

RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS OF PERSATUAN ISLAM (PERSIS)

Erni Isnaeniah¹, Fitriya Khoirun Nisa², Falya Alifa Ihyana³

¹²³Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung; Indonesia

Correspondence Email; erniisna@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research aims to describe the leadership perspective of the Persatuan Islam (Persis) Branch of Tanjungsari on the concept of religious moderation, analyze its relevance to Emile Durkheim's structural-functional theory and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, and explain its sociological implications for community interaction in Tanjungsari. This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach using field studies and library research. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, involving Persis religious leaders and community members as primary data sources, while books, journals, and official documents served as secondary data. The analysis applies sociological interpretation based on Durkheim's and Mead's theoretical frameworks. The findings indicate that Persis Tanjungsari understands religious moderation as a social mechanism that fosters harmony while maintaining Islamic orthodoxy. Moderation is practiced in social interactions but not extended to theological compromise. The organization functions as a moral regulator, cultivating tolerance without diluting religious principles. This aligns with Durkheim's concept of religion as a source of social solidarity and Mead's view of meaning formation through interaction. This study contributes to the sociology of religion in Indonesia by revealing the internal meaning-making process of moderation within Persis and its implications for community cohesion.

Keywords

Religious Moderation, Persatuan Islam, Structural Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism, Sociology of Religion.



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a diverse country, characterized by cultural, religious, racial, and ethnic diversity (Mazya et al., 2024; Subchi et al., 2022). However, this diversity is often a source of disintegration and potential division within the nation (Idi & Priansyah, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2021). Social conflicts that occur in society are generally triggered by religious factors, especially claims of truth and differences in understanding between religious communities, which give rise to internal and inter-religious tensions (Abboud-Armaly et al., 2025; Khiar & Abidin, 2024). In response to this situation, Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin (2014–2019) declared 2019 as the “Year of Religious Moderation” in an effort to strengthen tolerance and reduce religious-based conflicts (Jamaluddin, 2022; Syafieh & Anzhaikan, 2023).

The results of a study by the Wijanarka & Sari (2023) recorded 180 violations of freedom of religion and belief (KBB) with 422 cases in 29 provinces. In 2021, this number decreased to 171 cases and 318 incidents, but intolerance remains the most dominant form of violation. This situation shows that even though a policy of religious moderation has been implemented nationally, the social reality shows that there is still a weak understanding and internalization of the value of moderation in society. In the context of Islam, the term moderation is often equated with “moderate Islam,” but it is often misinterpreted as a compromise of faith or a weakening of belief.

Some people reject this policy on the grounds that the idea of religious moderation is considered to originate from Western thinking (Abror, 2020; Jamaluddin, 2022). In fact, religious moderation is not an attempt to modernize religion, but rather to place religious teachings in proportion to the social, cultural, and local wisdom contexts. In Indonesia, the two largest Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, are the main references in the discourse on religious moderation because both are known to have inclusive religious views and practices (Jubba et al., 2022; Muttaqin et al., 2025). However, besides these two, there are other Islamic organizations, such as Persatuan Islam (Persis), that have different interpretations of the concept.

In general, NU and Muhammadiyah fully support the idea of religious moderation, both in theological and social aspects (Kurniawan et al., 2023; Qorib & Umiarso, 2025). NU implements this through the principles of *tawasuth* (moderation) and *tasamuh* (tolerance) in social life, while Muhammadiyah promotes interfaith dialogue to strengthen social harmony (Aulia et al., 2024; Munandar & Susanti, 2025). In contrast to the two, Persis understands moderation as a cautious attitude in religion that only applies in the realm of *muamalah* (social), but not in the realm of *aqidah*

and worship. Persis rejects the understanding of moderation that is considered to blur the theological boundaries of Islam and considers that this concept needs to be understood carefully so as not to mix social aspects with beliefs.

These differences in perspective have an impact on the social dynamics of the community, particularly at the local level, such as in Tanjungsari Subdistrict, where three major Islamic organizations, namely NU, Muhammadiyah, and Persis, interact directly. Persis, as one of the religious and social organizations rooted in Tanjungsari since the 1960s, plays a vital role in shaping the religious orientation and moral discipline of the community. Based on field observations and interviews with local religious leaders, Persis contributes actively through religious study circles (*pengajian*), Quranic education, and social service programs that promote scriptural purity (*kemurnian akidah*) and ethical conduct in daily life. However, Persis faces several challenges, including limited public understanding of its moderate principles and the misconception that its strict adherence to the Quran and Sunnah equates to exclusivity. This has occasionally led to misunderstandings with followers of other Islamic groups, especially regarding differences in ritual practices such as *qunut* and *tarawih*. Despite these challenges, Persis's presence remains crucial in maintaining a balanced understanding of religion, offering a middle path between conservatism and pluralism. The existence of Persis in Tanjungsari thus not only strengthens the religious identity of its followers but also contributes to fostering religious moderation at the grassroots level by emphasizing tolerance, discipline, and peaceful coexistence within a pluralistic society.

