

Religious Moderation from a Multiculturalism Perspective: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Religious moderation is a crucial discourse in addressing polarization and intolerance within pluralistic societies. This study systematically reviews scholarly works to examine the conceptual, practical, and policy-oriented intersections between religious moderation and multiculturalism. Employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by PRISMA protocols, the research identified, screened, and analysed studies published from 2015 to 2025 across databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, DOAJ, and Garuda. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed works addressing religious moderation, multicultural education, and social cohesion, while data extraction captured objectives, theoretical frameworks, methods, and findings. Thematic analysis was then applied to synthesise key patterns and gaps. The findings indicate that religious moderation, when contextualised through multicultural values, significantly enhances social integration, interfaith tolerance, and civic dialogue. Evidence suggests that its effectiveness is reinforced by educational frameworks, inclusive policy initiatives, and community-based empowerment strategies. Moreover, the analysis highlights that contextual adaptation to local culture and religious narratives is essential to ensure the acceptance and sustainability of moderation initiatives. This review concludes that embedding religious moderation within multicultural frameworks not only mitigates identity-based conflicts but also strengthens substantive democracy in diverse societies. It further underscores the necessity for policymakers, educators, and religious leaders to adopt participatory and culturally grounded strategies to promote moderation values. By mapping theoretical developments and empirical practices, this study contributes to advancing an integrative conceptual model that unites religious moderation and multiculturalism for fostering inclusive and harmonious societies.

Keywords: *Religious Moderation; Multiculturalism; Social Cohesion; Interfaith Tolerance.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation in the context of multiculturalism represents a strategic approach that emphasises the importance of a tolerant, inclusive, and balanced attitude

in religious life within culturally and religiously diverse societies. Amid the growing challenges of intolerance and radicalism, the integration of moderation values and multicultural principles becomes key to building social harmony and strengthening intergroup cohesion. The dynamics of social, cultural, and religious diversity around the world—including in Indonesia—are becoming increasingly complex, demanding more inclusive and tolerant approaches to managing such diversity. Globalisation, migration flows, the rise of digital technologies, and growing inter-religious interaction are major driving forces behind the emergence of new challenges in multicultural societies (Banks, 2016).

The concept of religious moderation emerged as a response to religious exclusivism and intolerance, as well as a strategy to foster social harmony amidst cultural and religious plurality (Azra, 2017). Religious moderation is defined as a religious attitude that avoids extremism and fanaticism, and promotes interfaith dialogue grounded in the values of justice, balance, and tolerance (Ministry of Religious Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 2019). Meanwhile, multiculturalism is understood as a worldview that acknowledges, respects, and celebrates cultural diversity as both an unavoidable social reality and a source of national strength (Parekh, 2019). Thus, integrating religious moderation and multiculturalism becomes essential in shaping a peaceful, just, and sustainable social order.

Research on religious moderation has expanded significantly, particularly in Indonesia, a nation with a vast and diverse religious population. Numerous studies indicate that religious moderation is key to preserving the unity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) amidst threats of disintegration due to religious politicisation, intolerance, and radicalism (Wahid, 2018; Subagya, 2020). On the other hand, multicultural approaches in education and public policy have proven effective in building collective awareness of the importance of peaceful coexistence (Haryatmoko, 2019; Zulfikar et al., 2022). However, systematic literature examining the relationship between religious moderation and the perspective of multiculturalism remains scarce, even though their synergy is strategically important for fostering an inclusive society.

The relevance of these two concepts becomes even more apparent when viewed from contemporary socio-political dimensions. The rise of intolerance and religiously motivated violence across various countries, including Indonesia, indicates that normative approaches alone are insufficient. A holistic approach is required—one that integrates multicultural values into daily religious practices (Nasution & Sulaiman, 2020). In global discourse, Berry (2016) emphasises the importance of cultural integration as a positive form of adaptation in multicultural societies, where individuals from various religious backgrounds can coexist without losing their religious identity. This aligns with the principles of religious moderation, which place civility and balance at the core of religious life (Subchi, I., Zulkifli, Z., Latifa, R., & Sa'diyah, S, 2022).

The discourse on multiculturalism emerged towards the end of the 20th century as a critique of assimilation policies in Western countries that failed to accommodate the cultural identities of minority groups (Taylor, 1994). In this context,

multiculturalism is not merely a social strategy but a paradigm that acknowledges the legitimacy of difference and demands fair treatment for all cultural groups (Kymlicka, 2015). In recent developments, multiculturalism is increasingly seen as an essential instrument for strengthening social cohesion, especially in highly heterogeneous countries such as Indonesia, India, and Brazil (Modood, 2020). In Indonesia, the implementation of multiculturalism is reflected in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which emphasises unity in diversity (Tahir & Daulay, 2018). However, in practice, these values are often undermined by political identity interests that prioritise religious exclusivism, thereby fuelling social fragmentation (Mujani & Liddle, 2019).

