humanitarian initiatives. Religious figures ought to build strong connections with leaders and representatives of other religious communities, particularly in areas of social and humanitarian. This can be achieved by engaging in collaborative activities, engaging in philanthropic projects, and actively assisting those of different faiths who have been impacted by disasters. This will foster greater mutual esteem and admiration among religious communities, thereby cultivating a sense of harmony within community life.

Facilitating interfaith discussion. Religious dialogue has a crucial role in preventing misinterpretations or misconceptions among different religious groups. Dialogue serves as a means to channel the aspirations of religious communities. This dialogue does not involve debating or arguing, but rather focuses on discussing how to maintain unity and create a positive atmosphere in a multicultural society.

Ensuring fairness and wisdom while addressing misperceptions among religious communities. Friction and misperceptions can arise among religious communities in social interactions. In the event of a potential conflict, it is imperative for religious and traditional figures to act as mediators rather than provoking people to engage in violence against those with different religious beliefs. Thus, every issue that arises will be effectively resolved in a wise way for the benefit of the population as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In building a moderate society, the role of religious and traditional figures consists of: (1) the role of a narrator who builds a narrative of religious moderation for the community. (2) Role of a promoter who raises public awareness to be moderate. (3) The role of an executor, who provides an example and role model to the community on how to be moderate. Meanwhile, in building harmony between religious communities, the role of religious and traditional figures consists of: (1) the role of a connector who builds relationship with religious leaders and other religious communities. (2) The role of a negotiator who accommodates interests and brings about the common good between religious communities. (3) Role as a mediator who mediates if conflict occurs between religious communities.

Strategies that can be used by religious and traditional figures to realize the implementation of religious moderation are: (1) conveying the idea of religious moderation through lectures, religious sermons, or during celebrations of religious or traditional holidays. (2) encouraging people to appreciate and respect differences as a *sunnatullah* that must be accepted or embraced. (3) Providing practical examples to the community on how to behave towards people of other religions. The strategies that religious and traditional figures can use to foster harmony among religious communities are: (1) cooperating with other communities in social and humanitarian initiatives. (2) Facilitating interfaith dialogue among religious communities to avoid misperceptions. (3) Being fair and wise when there is potential conflict among religious communities, while maintaining composure and not being easily provoked.

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