

## The Religious Tolerance in Weaving National Unity and Cohesion

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### Abstract

Religious tolerance constitutes an essential foundation for maintaining the unity and cohesion of Indonesia's pluralistic society. This study provides an in-depth examination of the nature of interreligious tolerance, its relevance to religious, cultural, humanitarian, social, historical, and ethical values, as well as the current challenges in its implementation within society. In Indonesia, religious diversity is not merely a social reality but also a constitutional mandate that affirms freedom of religion as a fundamental right of every citizen. The teachings of Islam and other religions position mutual respect as a fundamental principle in social interactions. However, various incidents of intolerance indicate that there remains a gap between ideal norms and everyday practices. Through a comprehensive understanding of the concept of *tasamuh* (tolerance), cultural values, and historical exemplars, this research underscores the importance of strengthening religious moderation as a strategy to foster social harmony. Religious moderation is viewed as a collective endeavor involving the government, religious leaders, and the broader community to instill mutual respect without compromising each individual's core beliefs. Thus, tolerance is not merely a passive compromise but an active effort to build sustainable social harmony in pursuit of a sovereign, just, and civilized nation.

**Keywords:** Religious Tolerance, Religious Moderation, and Interreligious Harmony



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## INTRODUCTION

Religion serves both as the foundation of life and as a guide for its adherents. This foundation can be likened to the base of a house, where the strength of the structure depends on the solidity of its foundation. When one's understanding of religion is strong, their faith will also be steadfast. Conversely, if religious understanding is weak, faith tends to be fragile. Religion functions as a compass that provides direction and purpose for every believer as they navigate their life in the world.

Fundamentally, humans acknowledge the existence of one Supreme God, the Creator of the entire universe, who has determined human destiny even before their birth. When individuals long for their Creator, they express this yearning through prayer, as it serves not only as a medium of interaction with God but also reflects their belief that God observes and will hold them accountable for every sin they commit (Armstrong, 2002).

In the modern era, the currents of globalization have exerted a significant influence on human nature and character, particularly due to the influx of various ideologies from Western countries. In some Western nations, awareness of the importance of interreligious tolerance remains relatively rare, although there are certain individuals who continue to uphold the values of tolerance, often due to kinship ties, friendships, or professional relationships. Tolerance, in fact, is not merely about accepting differences but about mutually recognizing, being open to, and understanding those differences without disputing them, even when there is disagreement (Simarmata, dkk, 2017).

Interreligious tolerance constitutes a social mechanism through which individuals respond to religious diversity and pluralism. In daily life, tolerance is tangibly reflected in various social activities carried out cooperatively within communities, whether these activities relate to the public interest or to individual needs (Faridah, 2013). Indonesia is a country rich in diversity, comprising various ethnic groups and religions practiced by its people, such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Each religion teaches values of virtue, including the importance of tolerance and mutual respect among adherents of different faiths.

Indonesian society is characterized by diversity in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, and religion. Officially, the government recognizes six religions—Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—as well as various other belief systems practiced within the community. The existence of these faiths is founded on the principle of “belief in the One Almighty God.” The number of adherents of each religion varies across provinces. This diversity in religious life creates a rich and harmonious social mosaic. However, on the other hand, such differences also carry the potential to trigger conflict if not properly managed, which can lead to social tensions (Woda, 2023).

Regarding the religious diversity in Indonesia and its relation to efforts to promote tolerance, this must be continually nurtured, maintained, and pursued through collective efforts involving all parties. Although it cannot be denied that there are political parties and groups that appreciate and support such cooperation, there are also certain groups that deliberately attempt to undermine harmony and national unity (Setiabudhi, et.al, 2018).

At present, various religions interact within society. In a pluralistic community, differences in religious doctrines have the potential to generate conflict. Therefore, every adherent of a religion needs to adopt an attitude of tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance of differing teachings and religious interpretations. In this way, the potential for conflict can be minimized and prevented from escalating into more serious problems. According to the *Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language* (Poerwadarminta, 2002), The word “tolerance” refers to the disposition of accepting (respecting, allowing, or permitting) opinions, views, beliefs, customs, behaviors, and other aspects that differ from one's own, or to the attitude of distinguishing one's own stance from that of others. In other words, tolerance can be defined as an attitude of appreciating and respecting the beliefs and convictions of others that differ

from one's own. By cultivating a spirit of religious tolerance, a beautiful harmony will emerge within the life of the nation and the state.

