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The Concept of Religious Moderation: A Study of Maudhu'i's Interpretation

Rifki Azkya Ramadhan¹; Nurul Fadhilah Ramadhani Arqam²;

Asep Abdul Muhyi³

Abstract

This study aims to explore the concept of religious moderation from the perspective of Islam through a descriptive analysis approach. In this context, religious moderation is interpreted as a balanced attitude that encompasses various aspects of religious life. The results of the descriptive analysis of the Qur'an and relevant Islamic literature identify that religious moderation in Islam embodies values such as simplicity, tolerance, and justice. The Islamic perspective on religious moderation is reflected in the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, emphasizing the importance of avoiding extremism and fanaticism in religious practice. In the Qur'an, religious moderation is represented by the phrase "ummatan wasathan" in QS. Al-Baqarah verse 143, signifies the attitude of tawazun, or balance, as a distinguishing feature of the community of Prophet Muhammad SAW, characterized by fairness, wisdom, and impartiality. This balanced approach applies to all aspects of life, including worldly and otherworldly affairs, which must always remain balanced. Moderate attitudes in religious life are crucial to stop intolerant behavior that can lead to discrimination. In Indonesia, with its multicultural society, it is important to maintain harmony by adhering to the values of Islamic tolerance. This will ensure that religious life remains harmonious without any discrimination against fellow believers.

Keywords: Religious; Moderation; Islam; Al-Qur'an.

¹ UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia, Email: rifkiazkyar11@gmail.com

² UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia, Email: nurulfadhilah0813@gmail.com

³ UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia, Email: asepabdulmuhyi@uinsgd.ac.id

Introduction

In the complex and tension-filled global context, Islam is often understood through a narrow prism, especially in the context of religious moderation. Negative stereotypes commonly associated with this religion include images of extremism, fundamentalism, and conflict. Nevertheless, amidst this fog of misunderstanding and generalizations, Islam holds a treasure trove of teachings and values that promote moderation, tolerance, and peace[1].

As the holy book for Muslims, the Quran serves as the primary source of messages advocating religious moderation. The Quran is a spiritual guide and a practical guide for living a balanced and harmonious life. The concept of *wasatiyyah*, or moderation, is specifically emphasized in the Quran, urging its followers to steer clear of all forms of extremism. However, as with any sacred text, the interpretation of the Quran also plays a crucial role in Muslims' understanding of religious moderation. *Tafsir*, or the interpretation of the Quran by scholars, has played a crucial role in shaping religious thought and practices. However, these diverse interpretations often result in different, and sometimes conflicting, understandings of the concept of moderation[2].

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to delve into and analyze the concept of religious moderation in the Quran and its interpretations. The author will examine Quranic messages that emphasize moderation and simplicity, and explore how interpretations by prominent scholars have influenced the understanding and implementation of religious moderation among Muslims. By gaining a deeper understanding of the messages of the Quran and the diversity of interpretations, it is hoped that this paper can provide broader insights into the relevance and importance of religious moderation in the context of Islam. Additionally, we will identify challenges that may be faced in promoting religious moderation and formulate recommendations to strengthen understanding and practice of moderation in the lives of Muslims globally[3].

Method

In the context of research on religious moderation, the descriptive analysis method is chosen as the appropriate approach. Descriptive analysis provides an opportunity to delve into a deep understanding of the concept within the Quran and its interpretations[4]. This approach allows researchers to present findings in detail and systematically, by outlining and explaining the concepts contained within it. Through descriptive analysis, the author can examine every aspect of Quranic messages related to religious moderation[5], as well as observe how scholars interpret and apply this concept in everyday life through their interpretations. This method also enables researchers to highlight differences and

similarities in the understanding of religious moderation among various interpretations, thus providing a more comprehensive insight into the concept. Therefore, descriptive analysis becomes an effective tool in exploring the depth and complexity of religious moderation within the Quran and its interpretations.

