

Living Together in Difference: Enhancing Intercultural Communication through Religious Moderation in Post-Conflict Aceh

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Abstract

The implementation of Islamic law in Aceh is frequently associated with restrictions on minority rights and the rise of intolerance. However, little is known about contexts where Islamic law operates alongside patterns of interreligious harmony. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how moderation is practiced in Langsa City by focusing on interfaith communication strategies within the framework of Islamic law. Guided by Face Negotiation Theory, the research employs a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of interfaith interactions. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and then systematically interpreted to identify recurring communication patterns. Particular attention is given to how individuals and groups manage face—balancing self-face and other-face—in their interactions. The findings demonstrate that religious moderation in Langsa is not simply the outcome of legal enforcement but emerges from continuous communication and negotiation across various social and institutional settings. Specifically, the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB) and the Moderation Village program are central in fostering dialogue and sustaining trust between majority and minority groups. Moderation is further reinforced through culturally grounded values, accommodative legal mechanisms, educational initiatives, and collective expectations that encourage harmony and cooperation. These dynamics highlight the role of communication as a mediating force between normative frameworks of Islamic law and the lived reality of interreligious relations. Theoretically, the study advances Face Negotiation Theory by extending its application from intercultural to interreligious contexts. Practically, it proposes a communication-based model of moderation that can inform policymakers and community leaders in designing inclusive strategies for interfaith coexistence in multicultural environments.

Keywords

Intercultural Communication; Religious Moderation; Aceh

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1. INTRODUCTION

Post-conflict Aceh continues to face a variety of complex challenges. One of the persistent issues lies in governance, which has yet to function effectively in meeting public interests (Lee-Koo 2012). Alongside this, new types of conflict frequently surface and threaten peace, ranging from social and political disputes to intolerance and terrorism (Nirzalin and Febriandi 2020). Although such conflicts also occur in other regions of Indonesia, they remain highly sensitive in Aceh as they are often



associated with threats to peace and the possibility of renewed rebellion (Fakhri et al. 2025). This situation demonstrates that the Helsinki MoU did not automatically resolve all disputes; rather, it succeeded in concluding the "old conflict" while simultaneously opening the door to new forms of tension. If these conflicts are left unmanaged, they can weaken efforts to build sustainable peace in the province (Missbach 2011; Zulkarnaen and Suzanna 2018).

Within this broader landscape, the city of Langsa holds a strategic position as a multiethnic and multireligious community that reflects both the opportunities and challenges of coexistence under Islamic law. Previous studies suggest that the implementation of sharia in Langsa has at times reinforced intolerant tendencies, positioning minorities as "guests" in public life and compelling them to adapt to majority norms. Tolerance indexes have even ranked Langsa among the least tolerant cities in Indonesia, though their credibility remains debated, underscoring the persistence of intolerance as a serious concern. At the same time, everyday interactions reveal cooperation, mutual respect, and pragmatic coexistence that signal the presence of religious moderation despite such challenges. This paradox leads to the central research question: How is religious moderation practiced in Langsa through interfaith communication within Islamic law?.

Langsa, therefore, represents a focal point in Aceh's post-conflict environment. Prior studies contend that enforcing Islamic law in the city has generated pressures of conformity within religious life (Ichwan, Salim, and Srimulyani 2020). Non-Muslim minorities are often situated as outsiders in public policy and socially compelled to align with majority identity, for instance through hybrid practices such as non-Muslim women adopting the hijab (Ansor and Amri 2020). Furthermore, tolerance index reports have ranked Langsa among the ten cities with the lowest levels of tolerance in Indonesia, alongside Depok, Banda Aceh, Cilegon, Pariaman, Sabang, Padang Panjang, Padang, Pekanbaru, and Makassar (Ameliya 2022). Aceh contributes three cities to this list (Wahyudi and Siagian 2024). Although the accuracy of these indicators is open to discussion, they nevertheless reflect intolerance as a major and enduring challenge in Aceh (Zulkarnaen and Suzanna 2018), particularly in Langsa. Such a condition threatens social harmony, undermines respect for diversity, erodes unity, and distances society from religious moderation practices meant to cultivate respect and togetherness (Akhmadi 2019).

Against this background, the present study is grounded in the argument that although intercultural communication is widely acknowledged as a means of fostering competence across differences, in practice, its implementation often encounters tensions and difficulties in achieving religious moderation (Tahir et al. 2020). Earlier studies have underscored the importance of intercultural communication for maintaining social cohesion, whether through the use of local languages as tools of unification in diverse settings, through adaptation to local traditions that enhance competence, or through communication rooted in humanitarian values that reinforce social bonds (Eko and Putranto 2019). Intercultural communication, therefore, invariably involves processes of understanding and adaptation across cultural differences in order to prevent conflict and minimize misperception (Jailani, M., Dewantara, J. A., & Rahmani 2021).

