

Research article

Beyond Relativism and Exclusivism: Ontology of Commitment as Foundation for Religious Freedom and Moderation in Indonesia

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Abstract

Religious moderation has emerged as a central concept shaping the trajectory of religious freedom, primarily through the lenses of social tolerance and religious tolerance. A failure to distinguish between these two forms of tolerance carefully risks rendering the problem of religious truth both relative and biased. Consequently, efforts to promote religious moderation may inadvertently give rise to a new form of religious pluralism. This study employs a research-based literature review and critical analysis, drawing on Robert Audi's ontological commitment as its primary philosophical framework. The methodology integrates three systematic elements: *first*, interpretation is used to identify and articulate the core problems inherent in religious moderation; *second*, induction is employed to derive general conclusions about the concept of religious moderation; and *third*, heuristics are applied to explore the concept ontologically, epistemologically, and axiologically. The findings reveal that a nuanced distinction between social tolerance and religious tolerance is essential to prevent the dilution of religious truth claims while still fostering a pluralistic public sphere. Furthermore, the study identifies that without a strong ontological foundation as articulated by Audi religious moderation risks either descending into relativism (if tolerance is overemphasized) or lapsing into exclusivism (if truth claims are overemphasized). Thus, the findings demonstrate that a balanced, ontology-based approach can provide a more fundamental and coherent understanding of the actualization of religious freedom in Indonesia.

Keywords

Ontology Commitment; Religious Freedom; Religious Moderation; Religious Pluralism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Moderate attitudes are commonly associated with a religious environment characterized by significant diversity (Abror, 2020). In Indonesia, the discourse on moderation remains an ongoing debate regarding the nation's plurality, making the realization of religious moderation as a middle way critically important (Islam, 2020). This urgency stems from Indonesia's heterogeneous structure, which seeks balance between belief and practice, material and spiritual meaning, and worldly (*duniawi*) versus otherworldly (*ukhrawi*) orientations (Putri et al., 2024). However, framing religious moderation as a practical necessity (Jamarudin et al., 2022) often reveals an underlying inconsistency in individual religious commitment (Ridho, 2020). When citizens struggle to reconcile civic duties with faith fidelity, a fundamental tension emerges at the core of the moderation dilemma. Meanwhile, religious moderation is conceptually articulated as *Wasatiyyah* (Ari Wibowo, 2019; Fuadi, 2021; Sutrisno, 2019), denoting a justly-balanced, non-aligned posture.

Regionally, Muslim communities in Singapore have operationalized *Wasatiyyah* as a counter-ideology tool to promote inter-religious harmony and prevent radicalization (Hassan, 2014; 2025). Singapore's experience as a Muslim minority in a secular state offers valuable insights into institutionalizing *Wasatiyyah* as both theology and practical framework (Hassan, 2025). Through the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) and partnerships with non-state bodies like PERGAS, preaching is regulated to foster open, moderate thought (Muchtar et al., 2024; Hassan, 2025). Consequently, religious moderation has gained significant academic traction globally (Faisal et al., 2022: 48).

In Indonesia, moderation acts as an active counter-ideological measure defending Pancasila (Irama, 2021). Scholarship confirms that Pancasila functions as a civil religion supporting inclusive Islamic politics. However, critics argue that state-sponsored moderation risks promoting religious relativism or doctrinal inconsistency (Farida, 2020; Hasanuddin & Ginting, 2021). Empirical studies warn that top-down, purely textual implementations—unintegrated into school culture—fail as transformative forces, inadvertently increasing intolerance, violence, and fanatical attitudes among students. Without a holistic and culturally embedded approach, moderation policy risks becoming counterproductive.

This disconnect often stems from alignment gaps between individual cognition and religious practice, compounded by varying national standards. Globally, bibliometric research indicates a surge in moderation studies since 2019, with the

United States and Indonesia leading publication volume. Yet, definitional consensus remains elusive across political contexts. In Indonesia's democratic transition, debate persists on whether Pancasila should remain an open philosophy or an imposed formal ideology. Nevertheless, comparative studies (e.g., versus Syria) demonstrate that Indonesia's sociohistorical fabric yields higher Islamic moderation practices, affirming that moderation must align with local ideological frameworks.

Internationally, the 2004 Amman Message, ratified by the OIC, prohibited excommunication (*takfir*) and affirmed human dignity through justice, balance, and facilitation (*taysir*) while condemning excess (*ghuluww*) (Anica, 2021; Pinna, 2004; Rohmanu, 2011). This was reinforced by the 2005 Makkah Declaration, which rejected terrorism and violence in favor of universal human values (Hefner, 2021). Domestically, the 2018 Bogor Treatise contextualized moderation through seven core pillars: *Tawassut* (middle path), *I'tidal* (fairness), *Tasamuh* (tolerance), *Syura* (consultation), *Ishlah* (reform), *Qudwah* (leadership), and *Murwatanah* (national loyalty) (Fahri, 2019; Mu'ti & Burhani, 2019)—which the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs formally institutionalized in 2019 to ground national harmony in justice and balance (Fitri & Barizi, 2025).