Result and Discussion

The Meaning of Moderation in General

Moderation, which is rooted in the Latin word "Moderatio," is a concept that signifies the importance of balance and self-control over behaviors that tend to be extreme or excessive. In Indonesian, moderation is described in the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) with two main meanings: the reduction of violence and avoidance of extremism. This concept carries important implications in various contexts, especially in conflict resolution and efforts to maintain social order[6]. Reduction of violence, as one aspect of moderation, emphasizes the importance of controlling emotions and actions that have the potential to cause conflict or harm. In this regard, problem resolution through dialogue and wisdom becomes the primary principle for achieving peace and stability. On the other hand, avoidance of extremism highlights the necessity of attitudes that do not exceed limits or seek balanced solutions in facing various challenges. This encourages avoiding extreme actions that can harm oneself or others[7].

In Arabic, the concept of moderation is identified with the term "wasath" or "wasathiyah," which has semantic connections with words such as "tawassuth" (moderation), "i'tidal" (justice), and "tawazun" (balance). Individuals who practice the principle of "wasathiyah" are often referred to as "wasith." The use of the term "wasathiyah" in Arabic is also often interpreted as "the best choice." Although using various terms, they all depict the same essence, which is justice, referring in this context to the selection of a middle position among various extreme options. The term "wasith" has been adopted into the Indonesian language as 'wasit,' which has various meanings, including as a mediator or intermediary in the context of trade or business, as a reconciler or separator between conflicting parties, and as a leader in a competition.

The term "moderation" also originates from the English, "moderation," highlighting a balanced and non-excessive attitude. This reflects the essence of the concept of moderation, which emphasizes the importance of finding the middle ground between two extremes and avoiding excessive or exaggerated behavior in all aspects[8]. Therefore, moderation is not merely a stance or behavior, but also a life philosophy grounded in principles of balance, self-control, and respect for fair and equitable values. The concept of moderation

demands individuals to exercise self-restraint in all aspects and emphasizes the importance of appreciating diverse perspectives and striving to reach agreements beneficial to all parties[9].

The Meaning of Religious Moderation

Religious moderation is an approach that emphasizes simplicity and balance in practicing religious teachings. It involves a profound understanding of religious principles and their application in daily life in a non-extreme manner, both from an ideological perspective and in practice. Currently, Indonesia faces various challenges related to extremism, radicalism, and even hate speech that threaten the harmony among religious communities. In a commonly used analogy, moderation can be likened to a movement from the periphery towards the center or axis, while extremism moves in the opposite direction, away from the center and towards the outer edges. Like a dynamic pendulum, religious moderation advocates the idea that a moderate stance is an alternative that chooses to be in the middle among the existing extreme options[10].

In the context of religion, a moderate stance is an effort to maintain a middle ground amidst extremism, which leads to imbalance and conflict. Religious moderation not only means rejecting extremism but also refraining from excessive liberalism. The importance of a proper understanding of religious moderation lies in recognizing justice, equality, and decency in practicing religion, as well as respecting the diversity of beliefs[11]. Therefore, to ensure that religious perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors are in line with moderation, clear measures, boundaries, and indicators are necessary. Religious moderation is the key to creating an atmosphere of tolerance and harmony, both at the local, national, and global levels.

In multicultural societies like Indonesia, religious moderation is not just an option but a necessity[12]. Faced with the challenges of extremism and intolerance, Indonesian society must prioritize religious moderation as a solid foundation for maintaining harmony among religious communities. By choosing moderation, religious communities can treat each other with respect, embrace differences, and live together in peace and harmony. This also means firmly rejecting both extremism and liberalism in religious practices, thus creating the necessary balance to preserve civilization and achieve peace amidst diversity[13].

Religious Moderation in the Qur'an

Islam highly upholds the value of tolerance among religions. Allah SWT does not condone any form of discrimination against other religions[14], even if it is done verbally, such as ridiculing their teachings or even their gods. As Allah SWT conveys in the following verse,

وَلَا تَسُبُّوا الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَيَسُبُّوا اللَّهَ عَدْوًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ كَذَلِكَ زَيْنًا لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ عَمَلُهُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ مَرْجِعُهُمْ فَيُنَبِّئُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

"Do not revile those they invoke other than Allah, lest they revile Allah in enmity without knowledge. Thus, We have adorned for every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return, and He will inform them of what they used to do.", Al-An'am [6]: 108).