Existing research on religious moderation in Indonesia has predominantly concentrated on the roles of cultural communication (Ahmad, Pratama, and Jannah 2025), interpersonal communication (Ardianto, Gelgel, and Burmansah 2025), and digital media in promoting harmony (Muthia, Sultan, and Latief 2024). For example, research in Trenggalek emphasized the effectiveness of interpersonal communication in instilling moderation values (Fitriani and Prabowo 2023). A study in Asahan examined the communication model of the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in preventing and

resolving conflict (Muchlis, Sukiman, and Rubino 2022), while research in North Sumatra highlighted the significance of local wisdom in sustaining tolerant attitudes (Mailin, Sazali, and Dharma 2023). Meanwhile, digital media studies—such as analyses of the nu.or.id portal and the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ official website—have demonstrated how online communication is used to counter radical discourse and disseminate moderation values (Salendra 2024).

Studies on multiethnic and interfaith communication highlight the central role of religious and ethnic-racial identities in shaping self-concept, psychosocial well-being, and family interactions within social contexts marked by privilege and bias (Warner Colaner et al. 2023). Empirical evidence demonstrates that open communication about cultural and religious differences reduces conflict, enhances satisfaction, and fosters identity socialization, integration of differences, and resilience against prejudice. These findings shift the focus from deficit-oriented perspectives to the strengths of interfaith and multiethnic families in sustaining harmony (Reiter and Gee 2008). Nonetheless, existing research remains limited by its emphasis on Western contexts and Abrahamic traditions and the relative absence of children's, adolescents', and extended families' perspectives. Broader discussions, such as those inspired by Vatican II, underline the importance of dialogue that extends beyond tolerance toward active cooperation in community building (Sunarko OFM 2016). In Indonesia, similar dynamics suggest that interfaith dialogue and collaboration can strengthen social cohesion and contribute to consolidating a democracy rooted in diversity.

Most scholarly work on multiethnic and interfaith communication emphasizes the significance of open dialogue in mitigating conflict and fostering identity integration. Nevertheless, this research remains predominantly within Western contexts, centered on Abrahamic traditions, and limited to family-level interactions. As a result, little is known about how interfaith communication operates in community settings that are deeply influenced by legal and political structures, particularly within Muslim-majority societies where Islamic law is implemented. From a theoretical standpoint, existing studies have largely privileged intercultural approaches, with minimal engagement in applying Face Negotiation Theory to interreligious encounters. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the practice of religious moderation in Langsa, Aceh, a post-conflict region characterized by enforcing Islamic law. Drawing on Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey 2017), it explores how individuals and groups negotiate self-face and other-face to sustain interreligious harmony. The research makes a theoretical contribution by extending the scope of intercultural communication into interreligious contexts. In contrast, its practical contribution lies in advancing a communication-based framework that may inform the development of inclusive policies in multicultural and post-conflict societies.

In pursuing this aim, the study adopts Face Negotiation Theory as its analytical lens. The theory explains how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds negotiate their “face,” or self-image, during social encounters (Ting-toomey and Kurogi 1998). It distinguishes between positive and negative face, emphasizing two interrelated concepts: self-face and other-face (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey 2003). Self-face refers to efforts to preserve one's identity and dignity, while other-face highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting the identity and dignity of others. Within the context of Langsa, these concepts are critical to understanding how majority and minority communities manage interreligious communication. By applying this framework, the study seeks to reveal the communicative dynamics that support moderation while simultaneously addressing the fragility of social relations in a post-conflict environment.

The contribution of this study is twofold. From a theoretical standpoint, it advances the field of

communication by showing the relevance of Face Negotiation Theory for analyzing interfaith dynamics, thereby extending its scope from intercultural to interreligious contexts. From a practical standpoint, it introduces a communication-based model of moderation that can guide policymakers, community leaders, and civil society actors in designing inclusive strategies for coexistence. In a setting where peace is still fragile and interreligious harmony remains under pressure. These contributions are essential to reinforce social cohesion and strengthen the values of mutual respect and cooperation.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study approach (Fossey et al. 2002) to examine the practice of religious moderation through interreligious communication in Langsa City, Aceh. Langsa was purposefully selected not only because of its paradoxical image as one of the least tolerant cities in national surveys and a site of everyday interreligious cooperation, but also because of its strategic sociopolitical context. As a multiethnic and multireligious city in post-conflict Aceh, Langsa represents a critical setting where the implementation of Islamic law intersects with diverse communal identities, making it a theoretically significant case for advancing scholarship on religious moderation, intergroup communication, and the application of Face Negotiation Theory in interreligious contexts.

Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure breadth and depth. In-depth interviews were conducted with participants (Fadila et al. 2025), including Islamic clerics, Christian leaders, Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) members, local government officials, community elders, and socio-religious activists. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to capture diverse perspectives, with particular attention to ensuring the representation of both majority and minority groups. In addition, direct observations were carried out during religious celebrations, interfaith dialogue forums, and everyday interactions in multiethnic neighborhoods. These were complemented by document analysis, including policy papers, research reports, local media archives, and scholarly publications on intolerance and religious moderation in Aceh (Ardiansyah, Risnita, and Jailani 2023).

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, allowing themes to emerge from the empirical material rather than being imposed through predetermined categories. The process began with open coding of significant statements from interviews, observations, and documents. These were then clustered into broader themes such as negotiation of self-face and other-face, strategies of interreligious cooperation, and expressions of moderation in daily practices. To strengthen validity, the study employed triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, and compared majority and minority perspectives. In addition, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to verify accuracy, while peer debriefing with fellow researchers was used to refine interpretations. These strategies enhanced the study's credibility and transparency, ensuring that the findings are firmly grounded in participants' lived experiences (Daruhadi and Sopiati 2024).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Maintaining Positive Face in Intercultural Communication: Religious Moderation Practices in Langsa City

The maintenance of positive face is an important factor in communication. According to Ting-Toomey, maintaining positive face can be closely related to respect for local cultural values. In this context, individuals manage and preserve their face or social identity in intercultural interactions. Face

here refers to the positive self-image people want to maintain in interpersonal communication (Ting-toomey and Kurogi 1998b). Maintaining face in Langsa's culture is very important, as it is in many cultures worldwide. Americans embrace an individualistic culture that tends to value personal goals and needs, unlike Japanese, Chinese, and Indonesian societies that embrace a collectivist cultural system. People are often perceived as "we" and tend to value collective goals and needs (Matsumoto et al., 1996; Chon & Inagaki, 2020). Based on this classification, if we examine the religious culture of Langsa's society, it adopts a collectivist cultural system. Thus, formally and legally, they are recognized within their respective religious institutions, which are then unified under an umbrella organization known as the Inter-Religious Harmony Forum (Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama or FKUB) of Langsa City (Ansor and Amri 2020).

FKUB is a forum established by the government as a platform for interfaith communities to engage in dialogue on religious issues. This forum is important for every religious group in Langsa City, especially for minority groups. All religions can dialogue and present their concerns regarding religious and communal issues. Considering that the prevailing culture is collectivist, FKUB serves as an important platform for representing the religious identities (faces) of Langsa's communities.

For the people of Langsa, religion is an identity or face that embodies the collectivist culture. In everyday life, religion serves as a guide for actions and behavior. Each religion has institutions and authoritative figures within it. FKUB functions as a facilitator for all these religious institutions and leaders. Based on information provided by the Chairperson of FKUB Langsa, it was explained:

"The Inter-Religious Harmony Forum of Langsa City has consistently played a full role in maintaining religious harmony. If problems arise in interfaith interactions, FKUB sends letters to all religious representatives and leaders, inviting them to discuss and seek a middle ground through an approach of mutual giving and receiving in problem-solving. FKUB also seeks effective actions to resolve conflicts. Most issues arise from casual remarks in social interactions that trigger prejudice. Usually, efforts to seek a middle ground run smoothly and successfully resolve the problem. Religious leaders invited to the forum do not insist on their own truth but tend to accept solutions for resolution." (Interview with FKUB Chairperson).

To maintain religious tolerance in Langsa City, FKUB undertakes efforts to synergize and harmonize religious life through interfaith dialogues with religious leaders and activities involving all religious groups, such as religious moderation programs aligned with government initiatives, including community walks, social aid for people experiencing poverty and orphans across religions, and other interfaith events (Interview with FKUB members). These initiatives demonstrate FKUB's role as a mediator in fostering harmony and promoting religious moderation in Langsa City, which can be analyzed through two main strategies: seeking a middle ground between conflicting cultures and implementing effective, solution-oriented actions.

In the analysis of Face Negotiation, FKUB employs compromising (bargaining) and integrative (problem-solving) strategies.