Previous research has been conducted by a number of researchers. For example, research by Hardianti & Nurbaethy (2024) emphasizes the important role of religious leaders in instilling values of moderation in the millennial generation so that they are able to accept differences and respond to social issues wisely. Furthermore, research by Syarif (2021) discusses the concept of religious moderation from a Shia point of view as an effort to overcome intolerance in Indonesia. IJABI, as the first official Shia organization recognized by the government since 2000, received legitimacy from President Abdurrahman Wahid through a Presidential Decree. IJABI's religious thinking and practices are in line with the three pillars of religious moderation put forward by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Syarif, 2021).

In addition, research by Fahri & Zainuri (2019) describes a general portrait of religious moderation as a means of strengthening national unity and preventing radicalism. This concept is in line with the principles of moderate Islam as expressed by Quraish Shihab and Yusuf al-

Qardhawi, and implemented by NU and Muhammadiyah through the teaching of universal human values (Fahri & Zainuri, 2019). Nevertheless, these studies focus on NU and Muhammadiyah as representatives of moderate Islam, while the perspective of Persis, which has different theological and methodological characteristics, has not been studied in depth. In fact, it is important to examine these differences in perspective in order to understand how the concept of moderation is practiced contextually in a pluralistic society such as Tanjungsari.

From the above description, there is a conceptual gap in that the understanding of religious moderation in Indonesia has tended to emphasize the theological and institutional aspects of two large mass organizations (NU and Muhammadiyah), but has not explored alternative views from Persis, which has a more textual approach and is cautious about the influence of outside thinking. Meanwhile, an empirical gap is evident in the continuing social friction in society due to differences in the interpretation of the concept of moderation. Therefore, this study is important to fill this gap by describing how the views and implementation of religious moderation are understood by Persis, particularly at the local level, such as in Tanjungsari.

This study aims to describe the views of the Tanjungsari Branch of the Islamic Union (Persis Cabang Tanjungsari) on the concept of religious moderation, analyze the relevance of this understanding with Emile Durkheim's functional-structural theory and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction theory, and explain the sociological implications of Persis' interpretation of religious moderation on the dynamics of social interaction in the Tanjungsari community. Thus, this study is expected to contribute scientifically to the development of religious sociology studies in Indonesia, particularly in enriching the conceptual understanding of religious moderation from the perspective of the Islamic Union, which has not received much attention in academic research.

METHOD

The research method used in this study is qualitative research with a descriptive-sociological approach. This approach was chosen because it is able to describe in depth the views and understanding of Persis figures regarding the concept of religious moderation, as well as examining its relevance to Emile Durkheim's functional-structural theory and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction theory (Musa, 2024; Rohmawati et al., 2021). This research was conducted in Tanjungsari Subdistrict as the location for field research because this area is where the Tanjungsari Branch of the Islamic Union operates, which plays an active role in the religious and social life of the community.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained directly from in-depth interviews with religious leaders, administrators, and members of the Tanjungsari Branch of the Islamic Union regarding their views on religious moderation. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained through a literature study of various books, journals, scientific articles, research reports, and organizational documents discussing the concept of religious moderation and the Islamic Union's views on the issue.

The data collection techniques used included observation, interviews, and documentation. Field observations were carried out from March to July 2025 to observe social practices and interactions among members of the Tanjungsari community, particularly in the context of applying the values of religious moderation. During this period, researchers attended several *pengajian* (religious study sessions), organizational meetings, and community service activities organized by Persis Tanjungsari to understand how moderation was practiced in daily religious and social life. In-depth interviews were conducted in a structured and semi-structured manner with Persis leaders and administrators between April and June 2025 to explore their meanings and understandings of religious moderation. Documentation was used to collect written data in the form of activity archives, organizational reports, and relevant academic references. Furthermore, the data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively by examining, interpreting, and relating the field findings to the applied sociological theories to obtain a comprehensive understanding of religious moderation from the perspective of Persis.