It is truly regrettable that in today's social order, religious issues are still often used as triggers for disorder and various forms of wrongdoing in this country (Zainuri, 2020). This attitude reflects the persistence of groups within society who believe that their religion and beliefs are the most correct, along with the assumption that the majority group should receive better treatment than minority groups. Such thinking can have negative impacts on national life, ultimately fueling intolerance and radicalism. To this day, intolerance and radicalism remain issues that continue to generate social tensions and, indirectly, threaten national harmony and unity.

Various acts of wrongdoing committed under the pretext of religion demonstrate a lack of acceptance and respect for other faiths (Isnaeni, 2019). To address these problems and their negative impacts, the government strives to uphold religious tolerance through various measures and policies to ensure the unity and resilience of this pluralistic nation. One of the policies implemented is the "Religious Moderation Movement," which aims to cultivate a balanced approach to religious practice, promote respect for differences, and prevent extremism and intolerance within society.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, as the implementing body of government policies, is carrying out the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan, National Priority Program 4, and the National Policy Program on Spiritual Revolution and Cultural Development. In implementing this program, Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (PMA RI) Number 18 of 2020 affirms that the Ministry of Religious Affairs will: be a figure who is competent and trustworthy in building a pious and moderate religious community, an intelligent and virtuous society, in order to realize an advanced, sovereign, independent, and dignified Indonesia based on mutual cooperation.

In the book *Religious Moderation*, compiled by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2019, "religious moderation" refers to the coexistence of religious perspectives by manifesting the essence of religious teachings to uphold human dignity and worth, understood as attitudes and practices aimed at creating the common good based on principles of justice and balance, and upholding the Constitution as the national consensus. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, as the implementing body of government policies, is carrying out the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan, National Priority Program 4, and the National Policy Program on Spiritual Revolution and Cultural Development.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In this paper, the author will employ a coherent literature review method by collecting, examining, and analyzing various relevant sources, such as books, scientific journals, and articles that discuss religious tolerance in the context of efforts to weave national unity and cohesion in Indonesia. This writing is based on previous works and studies that highlight the values of tolerance, the principles of religious moderation, and the roles of the government, religious leaders, and society in building social harmony amid religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity.

The author will identify the main themes, key findings, and approaches used by earlier researchers to strengthen understanding of the contribution of tolerance to national cohesion. Furthermore, each source will be evaluated for its strengths and weaknesses to ensure its accuracy, reliability, and relevance to the objectives of this study. The discussion will cover the urgency of religious tolerance, its legal and philosophical foundations, its benefits for national life, challenges in its implementation, strategies for effectively promoting tolerance,

evaluation of tolerance practices in society, and conclusions regarding the role of tolerance as a foundation for an independent, just, and civilized Indonesian nation.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### *Religious Tolerance*

Etymologically, the word *tasamuh* comes from the Arabic root سَمْع, which means open-heartedness or tolerance. According to Tatapangarsa, the Arabic term for tolerance is *tasamuh*, which signifies generosity in social relations. *Tasamuh*, in its etymological sense, refers to tolerating or accepting matters with ease. It means to accept differences with an open heart. Linguistically, the word tolerance derives from the English term “tolerance,” which means allowing or permitting. In the *Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language*, it is defined as the quality of being tolerant, of letting things be, or allowing. In Arabic, the word for tolerance is *tasamuh* or open-heartedness. According to Badawi, *tasamuh* is a stance or attitude manifested in the willingness to accept a variety of perspectives and diverse positions, even if one does not agree with them (Bahari, 2010).

Terminologically, tolerance means respecting, allowing, and permitting the positions, opinions, views, beliefs, customs, behaviors, and so forth of others, even when they differ from or contradict one's own, such as in matters of religion, ideology, or race (Poerwadarminta). Tolerance is an attitude that every individual must possess, as differences are part of *sunatullah* (God's natural law) and cannot be separated from human life. This attitude should be utilized as a means to achieve common goals in community and national life, as well as to contribute to the creation of global order and security.

Indonesian society, as a multicultural community with diverse religions, holds various understandings of tolerance. However, there are still segments of the population that have an insufficient grasp of this concept. This lack of understanding can trigger misunderstandings and tensions within society due to an inability to accept existing differences. According to Tilman, there are reflections in understanding the attitude of tolerance, including the following:

- a. Peace is the goal.
- b. Tolerance means being open and receptive to the beauty of differences.
- c. Tolerance values individuals and their differences, removes prejudice and tensions arising from indifference, and provides opportunities to eliminate the stigma associated with nationality, religion, and cultural heritage.
- d. Tolerance is an attitude of mutual respect through understanding.
- e. The seeds of intolerance are fear and indifference.
- f. The seeds of tolerance are love, which grows through compassion and care.
- g. Without love, tolerance cannot be realized.
- h. Those who are able to appreciate the goodness in others and in situations possess an attitude of tolerance.
- i. Tolerance also means the ability to face difficult situations.
- j. Tolerance includes the willingness to accept discomfort in life and let it pass.
- k. With understanding and open-mindedness, tolerant individuals treat others fairly and demonstrate their tolerant attitude.