Figure 1. Face Negotiation in Langsa City

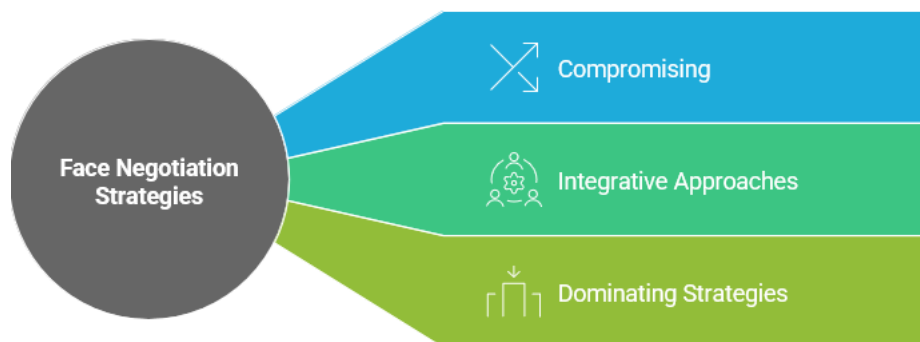


Figure 1 illustrates three communication strategies employed by FKUB Kota Langsa. *First*, the *compromising* strategy, which seeks a middle ground through a give-and-take approach. In this case, FKUB receives complaints and input from conflicting parties while providing solutions. Community members usually submit complaints, and before offering a resolution, FKUB first listens to the perspectives of both religious leaders. Afterward, FKUB adopts a middle path in addressing the issue. *Second*, the *integrative* strategy involves finding solutions that accommodate the interests and needs of all parties involved in the negotiation. This strategy focuses on creating a win-win solution, where each side feels its interests fairly represented. For example, FKUB engages in negotiations by identifying the core issues and then seeking joint options for resolution. This is often done through community walks and aid distribution without distinguishing between religions (Putri, Rahman, and Khotimah 2025).

In addition to using compromising and integrative approaches, FKUB sometimes applies a dominating (competing) strategy (Aryanto and Sitorus 2025). In Face Negotiation Theory, the dominating approach emphasizes one's interests, needs, and desires with little or no consideration for the other party's face. This strategy is often used to achieve personal goals without much compromise. In this context, FKUB uses its authority as a government-recognized forum for religious harmony. When employing this approach, FKUB does not necessarily consider the needs of others' faces; the most important priority is to achieve harmony.

Beyond FKUB, moderation is also shaped through the role of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Ministry is important in promoting religious moderation in society, especially in Indonesia and other countries with significant Muslim populations. The Ministry's initiatives include facilitating interfaith dialogue, developing inclusive religious education programs, and fostering religious tolerance. It also supervises religious practices, manages places of worship, and ensures that religious values are not misused for extremist or violent purposes.

In Langsa City, one concrete example of the Ministry's role in fostering tolerance as part of religious moderation is the establishment of a Religious Moderation Pilot Village in Karang Anyar Village, Langsa Baro District. Establishing Karang Anyar as a Moderation Village is nominal and realized through activities promoting tolerance and togetherness. The Head of the Office of Religious Affairs in Langsa Baro explained:

"In Karang Anyar, a Moderation Village has been established to maintain interfaith harmony. Karang Anyar was chosen as a pilot project because the community there is religiously diverse. Although conflicts have occurred in the past, the people of Karang Anyar can live in harmony despite their religious differences."

This information is also reinforced by the explanation from the organizers of religious moderation activities in Gampong Karang Anyar, stating that through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Government officially inaugurated Karang Anyar as a Moderation Village in Langsa on July 26, 2023. The inauguration of the Moderation Village was launched by the Mayor of Langsa, together with the Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office of Langsa. The selection of Gampong Karang Anyar as a pilot project for religious moderation was based on the fact that the community demonstrates a high tolerance toward diversity.

In contrast to the role of FKUB, the Ministry of Religious Affairs tends to use a dominating strategy. With the authority granted by the Minister of Religious Affairs through Decree No. 92 of 2022 on Strengthening the Religious Moderation Program within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry established a Moderation Village in Karang Anyar. The dominating strategy (competing), within the framework of Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998), is an approach that prioritizes one's own interests and goals without giving much consideration to the needs of other parties. In the case of establishing the Moderation Village, this strategy must still be applied wisely, considering the Ministry's role that is inherently religious and grounded in tolerance.

There are several ways in which the Ministry of Religious Affairs can employ a dominating strategy within the framework of Face Negotiation Theory. *First*, the Ministry can enact policies on religious moderation that are considered correct and consistent with the principles they uphold. Such policies may be enforced without compromise if deemed crucial to achieving the goals of religious moderation. This is applied when a village is considered sufficiently representative to be designated as a Moderation Village. Karang Anyar, for instance, was chosen because of the diversity within its community, which consists not only of one religion but also several religions and beliefs. *Second*, the Ministry can strengthen supervision and law enforcement against actions or individuals perceived as harmful to religious moderation, thereby ensuring firmness in applying the rules and preventing violations. *Third*, the Ministry may establish clear religious standards and emphasize norms that support moderation, while avoiding excessive compromise to maintain consistent principles. *Fourth*, the Ministry can design religious education programs that instill the values of moderation and tolerance among village communities. A dominating approach in this context ensures that the messages of moderation and tolerance are delivered effectively and assertively. *Finally*, the Ministry may take a firm stance in upholding rules and regulations supporting religious moderation by taking decisive action against violations (Observations on the Karang Anyar community).