Despite its utility against radicalism (Ipandang et al., 2022; Jamarudin et al., 2022), moderation faces skepticism from critics who view it as a pluralist ploy to equate all religions (Bakar, 2015; Muharam, 2020; Sumbulah & Nurjanah, 2013). Crucially, existing scholarship lacks ontological confirmation of religious moderation itself. As moderation determines whether freedom manifests as mere social tolerance or genuine religious tolerance, an ontological inquiry into moderation must examine its philosophical roots. Without establishing this essence, discussions of religious freedom remain vulnerable to relativism and bias (Abror, 2020).

This research gap is accentuated by empirical evidence showing a stagnation of religious freedom in Indonesia, driven by policies that prioritize state-sponsored moderation over constitutional rights. While global literature addresses diversity accommodation (Modood, 2013; Haitomi et al., 2022), bibliometric analysis reveals that the ontological link between religious freedom and moderation remains conspicuously underexplored.

Most extant studies reduce religious moderation to functional or descriptive categories, such as community attitudes, anti-radicalism pedagogy (Aulia, 2024), boundary management (Abror, 2020), national-ideological alignment (Ridho, 2020; Islam, 2020), or intrinsic tolerance. However, none systematically unpack its

ontological relationship with religious freedom, leaving unresolved whether moderation inherently safeguards or curtails liberty.

Addressing this gap, Robert Audi's ontology of commitment posits that authentic religious conviction is not purely private but carries public responsibilities (Audi, 2000). Applied to Indonesia, religious freedom imposes normative demands: citizens must demonstrate firm commitment to their faith while acknowledging others' equal right to worship without coercion. Anchored in Pancasila, constitutional protections (UUD 1945 Article 29), and scriptural principles (QS. Al-Baqarah: 256), tolerance becomes an active duty to protect others' freedom rather than passive non-interference. This conceptual bridge, which Audi terms "theo-ethical equilibrium" (Audi, 2011), grounds moral action in religious belief while maintaining accountability to shared civic respect.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, library-based research design utilizing critical philosophical analysis as its primary method. Rather than merely describing the empirical conditions of religious freedom in Indonesia, the research addresses a normative question: how authentic religious commitment manifest in actions that respect plurality. While empirical data alone can only reveal the case rather than what ought to be the case, a philosophical framework is essential to provide a rational justification for why active tolerance is an inherent demand of authentic faith within a pluralistic democracy.

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on Robert Audi's ontology of commitment. In *The Architecture of Reason*, Audi (2001) develops a theory of justified belief based on experiential grounding, critical reflection, and coherence. Extending these epistemological criteria to public religious commitment, Audi offers a rational defense of civic pluralism: holding one's convictions rationally requires acknowledging that others may hold different convictions on equally rational grounds. Applied to Indonesia, this framework interprets civic pluralism not as passive non-interference, but as an active, rational acceptance of diversity grounded in practical reason and national principles such as Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution (Audi, 2001, 2011; Jimly, 2016).

To operationalize this inquiry, three systematic methodological elements are integrated into a continuous analytical flow. *First*, the interpretive method diagnoses

the core sociopolitical frictions underlying religious moderation in Indonesia, where conflicts in a highly diverse society often stem from religious insecurity and the perception of difference as an existential threat (Hilmy, 2018; Islam, 2020). Within this context, state initiatives—such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ establishment of Religious Moderation Houses across higher education institutions (PTKINs)—serve as key interpretive framing devices to foster coexistence over hostility (Hefner, 2021; Saifuddin, 2019). *Second*, the inductive method synthesizes empirical observations of inter-religious tension and local tolerance practices into generalized propositions, allowing the study to address the persistent dilemma between doctrinal exclusivism and practical tolerance. By applying Audi’s ontology of commitment, this inductive process demonstrates that individuals can maintain firm doctrinal convictions without devaluing others, representing a mature commitment that is neither relativistic nor dogmatic (Hilmy, 2018). *Finally*, the heuristic method systematically investigates religious moderation across three interconnected philosophical dimensions: ontologically, by exploring the ultimate nature of religious truth and diagnosing the roots of exclusivism to foster genuine dialogue; epistemologically, by emphasizing epistemological humility—acknowledging that human understanding of divine truth is inherently partial—to prevent the absolutization of contingent interpretations (Hefner, 2019; Hilmy, 2018); and axiologically, by evaluating how religious morality informs public action, thereby grounding moderation in universal ethical principles such as justice, compassion, and human dignity. Through these integrated elements, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts to construct a coherent philosophical foundation for religious freedom and moderation in Indonesia.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Moderation Dilemma: Social and Religious Tolerance