Therefore, Muslims must always adopt a moderate approach to religion, especially in Indonesia, where society is heterogeneous in its religious beliefs. Even though Muslims constitute the majority based on data, it is not a justification to belittle or discriminate against other religions[15].

As for the demand from Allah SWT for all Muslims to adopt a moderate approach to religion, it is stated in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143.

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا وَمَا جَعَلْنَا الْقِبْلَةَ الَّتِي كُنْتُمْ عَلَيْهَا إِلَّا لِنَعْلَمَ مَنْ يَتَّبِعِ الرَّسُولَ مِمَّنْ يَنْقَلِبُ عَلَىٰ عَقْبَيْهِ وَإِنْ كَانَتْ لَكَبِيرَةً إِلَّا عَلَى الَّذِينَ هَدَىٰ اللَّهُ وَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيُضَيِّعَ إِيمَانَكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِالنَّاسِ لَرءُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ

"Thus, We have made you a median community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you. And We did not make the qiblah which you used to face except that We might make evident who would follow the Messenger from who would turn back on his heels[16]. And indeed, it is difficult except for those whom Allah has guided. And never would Allah have caused you to lose your faith. Indeed, Allah is, to the people, Kind and Merciful."

Imam ar-Raghib Al-Asfahani (d. 502 H) explained that what is meant by "wasathan" in the verse is the middle ground between two negative extremes, such as the quality of generosity being between stinginess and extravagance[17]. Therefore, the meaning of "wasathan" is fairness, in the sense of not leaning too much to one side, either in excessive restraint or exceeding limits. Thus, occupying the middle ground becomes something commendable[18].

Syaikh Muhammad Ali Al-Shabuni (d. 1442 H/2021 CE) in his tafsir book titled "Shafwatu Al-Tafasir" also explains the meaning of the term "ummatan wasathan" (a justly balanced nation) that Allah SWT attributes to the Muslim community by referring to the explanation of Imam Ath-Thabari. He explains it as follows:

{وَسَطًا} قَالَ الطَّبْرِي: الوسيط في كلام العرب: الخيار وقيل: العدل، وأصل هذا أن خير الأشياء أوسطها وأن الغلو والتقصير مذمومان

Ath-Thabari explains: "Al-Wasthu" in Arabic language discourse means something that is the best, and some also say it means just. This is based on the fact that the best thing is that which is in the middle because indeed, excessiveness and extreme brevity are both blameworthy."

Therefore, "ummatan wasathan" is a praise for the Muslim community who always maintain a moderate attitude, meaning neither excessive nor deficient. This attitude is a reflection of the teachings that Allah SWT has revealed to the Muslim community, which are moderate in nature, unlike the teachings of previous communities[19]. For example, the Jews went to extremes by considering Prophet Isa as an illegitimate child resulting from adultery[20], while the Christians also went to extremes by considering Prophet Isa as the son of God[18]. Islam, on the other hand, came with a balanced teaching, believing that Prophet Isa was born of Maryam without any male intervention and held the status of a messenger of Allah SWT. It is not surprising then that Islam is described by Allah SWT as a perfect religion with such uniqueness[21].

Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, is connected or relevant to the preceding verse, which is verse 142. In the previous verse, Allah SWT explains the command to change the qiblah, which initially faced Masjid al-Aqsa for approximately 17 months, to facing the Kaaba or Masjid al-Haram[22]. This change aroused envy among the Jews towards the Muslim community, leading them to question, "What has turned them (Muslims) from their qiblah to which they used to face?" Their envy stemmed from their knowledge that the Kaaba was an extremely sacred structure, especially since it was built by Allah's beloved, Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), along with his son[23], Prophet Isma'il. Allah SWT's mercy towards Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his community encompasses many aspects. Allah SWT granted many special laws to the community of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), including[24],

Rasulullah SAW's mission was directed to all mankind on Earth without exception. This is different from the Prophets and Messengers before him, who were tasked with conveying their messages only to their own people, while the message of Prophet Muhammad SAW is universal. As stated by Allah SWT in the following verse,

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا كَافَّةً لِلنَّاسِ بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

"We have not sent you (Muhammad) except as a bringer of good tidings and a warner to all mankind, but most of the people do not know." (QS. Saba [34]: 28).