As Ting-Toomey notes, using a *dominating* strategy does not always yield positive outcomes, as it may create dissatisfaction and conflict (Ting-Toomey 2017). To respond to this risk, the Ministry of Religious Affairs involves other institutions such as the Langsa City Government, FKUB, and other local government entities. Furthermore, the Ministry seeks to balance achieving religious moderation goals with maintaining positive relations with village communities and stakeholders. Dialogue and communication with villagers are also kept open to understand better their perspectives, which is

crucial in achieving moderation goals. This balance is maintained by organizing activities that accommodate all community groups regardless of ethnicity or religion.

The challenge lies in how groups with different identities (*faces*) within the Forum for Religious Harmony can foster cohesion, given that their differences extend beyond ethnicity to religious beliefs. Moreover, these groups exist as minorities within the dominance of Islam, which enforces Islamic law as a regional regulation. Based on the information obtained, minority religious groups strive to preserve the values of their local faith. In this context, Ting-Toomey refers to it as maintaining a positive face (*positive face*).

Maintaining a *positive face* (the desire to be seen as good, competent, and valuable) in Stella Ting-Toomey's *Face Negotiation Theory* involves various communication strategies that allow individuals to preserve their positive identity in conflict or intercultural communication situations. In the context of interreligious relations in Langsa, positive face maintenance can be explained through two main strategies (Ting-toomey and Kurogi 1998):

Figure 2. Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory (Ting-toomey and Kurogi 1998a)



Figure 1 emphasizes that Self-Face refers to maintaining one's own image by respecting the values and beliefs of one's religion without disparaging others, which requires politeness and respect in communication. Meanwhile, Other-Face refers to maintaining the image of others by avoiding demeaning their religion or beliefs, even in situations of disagreement. This requires empathy, cultural sensitivity, and an appreciation of differences.

The findings highlight that interreligious communication in Langsa is deeply influenced by its collectivist cultural orientation, where religion functions as both belief and social identity. In such a context, *face*—the positive self-image individuals and groups seek to maintain (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998)—plays a central role in sustaining harmony. Majority and minority communities negotiate *self-face* and *other-face* through formal institutions and everyday encounters.

The Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) provides a key illustration of this negotiation. Rather than imposing unilateral solutions, FKUB facilitates interfaith dialogue where leaders articulate concerns and search for compromises. Interviews with FKUB leaders emphasize that conflicts often emerge from casual remarks that spark prejudice but are typically resolved through mutual “give-and-take” discussions. This process reflects a *compromising* strategy, allowing each group to maintain dignity (*self-face*) while recognizing others' identities (*other-face*). FKUB also engages in *integrative* strategies by promoting joint activities such as interfaith dialogues and community-based programs, which foster win-win outcomes and reinforce collective cohesion.

In contrast, the Ministry of Religious Affairs often employs a *dominating* strategy, particularly through initiatives like the Moderation Village in Karang Anyar. While this top-down approach asserts state authority, interviews with local leaders suggest that it is accepted when balanced with participatory practices and inclusive symbolism. Here, domination serves less as unilateral enforcement and more as an effort to protect the collective *face* of Langsa as a tolerant and harmonious society.

Beyond formal institutions, positive *face* maintenance also appears in everyday interfaith interactions. Minority groups adopt adaptive practices—such as respecting Islamic dress codes in public spaces or participating in Muslim neighbors’ festivities—not as passive conformity but as strategic *facework* to sustain coexistence and minimize conflict. These actions demonstrate how moderation is enacted through subtle communicative choices embedded in daily life.

Overall, the findings show that moderation in Langsa is not simply the result of government regulation but the outcome of continuous negotiation of *face* across diverse actors and contexts. By grounding the analysis in lived experiences rather than institutional descriptions alone, this study extends Face Negotiation Theory from intercultural to interreligious domains, offering new insights into how harmony is actively constructed in post-conflict societies.

3.2 Religious Moderation Beyond Policy: Social Communication and Community Practices in Langsa

Religious moderation is a policy and a set of practices carried out through social interactions and specific activities that support its implementation in Langsa City. Therefore, illustrations of moderation should not focus solely on the role of government and institutions but also critically examine lived interactions within the community to reveal their theoretical significance.

Depictions of religious moderation in daily life are clearly visible in community interactions. Several informants, who served as research subjects, described how they interact with people of different ethnicities and religions. Based on observations and interviews, the discussion is divided into two categories: moderation in individual interactions and moderation in social group interactions. These two forms of interaction show significant differences. Individual interactions combine elements of individualism and collectivism, while moderation in social groups emphasizes collectivist culture.