The fundamental problem regarding religious freedom in Indonesia does not lie solely in the presence or absence of formal legal guarantees, but rather in the structural tension between the constitutional recognition of religious liberty and its discriminatory implementation at both social and policy levels. Religious freedom cannot be defined merely as an individual’s internal right to hold certain private convictions (*forum internum*). Rather, authentic religious freedom encompasses both internal freedom and external freedom (*forum externum*)—the right to express, practice, and manifest those beliefs in the public sphere without fear of discrimination, coercion, or violence.

In the contemporary Indonesian context, this scope has evolved into a contested arena over the state's recognition of religious minority groups, equal access to public services, and non-discriminatory participation in civic life. In concrete terms, this problem manifests as unresolved tensions among human rights guarantees, moral obligations, and social responsibilities. Consequently, the primary challenge facing religious freedom in Indonesia is the state's and society's inability to manage pluralism fairly without collapsing into either majoritarian dominance or secular anarchy.

To resolve this impasse, a clear distinction must be made between social tolerance and religious tolerance. Religion serves as one of the most critical cultural and institutional foundations in constructing human identity. As Robert Audi (1991, 1993) emphasizes, commitment to spiritual and moral matters provides an essential grounding for human action, maintaining that a belief gains rational justification when supported by coherent, independent normative sources. In a democratic society, state neutrality does not require the erasure of religious identity; rather, it demands a framework wherein religious commitments generate motives for moderate, prosocial behavior.

In Indonesia, religious moderation (*Wasatiyyah*) has historically evolved from a top-down state policy driven by the Ministry of Religious Affairs into a broader civil society movement (Hefner, 2021). This process of "moderatisation" extends beyond the mere rejection of violent extremism; it entails cultivating empathetic interfaith dialogue, institutionalizing tolerance within educational curricula, and promoting civic harmony.

However, the practical implementation of religious moderation faces persistent headwinds. These include the rise of populist religious identity politics, electoral polarization, and bureaucratic reductionism. Critical scholarship notes that when the state adopts a purely top-down, administrative approach to moderation, complex theological commitments risk being reduced to mere superficial compliance, thereby stifling organic, community-based tolerance. Therefore, religious moderation must not be viewed as an attempt to dilute theological doctrines or merge distinct religious concepts into a vague syncretism. Instead, it must function as a strategic instrument to preserve deep religious commitment while guaranteeing equal rights in the public sphere (Solahudin, 2019).

3.2. Grounding Indonesian Religious Freedom in Pancasila

From a liberal philosophical standpoint, such as that articulated by Andrew Altman, freedom of religion is conceptualized as a baseline liberty that protects both

the right to choose a religion and the right to adhere to no religion at all (Simanjuntak, 2022). Under this framework, constitutional protections extend equally to atheism, agnosticism, and non-institutionalized spiritual beliefs.

However, Indonesia's constitutional landscape departs significantly from this classic liberal baseline. Grounded in Presidential Decree No. 1/PNPS of 1965 and the first principle of Pancasila—"Belief in the One and Only God"—the Indonesian state requires its citizens to embrace a recognized religious faith, explicitly rejecting state-sanctioned atheism or secular irreligion (Pemerintah Pusat, 1965).

This "bounded" model of religious freedom creates a unique normative architecture. Pancasila functions not merely as a political compromise, but as the foundational ethical orientation (*philosophische grondslag*) of the nation (Putri et al., 2024). By establishing divinity as a central pillar of nation-building, the state binds religious freedom to moral responsibility toward the common good (Rahmah, 2009).

While this framework successfully guards against religious extremism and violent radicalism—such as religiously motivated terrorism (Halim, 2013)—it also generates constitutional friction when evaluated against universal human rights metrics. Historically, Indonesian society and legal institutions have viewed extreme religious liberalism, unrestrained secularism, and theological relativism as potential threats to national cohesion (MUI, 2005; Muktiono, 2012).

The dynamic history of Indonesian religious freedom illustrates a continuous effort to negotiate this tension between universal human rights norms and national religious character:

1965–1998 (State-Controlled Orthodoxy): Presidential Decree No. 1/PNPS of 1965 established a state-sanctioned framework restricting unrecognized faiths and non-religious ideologies.

2000 (Recognition of Minority Rights): On 17 January 2000, the state revoked Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967, formally ending decades of institutional discrimination against the religious and cultural practices of ethnic Chinese Indonesians (Ramli, 2019).