Religious moderation has also developed into a strategic national policy agenda, particularly since the launch of the Religious Moderation Strengthening Programme by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia in 2019. This programme aims to shape public mindsets to be more open, tolerant, and appreciative of differences without abandoning their religious convictions (MoRA RI, 2020). Several studies have revealed that this approach has been relatively effective in reducing the potential for horizontal conflicts and strengthening local-level social solidarity (Rohman, 2020; Setiawan et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the challenges are considerable—especially when moderation is perceived as a compromise of authoritative religious values (Kurniawan, 2022). It is therefore crucial to formulate a conceptual framework that bridges religious moderation with an inclusive and dialogical multicultural approach.

In the realm of education, the integration of religious moderation and multicultural values has begun to be implemented through character education curricula and strengthened civic education. Research by Susanti et al. (2023) shows that involving students in interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural activities enhances their understanding of diversity and reduces social prejudice. Similarly, Wardani & Pranata (2024) argue that enhancing multicultural literacy among university students can help cultivate a moderate religious outlook. However, fragmented and unsystematic approaches remain a barrier to comprehensive implementation of these values. A comprehensive literature review is therefore necessary to map best practices, identify challenges, and explore the integration potential of these two concepts across various spheres of life.

One of the gaps identified in previous literature is the lack of studies that explicitly elaborate the dialectical relationship between religious moderation and the principles of multiculturalism within the contexts of public policy, education, and social interaction. A study by Fikri & Hidayat (2019) noted that religious moderation tends to be interpreted normatively without accounting for the multicultural socio-cultural context. Yet values such as inclusivity, recognition of collective identity, and social justice—which lie at the heart of multiculturalism—are highly relevant to supporting moderation in religious life (Anwar, 2021). Furthermore, research by Lubis (2022) found that public policy implementation that neglects multicultural perspectives actually reinforces exclusivism and social segregation, particularly in structurally identity-fragile societies.

The primary aim of this study is to construct a comprehensive mapping of the relationship between religious moderation and multiculturalism using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. This approach enables researchers to examine, synthesise, and evaluate findings from various academic studies over the past decade that are relevant to the issue. Through this method, a holistic picture is expected to emerge, covering theoretical developments, policy directions, and field practices related to religious moderation within a multicultural framework. The study also aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, academics, and education practitioners in developing strategies for inclusive and just social development.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to enriching scholarly discourse on the intersection of religion and culture in increasingly plural contemporary societies. Within this framework, the concepts of religious moderation and multiculturalism are not merely theoretical but serve as ethical and practical foundations for addressing global challenges such as intolerance, extremism, xenophobia, and social disintegration. Thus, this study is not only academic in nature but also of high practical relevance. As stated by UNESCO (2021), multicultural education and interfaith dialogue are two key instruments in building world peace in the 21st century.

This literature review seeks to answer the following key question: how is the relationship between the concept of religious moderation and the principles of multiculturalism addressed in recent academic literature? In addition, the study will identify conceptual and implementation challenges faced in the integration of these two approaches. Preliminary conclusions from this introduction indicate an urgent need to formulate a conceptual framework capable of bridging religious practice with the realities of a plural society. When applied systematically and contextually, religious moderation within a multicultural perspective holds the potential to become a strong foundation for shaping a peaceful, inclusive, and civilised society amidst the complexities of the modern world.

METHOD

This study utilised the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, acknowledged for its rigour and transparency in synthesising research evidence (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007; Snyder, 2019). The SLR enabled the systematic identification, evaluation, and integration of relevant works to map existing knowledge, trace emerging trends, and reveal gaps in language, literature, and cultural education (Ridwanulloh et al., 2025).

The process followed PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021), comprising four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Relevant keywords (language education, literature education, teaching language, teaching literature, bahasa dan sastra, pembelajaran bahasa, pembelajaran sastra, cultural literacy) were applied across Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, ProQuest, DOAJ, and Garuda. Searches were limited to 2015–2025 to ensure contextual relevance. Duplicates were removed, and inclusion criteria restricted the dataset to peer-reviewed

studies on pedagogy, teaching, or curriculum, excluding non-academic and unclear works.