Moderation in individual interactions refers to moderation shaped through relationships between one individual and another. These interactions are often formed through social associations or business activities. Such interactions tend to reflect two “faces”: the face of individual culture and the face of collective culture. The individual culture highlights personal interests, whether in business or social life. This aligns with Geert Hofstede’s concept of Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation. A long-term orientation, for example, views time in a sustainable perspective, focusing on planning and future development rather than being bound by past values (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Lortie et al., 2019). Within this type of interaction, sensitive religious issues are often ignored or even treated humorously.

One informant, a woman from Paya Bujok Tunong, explained that she has had a friend of a different religion for a long time. Their relationship began through business: the woman opened a food stall while her friend supplied household goods and became her regular supplier. Their friendship has continued until now. When they meet, they often joke—even about sensitive religious matters—but this never leads to conflict. This is because their orientation is toward business, not

religious values, which they regard as personal matters that are not diminished even if not respected by others.

Nevertheless, this does not mean they fail to show positive face in their interactions. Their jokes are not intended to demean others. Nor does this mean that they disregard their religious identity (self-face). Rather, they have their own way of respecting their identities. Furthermore, individual interactions in moderation sometimes employ the obliging (accommodating) method, which involves sacrifice or self-adjustment to meet the needs of others, even if this means reducing or neglecting one's own interests (Kuzmochka, n.d.; Al Azis & Irwansyah, 2021). This method focuses on preserving the "face" of others in interpersonal communication. For example, a non-Muslim trader always attends Muslim community events such as weddings, funerals, and religious gatherings.

Beyond individual interactions, moderation is also practiced in social group settings, such as at the village level. This phenomenon is evident in Karang Anyar Village, Langsa Baro District, Langsa City. As a pilot project for religious moderation, tolerance is actively practiced there. According to one resident, who is also a village moderation organizing committee member, moderation in Karang Anyar is reflected in both village activities and daily social interactions. For example, non-Muslim residents participate in communal work, while Muslim residents share resources such as sacrificial meat and other assistance with non-Muslims.

The harmony among Karang Anyar residents results from efforts to preserve the values of their faith and that of others. Within Face Negotiation Theory, this is considered a way of maintaining positive face. Positive face is essential in interaction, especially intercultural communication, as it reflects self-image and dignity. There are two main aspects: self-face (one's own face) and other-face (the face of others). Both are important in understanding the dynamics of intercultural communication and social interaction, as they demonstrate how self-image and the image of others can influence communication and potential conflict.

Self-face refers to a person's self-image in communication, encompassing how they see themselves and wish to be seen by others. It involves self-esteem, identity, and personal image. Preserving self-face means maintaining dignity, avoiding shame, and ensuring communication aligns with social norms. In Langsa, self-face is manifested when religious groups express their identities without undermining the faith of others. For example, both Muslims and non-Muslims demonstrate their religious identity through peaceful actions, such as distributing sacrificial meat to non-Muslim residents or attending religious activities of other groups.

Based on field data, several forms of self-face practice in Langsa can be identified: (1) Participation in interfaith dialogue. In monthly dialogues mediated by FKUB, individuals from different religions speak and listen with respect while maintaining their identity as devout adherents. For example, pastors present arguments from their scriptures while engaging in discussions with other religious groups. (2) Avoiding religious conflict. In situations of differing religious practices, such as Friday prayers or during Ramadan, individuals strive to maintain self-face by demonstrating calmness and tolerance. For instance, they close shops on Friday and Maghrib prayers or keep food stalls closed during the daytime in Ramadan. (3) Interfaith education and learning. In schools and universities, some non-Muslim students choose to study other religions even though they are allowed to study their own. This reflects an approach that respects both their self-face and the other-face of others, showing curiosity and appreciation for different beliefs.

In social work and humanitarian projects involving individuals from different religions in Langsa, Self-Face can be demonstrated through a willingness to cooperate for the

common good without compromising one's religious values. Individuals can collaborate with mutual respect and a sense of responsibility toward the broader community, for example, through communal work (gotong royong) and other social activities, both at the city level in Langsa and within villages (gampong). (interview with Christian communities).

In the context of religious tolerance in Langsa, Self-Face helps individuals maintain a self-image that respects their own beliefs while also acknowledging the beliefs of others. This fosters social harmony and cooperation among residents of diverse religious backgrounds. Understanding Self-Face enables individuals in Langsa to build more harmonious and constructive relationships within religious tolerance.