According to Adeney (1926), According to Adeney, the meaning of tolerance is the voluntary decision not to take action against something that is considered unjustified, implying limited truth and conditional freedom. Tolerance refers to an attitude of openness, broad-mindedness, willingness, and gentleness. UNESCO defines tolerance as an attitude of mutual respect, acceptance, and appreciation amid cultural diversity, freedom of expression, and human character (Walzer, 1997).

Tolerance is a form of accommodation within social interaction. Socially, religious individuals cannot deny that they must engage not only with their own group but also with those of different faiths. Religious communities must strive to cultivate tolerance in order to maintain social stability and prevent ideological and physical conflicts among people of different religions (Casram, 2016). Powell and Clarke (Hermawati, 2017) states that *an attitude of tolerance is only possible when some action or practice is objectionable to us, but we have overriding reasons to allow that action or practice to take place.*

### Interreligious Tolerance in Weaving National Unity and Cohesion

Indonesia is not only rich in natural resources but is also a country abundant in diversity. Differences in ethnicity, language, culture, and religion are an inevitability decreed by Allah SWT. Even in the Qur'an, this diversity is acknowledged as part of His will. Allah SWT states in Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُم مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُواٰ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتُقْرَنُكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

It means:

*"O mankind! Indeed, We have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Truly, Allah is All-Knowing and All-Aware."* (Q.S. Al-Hujurat: 13)

Said Agil explains that harmonious interreligious life in Indonesia is structured within the Trilogy of Harmony, namely: (1) Internal harmony within each religion, which refers to harmony among the various sects, schools of thought, or denominations within a single religious community; (2) Harmony among different religious communities, which refers to harmonious relations among followers of different religions; and (3) Harmony between religious communities and the government, which seeks to foster alignment and mutual understanding between religious leaders or adherents and government officials, in order to build a cohesive and harmonious Indonesian society of believers (Christover, 2021).

Society prioritizes an attitude of interreligious tolerance by accepting the existence of other religions. Through social interaction, togetherness, and mutual cooperation, an atmosphere of peace and harmony is created. Maintaining good relations within the community is not only an obligation among those who share the same faith but also a duty to foster positive relationships with those of different religions (Hasanah et al., 2023). Normatively, there are fundamental values that form the basis of interreligious tolerance.

*First*, the religious values contained within the teachings of each faith, both Islam and Christianity, emphasize the importance of an attitude of tolerance. In Islam, the principle of tolerance is affirmed in Surah Al-Kafirun, verse 6, which states: "*Lakum Diinukum Waliyadin*", meaning "*To you your religion, and to me mine.*" Islam teaches that no one should be forced to embrace or abandon a religion. Every individual has the right to believe and to practice worship in accordance with their convictions.

This is also guaranteed in the 1945 Constitution, Article 28E, which states that:

1. Every person has the right to embrace a religion and to worship according to their religion.
2. Every person has the right to the freedom to hold their beliefs.

Differences are part of Allah's mercy, enabling human beings to complement and assist one another. Living in harmony without division is a shared goal. As Muslims, who form the majority in Indonesia, it is important not to feel self-righteous but instead to serve as protectors and caretakers of minority groups. Every religion should strive to develop understandings and practices that encourage cooperation and harmony within society. For

example, when Muslims hold a *slametan* ceremony, Christians often help and sometimes even participate in the event. For them, this is not an issue, because in terms of humanity, there are no differences that must be contested. However, in matters of faith, every individual retains the freedom to practice their own beliefs.

In Islam, tolerance is an attitude of empathy and open-heartedness. Religious tolerance, according to Islam, means allowing followers of other religions to perform their acts of worship and practice their teachings, as long as these activities do not disrupt public order and peace. In reality, however, this spirit of tolerance often remains limited to mere words. Some minority groups face difficulties in carrying out their worship, such as obstacles in establishing houses of worship or resistance to their religious activities. In fact, Article 28 of the 1945 Constitution clearly affirms that every citizen has the right to practice their religion according to their convictions. Therefore, as the majority group, Muslims are expected to be protectors and to set a good example in upholding tolerance and respecting the religious rights of all parties.