Data extraction captured aims, methods, theoretical frameworks, findings, and contributions. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified patterns, categorised into teaching strategies, cultural integration, digital technologies, critical literacy, and curriculum innovations. Validity was supported through triangulation across databases (Fink, 2019), audit trails (Snyder, 2019), and peer review with experts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the relationship between religious moderation and multiculturalism has become a key focus among academics, particularly in response to rising social tensions driven by religious polarisation and identity politics in global society. A systematic analysis of 56 core pieces of literature reveals an increasingly positive trend in aligning these two concepts within academic discourse and public policy. Religious moderation is no longer viewed merely as a narrative of tolerance in religious contexts but has evolved into a strategic approach to strengthening social cohesion through multicultural values such as recognition of diversity, social justice, and the right to cultural identity. Accordingly, the main hypothesis—that religious moderation and multiculturalism have a substantive connection within the framework of inclusive society building—can be deemed valid based on the literature analysed.

To reinforce these findings, a thematic classification of the literature was conducted based on five key aspects: conceptual context, geographical context, methodological approach, areas of application, and theoretical contribution. The results of this classification are presented in Table 1, which maps each analysed publication according to its main research focus.

Table 1. Thematic Classification of Literature Based on Research Focus

No	Research Focus	Number of Studies	Percentage (%)
1	Definitions & Theoretical Frameworks	16	28.6%
2	Multicultural & Religious Education	14	25.0%
3	Religious Moderation Policy	10	17.9%
4	Interfaith & Socio-Cultural Dialogue	9	16.1%
5	Strategies for Implementing Moderation	7	12.4%
	Total	56	100%

As shown above, 16 studies (28.6%) explicitly discuss definitions and theoretical frameworks of religious moderation and multiculturalism. These studies, typically published in journals of philosophy, sociology, and religious studies, aim to formulate the normative link between the two concepts. Key findings reveal that religious

moderation is generally defined as a religious attitude upholding justice (al-‘adl), balance (tawazun), tolerance (tasamuh), and non-violence (laa ‘unf), while multiculturalism is formulated as a value system and policy that recognises cultural identity plurality and promotes equitable social integration.

Another 14 studies (25%) emphasise the importance of integrating moderation values within the educational system, especially multicultural education. These studies significantly contribute to uncovering pedagogical practices that support the internalisation of inclusive religious values through both formal and informal curricula. For instance, Susanti et al. (2023) found that students involved in interfaith activities exhibit higher levels of tolerance compared to those in homogenous environments. Meanwhile, Wardani and Pranata (2024) highlight that the success of multicultural education strongly depends on teachers’ readiness to serve as facilitators of intercultural dialogue and promoters of moderate religiosity.

Literature on religious moderation policy accounts for the third largest portion (17.9%). These studies examine the implementation of public policies such as the Religious Moderation Programme by Indonesia’s Ministry of Religious Affairs. The findings show that these policies have provided a normative and operational framework for educational institutions, civil society organisations, and government apparatus to ground moderate values in social life. However, studies like those by Kurniawan (2022) and Rohman (2021) criticise the implementation for being predominantly top-down and not yet effectively reaching grassroots communities, thereby limiting its widespread impact.

Nine studies (16.1%) explore interfaith dialogue practices and social interactions as a medium for applying religious moderation in multicultural contexts. Many of these works focus on local case studies from communities that have successfully fostered social harmony amidst religious and cultural plurality—such as post-conflict Ambon or interfaith communities in Yogyakarta. These studies stress the importance of community-based approaches in sustaining spaces for interfaith dialogue.

Practical strategies for implementing moderation values are addressed in seven studies (12.4%). These strategies include strengthening interfaith religious literacy, training dialogue facilitators, developing diversity-based educational modules, and establishing interreligious and interethnic forums. The findings suggest that the implementation of moderation values cannot be partial but must be integrated across social, educational, and cultural spheres.

Most of the analysed literature originates from Indonesia (61%), followed by other South and Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, India, and the Philippines (21%), and Western countries like the UK, Canada, and the United States (18%). The dominance of Indonesian studies suggests that religious moderation and multiculturalism have become central to domestic academic and policy agendas, reflecting the nation’s pluralistic society and status as the world’s largest Muslim-majority country. In contrast, studies from Western countries often focus on multicultural education’s role in responding to migration and growing Islamophobia,

thereby offering perspectives centred on inclusive discourse within education and immigrant integration policies.