The data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation were analyzed using a sociological approach with two main theoretical frameworks, namely Emile Durkheim's functional-structural theory and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction theory. First, Durkheim's functional-structural theory was used to examine how the concept of religious moderation functions in maintaining social order and balance in the religious life of the Tanjungsari community (Yansi et al., 2024). This perspective views society as a stable system, in which each element has a function to maintain social harmony (Nugroho, 2021; Wahyuningsih, 2020).

Second, Mead's symbolic interaction theory is used to understand the process of forming the meaning of religious moderation through social interactions between individuals in the Islamic Union community (Dimas et al., 2024). This theory focuses on symbolic meaning, self-concept, and social relationships as the result of communication and interaction between community members (Rahma & Pribadi, 2021; Raho, 2021). Through these two theories, data analysis was conducted using

descriptive qualitative methods, namely by interpreting the meanings, values, and social behaviors that emerged in the practice of religious moderation among members of the Tanjungsari branch of Persatuan Islam.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Persatuan Islam (Persis) became known in Tanjungsari District in the early 1960s through the religious activities of a number of individuals, such as Taufik Hidayat, M. Kahfi, Dawi, and R.M. Muhyidin, who sought to introduce Persis teachings in their workplaces and communities. This understanding grew stronger through recitation activities at the Muhammadiyah Tanjungsari PGA, led by Ustaz Endang Sulaiman from Persis Sumedang. These activities gave rise to a more puritanical Islamic consciousness oriented towards the purification of faith and religious practices in accordance with the Qur'an and Sunnah. The peak of this movement's development was marked by the establishment of the Tanjungsari Persis Branch Leadership (PC) in 1991, which became a formal milestone for the spread of Persis teachings in the region.

In this study, the views of Persis Tanjungsari leaders on religious moderation show caution towards the concept of moderation that has developed in general. For them, moderation can only be accepted as long as it does not violate the principles of the Islamic creed and sharia. A moderate stance is understood in the social sphere, such as tolerance between religious communities and respect for freedom of worship, but not in terms of belief and mahdhah worship. Thus, the approach to moderation promoted by Persis Tanjungsari is a form of balance between social openness and steadfastness in maintaining the purity of Islamic teachings.

This study found that the understanding of religious moderation among the leaders of the Persis in Tanjungsari has characteristics that differ from other Islamic organizations. Although Persis generally supports tolerance and peace, they emphasize that the concept of moderation should not be applied in the realm of faith and worship, but rather in the social realm (muamalah). This understanding shows caution towards the concept of religious moderation, which is considered to originate from Western thought and has the potential to obscure the purity of Islamic teachings.

Based on the interview results, moderation among Persis Tanjungsari members is manifested through social behavior, such as respecting differences in religious practices (e.g., qunut and the number of tarawih rakaats), not imposing religious opinions on others, and establishing social

cooperation with other community groups. However, they reject activities that are considered beyond the limits of tolerance, such as interfaith prayers or celebrations of other religious holidays. In addition, it was also found that the understanding of religious moderation among the people of Tanjungsari has undergone a positive shift. Conflicts between Muslims, which used to occur frequently, have now begun to decrease. Residents tend to be more open to differences, resulting in more harmonious religious practices that are oriented towards mutual respect between individuals.

Table 1. Findings on Religious Moderation from the Perspective of Persis Tanjungsari

No	Aspect	Key Findings	Social Implications
1	Scope of Moderation	Religious moderation is applied only in social (muamalah) aspects, not in matters of faith ('aqidah) or ritual worship ('ibadah).	Prevents syncretism and preserves the purity of Islamic teachings.
2	Attitude toward Differences	Differences in worship practices (e.g., Qunut, Tarawih) are respected without causing conflict.	Strengthens internal Muslim cohesion and tolerance.
3	View of the Moderation Concept	The government's concept of moderation is critically reviewed to ensure it does not contradict the Qur'an and Sunnah.	Encourages selective engagement with state religious policies.
4	Social Implementation	Social programs such as community service and cooperation among organizations are carried out without interfaith rituals.	Builds harmonious social relations while maintaining doctrinal boundaries.
5	Role of Religious Leaders	Religious leaders of Persis actively promote tolerance through Islamic-based teachings and community activities.	Function as moral agents and mediators of religious moderation values.

Source: Author's research, 2025

The findings summarized in Table 1 reveal that the concept of religious moderation among Persis Tanjungsari adherents is rooted in a doctrinally conservative yet socially adaptive framework. Moderation (*wasathiyyah*) is interpreted not as a theological compromise but as a moral guideline for harmonious coexistence. By restricting moderation to *muamalah* (social relations) while preserving doctrinal purity in 'aqidah and 'ibadah, Persis Tanjungsari ensures that the application of moderation remains consistent with Islamic orthodoxy. This selective application prevents syncretism and emphasizes that maintaining the integrity of belief is a fundamental aspect of genuine moderation.