Not only to mankind on Earth, but the message that Prophet Muhammad SAW conveyed was also directed to the jinn. As stated by Allah SWT in the following verse:

وَإِذْ صَرَفْنَا إِلَيْكَ نَفَرًا مِّنَ الْجِنِّ يَسْتَمِعُونَ الْقُرْآنَ فَلَمَّا حَضَرُوهُ قَالُوا أَنْصِتُوا فَلَمَّا قُضِيَ وَلَّوْا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِمْ مُنْذِرِينَ قَالُوا يَا قَوْمَنَا إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا كِتَابًا أُنزِلَ مِن بَعْدِ مُوسَىٰ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ وَإِلَىٰ طَرِيقٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ يَا قَوْمَنَا أَجِيبُوا دَاعِيَ اللَّهِ وَآمِنُوا بِهِ يَغْفِرَ لَكُمْ مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُجِرْكُمْ مِّن عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ وَمَن لَا يُجِبْ دَاعِيَ اللَّهِ فَلَيْسَ بِمُعْجِزٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَيْسَ لَهُ مِن دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءُ أُولَٰئِكَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ

"(Remember) when We directed toward you (O Muhammad) a company of jinn, listening to the Qur'an. And when they attended it, they said, 'Listen quietly!' And when it was concluded, they went back to their people as warners. They said, 'O our people, indeed we have heard a [recited] Book revealed after Moses confirming what was before it which guides to the truth and to a straight path[25]. O our people, respond to the Messenger of Allah and believe in him; Allah will forgive for you your sins and protect you from a painful punishment. But he who does not respond to the Caller of Allah will not cause failure [to Him] upon earth, and he will not have besides Him any protectors. Those are in manifest error." (QS. Al-Ahqaf [46]: 29-32).

The specific laws (Syari'ah) that Allah SWT gave were exclusively for Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his followers. This was elucidated by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the following saying:

أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: أُعْطِيتُ خَمْسًا، لَمْ يُعْطَهُنَّ أَحَدٌ قَبْلِي: بُصِرْتُ بِالرُّعْبِ مَسِيرَةَ شَهْرٍ، وَجُعِلَتْ لِي الْأَرْضُ مَسْجِدًا وَطَهْرًا، فَأَيُّمَا رَجُلٍ مِنْ أُمَّتِي أَدْرَكْتُهُ الصَّلَاةَ فَلْيُصَلِّ، وَأَجَلْتُ لِي الْمَغَانِمَ وَلَمْ تَحِلَّ لِأَحَدٍ قَبْلِي، وَأُعْطِيتُ الشَّفَاعَةَ، وَكَانَ النَّبِيُّ يُبْعَثُ إِلَى قَوْمِهِ (خَاصَّةً، وَبُعِثْتُ إِلَى النَّاسِ عَامَةً)

"Verily, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, 'I have been given five things that were not given to any Prophet before me: 1) I have been granted victory by awe, (by the help of Allah) for a distance of one month's journey, 2) the earth has been made for me (and for my followers) a place for praying and a means of purification[26], therefore anyone of my followers can pray wherever the time of a prayer is due, 3) the spoils of war have been made lawful to me (and were not made so to anyone else before me), 4) I have been given the right of intercession (on the Day of Resurrection), 5) every Prophet used to be sent to his nation only, but I have been sent to all mankind."

Indeed, it is because of these specific and unique privileges that Allah SWT bestowed the title upon the nation of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as "ummatan wasatahan," meaning given the most perfect teachings through its best laws[27]. Regarding Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, Sheikh Wahbah Al-Zuhaili (d. 1436 H/2015 CE) provides an explanation concerning the context of this verse. He states that Allah clarifies that the change in the qiblah, which initially faced towards Baitul-Maqdis (Jerusalem) but was later redirected towards the Kaaba in Masjid al-Haram, does not indicate any inconsistency on the part of Allah SWT.