2009 (Constitutional Court Decision No. 140/PUU-VII/2009): The Constitutional Court upheld the legality of the 1965 Blasphemy Law, affirming that religious freedom in Indonesia is bounded by moral standards, public order, and the principle of divinity.

While religious minorities initially feared that Court Decision No. 140/PUU-VII/2009 privileged majoritarian standards, subsequent policy interpretations have

framed Religious Moderation as a constructive middle ground (Hudaeri, 2007; Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019). Under this synthesis, religious freedom and religious moderation are not mutually exclusive; they are complementary dimensions of a unified constitutional order.

Freedom of religion provides the foundational right ensuring that no citizen is coerced in matters of conscience. Moderation provides the social mechanism preventing that freedom from devolving into sectarian conflict or majoritarian tyranny. The remaining theoretical hurdle, therefore, is ontological: how can an individual maintain absolute fidelity to their religious truth claims while simultaneously respecting the equal freedom of others?

3.3. Ontology of Commitment: Justification for Civic Pluralism

To provide a rigorous philosophical answer to this challenge, this study draws upon Robert Audi's ontology of commitment. Audi asserts that authentic religious commitment operates through a dual obligation: *First*, the individual commitment to obey divine morality and scriptural tenets (*private sphere*); and *second*, the shared civic commitment to cultivate social harmony and justice alongside fellow citizens (*public sphere*). In democratic societies, these two obligations do not exist in opposition; rather, they operate simultaneously through practical reason and ethical principles (Audi, 2014).

In *The Architecture of Reason*, Audi (2001) posits that moral obligations are grounded in rational beliefs that direct human action toward intrinsic moral goods. When a moral obligation is informed by a religious norm, the resulting action becomes a sacred duty for the believer. However, Audi cautions that religious actions in a pluralistic public sphere must also satisfy the criteria of rational reflection and value coherence (Audi, 2005).

This yields what Audi terms Rational Symmetry: if a religious believer holds their convictions rationally, they must recognize that adherents of other faith traditions hold their respective beliefs on equally rational grounds. Acknowledging the rationality of another person's faith does not require compromising one's own truth claims; rather, it requires acknowledging that one's personal conviction does not grant political authority to coerce or invalidate others (Audi, 1993).

Applying Audi's ontology of commitment to Indonesia reveals that religious moderation is not a pragmatic compromise born of weakness, nor is it a secular

dilution of faith. Instead, it represents the highest expression of rational religious commitment. Under this framework, five core principles emerge to guide the actualization of religious freedom and moderation in Indonesia:

First, differentiation of theological truth claims from civic obligations, where adherents maintain doctrinal integrity in personal worship while upholding non-discriminatory equality in public civic interactions. *Second*, transition from passive tolerance to active respect, aimed to move beyond mere non-interference toward an active recognition of the rational and constitutional rights of other religious communities. *Third*, institutionalization of dialogical frameworks by embedding reflective interfaith dialogue and dispute resolution within educational, legal, and civic institutions. *Fourth*, harmonization of individual liberty with communal welfare by balancing personal religious expression (*forum externum*) against public order and the overarching ethics of Pancasila. *Finally*, cultivation of epistemological humility by recognizing that while divine truth is absolute, human interpretations of sacred texts remain partial, necessitating humility and peaceful coexistence.

Ultimately, Robert Audi's framework demonstrates that deep religious conviction and robust religious freedom are mutually reinforcing. By anchoring religious moderation in an ontology of commitment, the Indonesian state and society can transcend the false dichotomy between religious exclusivism and secular relativism, securing a democratic public sphere grounded in both divine morality and civic justice.

3 CONCLUSION

Religious moderation is the right step if implemented properly in Indonesia. Based on the description above, religious moderation is relevant to an inclusive, tolerant, and diverse life. However, religious moderation can still give rise to liberalism and pluralism. This is undoubtedly an academic study in the philosophy of religion that should get more attention. So, determining the essence of freedom of religion in Indonesia does not only emphasize moral decisions or considerations. However, what determines is the ontology of commitment of each individual in maintaining religion as an ethical basis. Religious moderation in Indonesia need not remain an abstract ideal or a contested political slogan. By operationalizing Robert Audi's philosophy of religious commitment into measurable indicators, structured training programs, institutionalized dialogue forums, curriculum reforms, and systematic policy assessments, the dynamics of religious moderation can be advanced

in practical, accountable, and comparable ways. The key insight from Audi is that authentic religious commitment is not weakened by epistemic humility, dialogue, or procedural fairness it is strengthened. A believer who can articulate their faith clearly, respect others' right to differ, engage in substantive theological dialogue, and accept fair procedural constraints is not a less committed believer but a more mature one. For Indonesia, the challenge is not to choose between religious conviction and social harmony but to cultivate an environment where both can flourish, where the ontology of commitment is honored, and the ontology of coexistence is realized.

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