Alongside self-image through Self-Face, the concept of Other-Face also plays an important role. Other-Face refers to the image of others in communication—how others perceive one. Attending to Other-Face means respecting the feelings, dignity, and self-image of others in communication. This involves empathy toward others' perspectives while avoiding behaviors demeaning, insulting, or undermining their self-image. Within the framework of Face Negotiation Theory, maintaining a balance between Self-Face and Other-Face is crucial for minimizing conflict and building positive relationships. Neglecting Other-Face may lead to conflict and damaged relationships, while focusing too heavily on Other-Face at the expense of Self-Face risks exploitation and a loss of self-respect. In intercultural communication, understanding both concepts helps individuals become more sensitive to differences in cultural norms and communication expectations, allowing them to convey messages effectively and avoid face-threatening acts that may trigger conflict or discomfort.

In the context of religious tolerance in Langsa, Aceh, there are many ways individuals can show concern for Other-Face, ultimately fostering harmony and cooperation among different religious groups. This can be done through active listening, where individuals from different religious backgrounds give full attention to others during conversation, reflecting respect for their beliefs and viewpoints, as seen in meetings organized by FKUB, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and at the village level. It may also take the form of participation in religious ceremonies or celebrations, where attending events held by other faith communities demonstrates respect for their practices, such as the presence of non-Muslims in Islamic celebrations. Cooperation in social or humanitarian activities is another example. Other-Face is demonstrated through collaboration based on mutual respect for each party's religious values and beliefs, affirming that others are valuable partners in achieving common goals. Similarly, offering assistance during religious conflict or crisis reflects empathy and care, while respecting places of worship by maintaining cleanliness and observing rules shows appreciation for the beliefs of others. In all these examples, Other-Face reflects an attitude of respect, empathy, and recognition of others' religious identities. This contributes to creating a more inclusive environment, strengthening religious tolerance in Langsa, and promoting peace and interfaith harmony.

Based on the data findings, the practice of religious moderation in Langsa manifests in formal policies and everyday social interactions. Viewed through the lens of *Face Negotiation Theory* (Ting-Toomey 2013), the data demonstrates that the community employs communication strategies oriented toward both *Self-Face* and *Other-Face* to maintain harmony. For example, a non-Muslim trader attending Islamic religious events illustrates an expression of concern for *Other-Face*. Such participation signifies respect and represents an accommodative communication strategy that reduces the potential for *face-threatening acts* in interfaith interactions.

On the other hand, practices such as the distribution of sacrificial meat (*qurban*) to non-Muslim residents show efforts to maintain *Self-Face*. The Muslim community reinforces its religious identity as a peace-loving faith while sending a positive message to other communities. This analysis aligns with Brown and Levinson's (Brown and Levinson 1987) concept of *positive politeness strategies*, whereby individuals strive to build closeness and solidarity while affirming their own self-image. Thus, religious moderation in Langsa can be understood as a reciprocal communication process that balances strategies of maintaining one's own face (*self-face*) while respecting the face of others (*other-face*).

Furthermore, cooperation (*gotong royong*) and interfaith participation in social projects can be explained through *Co-Cultural Communication Theory* (Orbe 1998), in which minority and majority groups negotiate their identities within shared communicative spaces. The strategies adopted by the Langsa community tend to be *accommodating* and *collaborative*, rather than *assertive* or *nonassertive*. This suggests that harmony is achieved not merely through the absence of conflict but through communicative awareness grounded in recognition, empathy, and respect for differences (Kim and Gudykunst 1996).

Viewed from the perspective of Islamic communication, these practices embody the value of *ukhuwah insaniyah* (universal brotherhood), in which all humans are regarded as part of a single family regardless of religion (Rusli, Asnaiyati, and Ramli 2024). This principle encourages Muslims to engage in communication that prioritizes empathy, respect, and harmony with others. Similarly, the practice of distributing sacrificial meat (*qurban*) to non-Muslim neighbors reflects *adl* (justice) and *ihsan* (benevolence) (Sihombing, Kholil, and Yusnadi 2023), which highlight compassion and fairness in social interaction. In relation to Face Negotiation Theory, such practices can be understood as maintaining *Self-Face*, since the Muslim community reaffirms its religious identity as just and compassionate, while simultaneously preserving *Other-Face* by respecting the dignity and beliefs of non-Muslim neighbors. This dual awareness demonstrates that Islamic communication strengthens internal identity and nurtures interfaith harmony, ensuring that religious expression contributes to peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

The data analysis in Langsa demonstrates that religious moderation is not limited to policy frameworks but is enacted through everyday communicative strategies that integrate local values, modern communication *theories*, and Islamic communication concepts. From the perspective of Face Negotiation Theory, interreligious interactions in Langsa reveal negotiations between *self-face* and *other-face* that go beyond individual image management to encompass the collective dignity of majority and minority groups in a post-conflict context. This expands the scope of the theory, originally designed to explain intercultural encounters, into a tool for understanding interreligious communication in societies governed by religious law.