Another important finding is the growing consensus that religious moderation cannot be fully understood without considering the multicultural context in which it is applied. Moderation becomes relevant through engagement with difference—not in homogenous settings. Multiculturalism, in this regard, is not just a context but also an analytical tool for understanding how moderate values are received. Some studies even propose the term “multicultural religious moderation” as a new approach that merges peaceful religious principles with the recognition of cultural and ethnic diversity. This points to a theoretical development that unifies the two paradigms in a more integrative conceptual framework.

Several challenges are also identified. Chief among them is ideological resistance from religious groups who perceive moderation as a compromise on absolute religious truths. Some studies reveal that promoting moderation often faces opposition from conservative narratives which view pluralism as a threat to doctrinal purity. In this context, dialogical approaches grounded in religious values are needed—rather than purely normative approaches imposed by the state or international bodies. As shown by Subchi, I., Zulkifli, Z., Latifa, R., & Sa’diyah, S. (2022), the internalisation of moderation is more effective when delivered through theological narratives aligned with community beliefs, such as sermons, religious study groups, and formal religious institutions.

There is also a conceptual gap in some of the literature, where terms like “religious moderation” and “interfaith tolerance” are used interchangeably, despite their differences. Religious moderation entails more than tolerance—it includes critical reflection on one's own religious interpretations, openness to differing views, and willingness to engage in equal dialogue. Thus, conceptual literacy among academics, educators, and policymakers must be strengthened to avoid simplified understandings that could hinder effective application of these values.

Integrating religious moderation and multiculturalism requires cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial cooperation. Educational, religious, and cultural policies must be aligned. Some studies, including those by Anwar (2021) and Zulfikar et al. (2022), emphasise the need for regulatory frameworks that explicitly and consistently embed multicultural values into the national curriculum from primary to tertiary education. Moreover, the role of broadcast and social media is deemed crucial in shaping public opinion supportive of diversity.

A survey by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) recorded an increase in resistance to tolerance: the proportion of Muslims opposing the construction of non-Muslim houses of worship rose from 48% to 59% between 2016 and 2018—reflecting a real and growing trend of intolerance. This study reinforces the notion that religious moderation is a necessary inclusive tool within multicultural contexts. When combined with literature on inclusive multicultural values, these data highlight the urgent need to strengthen moderation initiatives.

Survey data involving Muslim students at state Islamic universities (N = 578) show that the level of religious moderation is influenced by religiosity and socio-economic status, based on multiple regression analysis. The model indicates a significant positive correlation between religiosity and involvement in student organisations with moderation, while parental income and allowance have limited or insignificant effects. These findings support thematic literature suggesting that religious moderation does not emerge automatically, but is shaped by education and social environments that actively support dialogue and multicultural pluralism.

Regarding the national tolerance index, data from the #ProjectSHIFT campaign show that the Religious Harmony Index (KUB) rose from 73.09% in 2022 to 76.02% in 2023. While this 2-point increase may seem modest, it still signals a positive direction. Among the literature on moderation strategies, several studies cite the effectiveness of youth digital campaigns as contributing factors to the improvement of such indicators. This provides empirical evidence that moderation is no longer confined to academic discourse but is reflected in public campaigns.

Table 2. Empirical Indicators of Religious Moderation and Multiculturalism in Indonesia

No	Indicator	Value / Finding	Data Source
1	Muslim opposition to non-Muslim worship houses	59% (up from 48% between 2016–2018)	National survey (LSI)
2	Moderate students (regression model)	Positive correlation: religiosity & student organisations	Survey of Islamic HEIs
3	National Religious Harmony Index (KUB)	76.02% (2023), up from 73.09% (2022)	#ProjectSHIFT Campaign
4	Social Piety Index (IKS)	83.92%	Puslitbang Bimas Agama
5	Muslim student tolerance toward minorities	3.82 (high category)	Jakarta student survey

This table further reinforces that empirical indicators support the trend towards integration of moderation and multiculturalism. For example, a high IKS score shows that religious piety does not automatically equate to moderation, but university survey data indicate that education settings play a vital role in fostering moderation more tangibly.

Based on thematic findings and empirical data, the discussion underscores that religious moderation and multiculturalism conceptually and practically reinforce each other. The literature on definitions and theory describes moderation as embodying values of al-‘adl (justice), tawazun (balance), tasamuh (tolerance), and laa ‘unf (non-violence), while multiculturalism is defined as a policy framework recognising cultural diversity and aiming for equitable social integration. This is corroborated by studies such as Abdullah Idi & Deni Priansyah (2023), who assert that moderation is vital for interfaith harmony in Indonesia's pluralistic society.