Therefore, Allah SWT provides understanding to the Muslim community that regardless of the direction, ultimately all directions belong to Allah SWT[28]. The change in the qiblah was a command from Allah SWT that must be obeyed[29]. In essence, facing towards Baitul-Maqdis or the Kaaba is the same in worship; it is facing Allah SWT and not the material object itself[30]. The true benefit lies not in what is aimed for but in obedience to the command of Allah SWT[31]. This understanding was not known to the Jews and the hypocrites at that time. They interpreted the change in the qiblah as a violation of the customs of previous communities who faced Jerusalem. They mistakenly thought that this command from Allah indicated inconsistency. Due to their ignorance, Allah condemned them in the preceding verse, calling them "Sufaha" or those lacking in intellect and faith[32].

Sheikh Wahbah Al-Zuhaili also explains the nature of "wasathan" attributed to the Muslim community, which signifies balance and justice, indicating a tendency neither towards one extreme nor the other, but always remaining in the middle without being excessive or deficient in worldly or religious matters. Therefore[33], Islam prohibits extremism in religion[34], which neglects its worldly rights, such as physical health and family rights that must be fulfilled[35]. This is different from the Jews and the polytheists who are materialistic, thus neglecting the rights of Allah and leaning towards worldly pleasures. Similarly, the Christians are immersed in spiritualism, prohibiting what is permissible[36].

Similar explanations regarding "ummatan wasathan" also come from Imam Al-Qurtubi (d. 671 H/1273 CE) in his tafsir book titled "Al-Jami' li Ahkam Al-Qur'an." He explains that the attribution of "wasathan" to the Muslim community is due to their special quality of justice, which entails not being excessive or deficient in anything[37]. This can be seen in the difference when compared to the previous communities, namely the Jews and the Christians[38], in their attitude towards prophethood. The Jews of old often belittled the Prophets and Messengers sent by Allah to their people[39], while the Christians went to extremes in glorifying the messengers of Allah to the point of considering

them as the sons of God and even worshiping them. Therefore, Islam occupies the best position, which is a middle ground between these two attitudes, honoring the messengers of Allah without idolizing them[40].

Quraish Shihab provides an explanation that the distinction of the Muslim community as "ummatah wasathah" places them in the middle, not leaning too far to the left or to the right. In this position, Muslims can act justly and serve as examples to anyone on either side[41]. Moreover, being in the middle allows Islam to see all sides, making the Muslim community witnesses to other nations. However, this can only happen if Muslims themselves make Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) a witness to the truth of their actions and behavior, in the sense of emulating everything he taught[42]. This moderate nature can also be understood in dealing with worldly and hereafter matters[43]. One should be moderate, not getting carried away with the transient pleasures of the world to the extent of neglecting the obligation to worship the Creator, Allah SWT. Likewise, one should not go too far in religious matters to the extent that many worldly rights are ultimately overlooked[44].

From the interpretations of these commentators, all convey similar points, namely the excellence of the Muslim community in their moderate or balanced approach to everything. The middle position represents fairness and wisdom in dealing with all matters[45], so it is only fitting that Muslims do not exhibit extremism towards one side or the other. However, from the explanations above, in my opinion[46], Quraish Shihab comes with a more comprehensive explanation of the middle position, which is the excellence of the Muslim community. He articulates it well in understanding that this attitude symbolizes justice and wisdom, as well as the ability to see from various perspectives without turning a blind eye to others' viewpoints[47].

Conclusion

From the previous discussion, we can conclude that the concept of religious moderation in the Quran, represented by the phrase "ummatah wasathah" in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 143, signifies a balanced approach that is the hallmark of the followers of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It entails acting with fairness, wisdom, and avoiding extremism. This characteristic distinguishes the Muslim community from previous communities, such as the Jews and Christians. The principle of moderation applies to all aspects of life, including worldly and spiritual matters, requiring a balanced approach.

Moderation is crucial in religious life as well, as it can prevent intolerance and discrimination. In a multicultural society like Indonesia, maintaining harmony amidst diversity is essential, and Islamic teachings advocate for

tolerance, which is a consequence of moderation. Therefore, religious life can remain peaceful without any discrimination against fellow believers.

Author Contributions

Rifki Azkya Ramadhan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Nurul Fadhilah Ramadhani Arqam:** Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Investigation. **Asep Abdul Muhyi:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

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