In interfaith social interactions in Langsa, the practice of self-face is reflected through openness to cooperate in social work and humanitarian activities without sacrificing each community's religious identity. The Christian community, for instance, emphasizes that their involvement in communal work does not blur their faith values but affirms their identity while demonstrating commitment to the common good. This orientation toward self-face is affirmative, as it maintains personal dignity while contributing to the wider community. A similar dynamic can be seen in Karang Anyar, known as the "Moderation Village," where face negotiation occurs in a balanced way. Despite a history of conflict, the community strives to assert its own religious identity (self-face) while also opening space

for recognizing other groups' identities (other-face). This collective effort enables peaceful coexistence, as each group can negotiate its own interests without denying the rights of others.

In various cases of conflict, including those triggered by everyday remarks, people emphasize compromise and acceptance to reduce potential threats to each group's dignity. This approach reflects a mutual face strategy that upholds collective respect and contributes to the realization of social harmony.

Through the lens of Co-Cultural Theory, the accommodative strategies adopted by minorities in Langsa are not mere acts of subordination but expressions of agency within a communicative space shaped by sharia dominance. For instance, minority participation in majority religious events or majority engagement in interfaith cooperation illustrates *collaborative positioning*, where identities are negotiated within a framework of togetherness without eroding selfhood. These findings challenge the classical assumption that minority accommodation inevitably weakens identity, thus offering a novel contribution to intercultural communication scholarship.

Within the framework of Islamic communication, values such as *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *adl* (justice), and *ihsan* (benevolence) function not only as moral norms but also as communicative resources that guide interaction toward respect and solidarity. These values serve as ethical foundations and practical strategies in sustaining harmony, showing that Islamic communication can be understood as a form of *facework* highly relevant in interfaith contexts.

The Langsa case presents a theoretical innovation: it extends Face Negotiation Theory into the interreligious domain, enriches Co-Cultural Theory with insights on minority agency under religious legal dominance, and reinterprets Islamic communication concepts as analytical mechanisms rather than purely normative principles. This combination demonstrates that religious moderation in Langsa confirms existing theories and advances them, opening new pathways for communication theory in multicultural and post-conflict contexts.

Implications of these findings indicate that religious moderation should be understood as a communicative practice that bridges theory and lived experience. Theoretically, the Langsa case contributes to developing a more integrative framework for studying interreligious communication by combining global theories with Islamic perspectives. Practically, it highlights that fostering religious moderation in post-conflict societies requires strengthening grassroots communicative practices—such as shared rituals, humor, cooperation in social projects, and dialogical engagement—that nurture self-face and other-face. For policymakers, interfaith forums, and educational institutions, this suggests that durable harmony is best achieved through top-down policy and through cultivating everyday communication practices that embody empathy, respect, and shared responsibility across religious differences.

4. CONCLUSION

Religious moderation in Langsa City is sustained through communicative processes that balance self-face and other-face in institutional and community contexts. Moderation emerges through formal initiatives of governmental and civil society organizations and daily interactions within communities such as Gampong Karang Anyar. In these encounters, individuals negotiate their self-face by affirming and maintaining their religious identity while simultaneously recognizing and respecting the other-face of different faith groups. This dynamic demonstrates that communication is not merely the exchange of information but a relational practice that maintains dignity, fosters mutual recognition, and sustains social harmony.

Beyond confirming existing theoretical frameworks, this study contributes to scholarship by extending Face Negotiation Theory and Co-Cultural Communication Theory into the lived realities of interfaith moderation in post-conflict Aceh. The findings reveal that moderation adapts global theories to local traditions such as musyawarah (consensus-building), gotong royong (cooperation), and Islamic communicative values of ukhuwah, adl, and ihsan. This integration illustrates how cultural and religious practices enrich theoretical understandings of self-face and other-face negotiation in plural societies. The practical implications are threefold: first, policymakers should design interfaith training programs and communication platforms that equip communities with skills for constructive dialogue; second, educators can embed moderation values into curricula and digital literacy modules to reach younger generations; and third, community leaders can model moderation by incorporating inclusive practices into local decision-making and grassroots initiatives.

This study, however, has limitations. Its qualitative scope is restricted to one city, which limits generalizability across broader Indonesian or Southeast Asian contexts. Moreover, the absence of digital ethnography leaves unexplored the significant role of online communication in shaping interfaith relations today. Future research should adopt comparative and mixed-method approaches, including digital analysis, to test and refine the communicative model of moderation proposed here. By acknowledging these limitations while underscoring its contributions, this study emphasizes that religious moderation is best understood and sustained through communicative practices that balance self-face and other-face, providing a pathway for theoretical advancement, policy innovation, and community empowerment.

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