Furthermore, the respectful attitude toward intra-Muslim differences, such as variations in prayer practices, indicates an inclusive social ethic within theological boundaries. Members of Persis Tanjungsari demonstrate an awareness that unity in diversity can be achieved without diluting faith. Their critical perspective on the government's religious moderation policy underscores a preference for contextualizing national narratives within local religious frameworks. This demonstrates the organization's commitment to reconciling state-led religious discourse with scriptural principles

derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah.

The findings also highlight the significant mediating role of religious leaders in shaping and disseminating moderation values. Through sermons, study circles, and social programs, Persis leaders act as bridges between theology and community life. They promote an interpretation of moderation that fosters mutual respect and cooperation, while discouraging actions that could blur doctrinal distinctions. Consequently, Persis Tanjungsari's approach to moderation embodies a synthesis between theological steadfastness and social responsibility—forming a model of religious coexistence that is both faithful to Islamic teachings and responsive to the multicultural realities of Tanjungsari society.

Discussion

Based on the findings presented above, the perspective of Persis Tanjungsari on religious moderation can be explained through the theoretical lenses of Emile Durkheim's structural-functional theory and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism. These two perspectives complement one another in explaining how religious understanding both maintains social order and constructs meaning through social interaction.

First, consistent with Durkheim's (1858–1917) view, religion serves as a moral foundation and social mechanism that sustains collective solidarity (Noh et al., 2025). Within the Persis Tanjungsari community, the understanding of moderation in religion (*wasathiyyah*) functions as a stabilizing force that binds individuals through shared norms derived from Islamic teachings. Although Persis members interpret moderation within the limits of Sharia, the social effect remains integrative—reducing conflict and strengthening communal harmony. Their rejection of violence in the name of religion and their tolerance toward diverse worship practices, such as qunut and tarawih variations, illustrate Durkheim's idea that religion acts as a “social glue” that unites society through shared moral values.

Second, from a Durkheimian standpoint, religious moderation also performs a regulatory function that maintains equilibrium between individual behavior and collective order (Hidayatulloh & Saumantri, 2024). The internalization of moderation values among Persis followers, such as politeness in da'wah, respect for differing opinions, and refusal to engage in theological debates that provoke conflict, reflects a moral control mechanism embedded within the group's social structure. Thus, religion operates as a system of collective representations that shape the behavior of its adherents, ensuring social cohesion while preserving the purity of belief. Similar findings were

reported by Mandalia (2024), who found that Islamic organizations in West Java also function as agents of social stability by channeling religious values into moral regulation and civic ethics.

Third, from Mead's perspective of symbolic interactionism, religious moderation within Persis Tanjungsari emerges from ongoing processes of communication, interpretation, and shared meaning (Dimas et al., 2024). Concepts like *wasathiyyah* and *rahmatan lil-'alamin* become symbolic references that guide members' behavior in everyday interactions. These meanings are not static but are constructed and reconstructed through sermons, study circles, and community meetings. For Persis members, moderation is understood not as a theological compromise but as a moral stance that balances firmness in faith with civility in social relations. This process of meaning-making confirms Mead's argument that human behavior is shaped by social interaction and the exchange of symbols within specific contexts. A similar pattern was identified in their study (Muhammad & Linda, 2024) on NU pesantren networks, where the reinterpretation of religious symbols reinforced inclusive social behavior without compromising theological boundaries.

Fourth, the role of religious leaders (ustadz and branch chairpersons) can be interpreted through Mead's concept of "significant others" (Tondi et al., 2025). These figures act as influential agents who transmit and model the symbolic meaning of moderation to the broader congregation. Through their leadership, the idea of moderation becomes internalized as part of collective identity, linking scriptural teachings with social realities. Their actions, sermons, and community engagement help translate abstract religious concepts into concrete social practices, such as cooperation, mutual respect, and tolerance in everyday life. This finding resonates with Jamaludin et al. (2024), who argues that the charisma and credibility of local religious elites play a decisive role in transforming abstract religious ideals into tangible social norms that guide behavior.