The interrelation between education and moderation practices is gaining strength. Studies by Susanti et al. (2023) and Wardani & Pranata (2024) show that interfaith dialogue and multicultural education activities improve student tolerance. This is backed by data on moderate student engagement in inclusive student organisations like

LDK or HMI, which significantly support the internalisation of moderation values via structures that promote pluralism and dialogue.

Research on the religious moderation programme under Indonesia's RPJMN 2020–2024 finds that while the policy framework is fairly robust, the main challenge lies in community-based implementation. Literature by Rohman (2021) and Kurniawan (2022) critiques the top-down nature of these policies, which limits their grassroots impact. Meanwhile, the consistently high IKS score remains administrative and may not reflect deeper social realities. These findings suggest the need for bottom-up strategies rooted in local values and community participation to reinforce religious moderation in multicultural frameworks.

Case studies from communities such as post-conflict Ambon and interfaith groups in Yogyakarta affirm that community-based approaches are effective in fostering harmony. This is consistent with the observation that tolerant cities like Ambon, Singkawang, and Manado, despite their ethnic and religious diversity, display high tolerance levels. These successes demonstrate the real synergy between religious moderation and multicultural values as ethical and social foundations for promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and social cohesion in diverse societies.

Literature also finds that some studies still conflate religious moderation and interfaith tolerance, despite their different dimensions: tolerance involves passive acceptance, whereas moderation entails reflective openness to one's own interpretations and equal dialogue. Clarifying this distinction is essential to ensure that moderation-based multicultural programmes are not reduced to "passive tolerance" but understood as active values of dialogue, inclusivity, and critical thinking toward dogmatic interpretations.

The majority of the literature (61%) originates from Indonesia, highlighting the relevance of national policies like RPJMN on religious moderation and multicultural education practices. Southeast Asian and Western literature offers comparative insights: countries like Malaysia, India, the UK, and Canada tend to emphasise multiculturalism in formal education and immigrant integration policies. This enables a globally integrative framework: religious moderation as a universal core value, and multiculturalism as a context adapted to each country's social conditions.

The interim conclusion is that the initial hypothesis—that religious moderation and multiculturalism are substantively interlinked in building inclusive societies—is strongly supported by thematic literature and empirical evidence. These concepts are not only theoretically aligned but interact practically across education, public policy, and intercommunity dialogue. The strength of internalised moderation is significantly amplified when placed within a multicultural framework that recognises cultural and religious pluralism.

Successful integration does not occur automatically. The effectiveness of religious moderation in enhancing social cohesion relies heavily on inclusive education environments, community-based public policies, and bottom-up initiatives involving interfaith society. Effective strategies include training dialogue facilitators, integrating

multicultural values in character education curricula, and youth digital campaigns (#ProjectSHIFT) that have helped raise national tolerance indicators.

Although the trend of religious moderation in Indonesia is progressing positively, ideological resistance from conservative groups remains a serious barrier. To overcome this, literature recommends theological approaches within faith communities (e.g., through sermons and religious study groups), so that moderation is seen not as a compromise, but as an essential part of religious teachings aligned with peace and justice.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review empirically demonstrates that integrating religious moderation and multiculturalism is well-supported by both academic literature and quantitative data. The growing focus on these interrelated concepts signals a paradigm shift—from a mere tolerance narrative to a strategic approach for fostering social cohesion. The empirical indicators show that moderation implemented within a multicultural framework is not only normative but increasingly internalised through education, public campaigns, and community-based policies.

The application of moderation values proves more effective in educational and social settings that encourage dialogue and active engagement. University student surveys indicate that religiosity combined with involvement in inclusive religious organisations correlates with higher moderation levels. These findings are reinforced by the rise in the Religious Harmony Index and other indicators like IKS and student tolerance, showing that educational spaces and youth participation are crucial in rooting diversity values.

Ideological resistance from conservative groups and oversimplification of moderation as passive tolerance remain key challenges. Thus, implementation strategies must emphasise community-based and internal religious narratives aligned with community beliefs. This not only enhances the legitimacy of moderate values among religious adherents but ensures that religious moderation programmes truly reflect the needs and social realities of multicultural societies.

In summary, this study confirms the initial hypothesis that religious moderation can be strengthened through a multicultural approach, supported by academic evidence. The findings contribute to the formulation of a conceptual framework integrating both approaches across various social contexts. This integrative model has the potential for wide application in education policy, community development, and interfaith dialogue in diverse nations. However, its success depends heavily on a shared commitment by the state, civil society, religious institutions, and educational sectors to build an open, just, and equal social ecosystem for all groups.

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