Fifth, the findings also demonstrate that Persis Tanjungsari distinguishes between pluralism and plurality. While rejecting theological pluralism that equates all religions as equally true, they accept social plurality as an unavoidable reality in a diverse society. This stance aligns with Durkheim's notion that religion provides a normative framework that regulates moral boundaries within society. Religion, in this sense, enables Persis members to engage in intergroup relations without compromising their theological commitments, maintaining a delicate balance between orthodoxy (purity of belief) and orthopraxy (social conduct). This observation is comparable to the results of Koenig (2025), who noted that religious groups with strong theological identities can still foster social harmony if their teachings emphasize *akhlaq* and civic ethics as universal values.

Sixth, the process of socializing moderation values through routine religious education, community service, and interorganizational collaboration also illustrates the intersection of Durkheim's and Mead's ideas. The collective rituals and joint activities serve as Durkheimian forms of "collective effervescence" that reinforce group solidarity (Rimé & Páez, 2023), while at the same time functioning as Mead's "interactional spaces" where shared meanings of tolerance and balance are constructed (Saudale et al., 2025). This demonstrates that religious moderation, as practiced by Persis Tanjungsari, is both a structural necessity and an interpretive outcome of continuous social interaction. Taufikin & Nurhayati (2025) similarly found that in community-based religious organizations, social practices become laboratories of symbolic learning, reinforcing moderation through lived experiences rather than abstract doctrines.

Seventh, sociologically, Persis Tanjungsari's approach to moderation reaffirms that religion remains a dynamic social institution that adapts to plural realities without losing its normative essence. Moderation, in their context, is not a weakening of faith but a disciplined attitude that regulates behavior and nurtures harmonious coexistence. Thus, both Durkheim's structural-functional framework and Mead's symbolic interactionism are relevant in explaining how Persis Tanjungsari maintains religious orthodoxy while participating constructively in Indonesia's plural society. The balance between faith and social civility becomes the core of their religious moderation, an equilibrium that sustains both moral order and social integration (Pratiwi & Suniadewi, 2024). These findings expand the work of Setinawati et al. (2025), who emphasized that religious moderation should be seen not merely as a state policy but as a form of *cultural religiosity*, an evolving synthesis between belief and social practice.

The findings of this study are in line with previous research that highlights the social function of religion and the process of meaning-making within religious communities. Nugroho (2021) explained that in Durkheim's structural-functional framework, religion acts as a mechanism to maintain moral order and social solidarity. This corresponds with the findings in Persis Tanjungsari, where the concept of religious moderation functions as a social glue that preserves harmony among diverse members while remaining grounded in Islamic principles. However, this study extends Nugroho's perspective by illustrating how functional mechanisms operate at the grassroots level through local religious activities, leadership guidance, and community-based internalization of moderation values.

Similarly, Rahma & Pribadi (2021) demonstrated that symbolic interaction forms collective meanings through repeated exchanges in online discourse. The present study supports this view, but in a different context, direct social interactions within religious organizations. Through sermons, study circles, and community dialogues, Persis members construct shared meanings of *wasathiyah* (moderation) that reinforce tolerance without diluting creed. Moderation in Persis Tanjungsari emerges organically from within the community. This bottom-up interpretation aligns with Durkheim's idea of religion as moral regulation and Mead's concept of shared symbolic meaning, demonstrating how religious moderation operates as both a social and communicative process in a plural society. In this sense, Jati et al. (2024) argues that such community-driven models of moderation provide stronger sustainability than top-down programs imposed by the state.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that religious moderation within the Persis Tanjungsari Branch serves as a form of social adaptation to Indonesia's plural society while maintaining theological boundaries. Moderation is expressed through tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence without compromising Islamic orthodoxy. This finding affirms Durkheim's perspective that religion reinforces social solidarity and Mead's view that meanings are socially constructed through interaction. Thus, Persis's understanding of moderation is not a dilution of belief but a conscious social mechanism that balances orthodoxy (faithfulness to creed) and orthopraxy (ethical social behavior). From a practical standpoint, this study underscores the importance of religious institutions as moral regulators and mediators in promoting peaceful coexistence. Persis's approach to moderation offers a model for local religious organizations in managing diversity through education, dialogue, and consistent religious guidance. The government and the Ministry of Religious Affairs could integrate Persis's community-based moderation model into local religious education and inter-community dialogue programs to strengthen social cohesion and counter intolerance.

For future research, this study suggests conducting comparative analyses between Persis and other Islamic organizations (e.g., Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama) to explore different modes of moderation interpretation. Further studies can also develop applied models of moderation education within religious organizations, focusing on youth and digital communities, or examine sociological aspects of symbolic interaction in religious discourse across diverse local contexts.

Through such efforts, the academic understanding of religious moderation in Indonesia can evolve toward a more inclusive, dialogical, and socially grounded paradigm.

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