As stated by Quraish Shihab (1992), Islam teaches and emphasizes the necessity of the ethics of tolerance in interactions among followers of different religions; therefore, it is inconceivable that Islam would undermine such tolerance in the name of religion itself. However, on the other hand, in interreligious relations, Islam is also very strict in safeguarding the purity of Islamic creed (*aqidah*) and Islamic law (*sharia*) from any external influences. For Islam, the purity of creed and sharia must not be compromised or tainted by the practice of tolerance.

**Second**, cultural values and local customs play an important role in shaping attitudes of tolerance within society. Practices that have been passed down from generation to generation have become part of traditions embedded in everyday life. In the *Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language* (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*), culture is defined as a way of life that develops and is collectively owned by a community group, and is passed down from one generation to the next. Culture is formed by various complex elements, including belief systems, politics, customs, language, tools, clothing, architecture, and the arts.

According to Edward B. Tylor, culture is a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society. Therefore, culture plays a major role in shaping patterns of thought and social behavior, including in fostering interreligious tolerance.

**Third**, humanitarian values. Essentially, human beings are social creatures who depend on one another. No individual can live alone without the help of others, whether in fulfilling basic needs such as food, drink, and clothing, or in other social aspects. This interdependence indirectly fosters the development of tolerant attitudes in community life. Islam itself upholds humanitarian values very highly. Gus Dur once stated that there are three main principles in human relations: loving one another, understanding one another, and supporting one another (Faqieh, 2010).

Humanity is grounded in mutual respect, a sense of belonging, interdependence, and compassion among members of society. Through these values, attitudes of interreligious tolerance can grow and develop properly. However, today, the spirit of tolerance has begun to fade in Indonesian society. Differences in viewpoints and the tendency to accuse one another of disbelief (*takfir*) have given rise to intolerant groups that, in reality, only seek to create discord within Indonesia's pluralistic society. This aligns with Gus Dur's statement that human beings should not be viewed through the lens of religion, politics, ethnicity, political parties, mass organizations, or any other attributes. The focus of humanity is simply human beings and humanity itself. The value of humanity in Islam is also conveyed in the Qur'an, among others in Surah Ta-Ha, verses 29–32, which reads:

وَاجْعُلْ لِي وَزِيرًا مِنْ أَهْلِي هَارُونَ أَخِي اشْدُدْ بِهِ أَزْرِي وَأَشْرِكْهُ فِي أَمْرِي

It Means:

"And appoint for me a helper from my family, (that is) Aaron, my brother. Strengthen me through him, and let him share my task." (Q.S. Thaha: 29-32)

This verse illustrates that in carrying out duties and responsibilities, human beings need assistance and cooperation from others. Even Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) himself prayed to Allah that his brother, Aaron (peace be upon him), would help him in facing such a great task. This serves as an important foundation in Islam that human beings, as social creatures, must help, support, and collaborate with one another for the common good.

**Fourth**, social values are closely linked to community interactions. Social interaction is the main prerequisite for the occurrence of social activities. In its definition, social interaction refers to relationships between individuals, between groups of people, or between individuals and groups of people (Taufik , 2018). The theory of social interaction is appropriate to use when examining the reciprocal relationships between individuals, between groups, or between individuals and groups. When prevailing social values are upheld, harmony within society can be maintained effectively. Social cohesion in rural communities tends to be stronger compared to urban areas. In reality, however, when neighbors hold a celebration, often only their family members participate in helping.

**Fifth**, historical values demonstrate that since ancient times, society has lived side by side in harmony, helping one another, respecting, and appreciating each other. Religious differences have not been an obstacle to establishing social interactions. When looking at history more broadly, Indonesia's struggle for independence involved fighters from various religious backgrounds, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others. Therefore, harmonious life in diversity has become part of this nation's identity. Many regions in Indonesia show how communities of different religions, ethnicities, cultures, languages, and backgrounds can coexist peacefully.

Indirectly, the founders of the nation taught the importance of living in harmony, helping one another, and protecting each other. However, in the modern era, these values seem to have begun to erode. Various cases of intolerance still occur, such as prohibiting the construction of places of worship, vandalizing houses of worship, and restricting religious activities. This situation serves as a reminder to all of us of the importance of continually upholding and fostering mutual respect among people of different faiths.

Sixth, moral values play an important role in cultivating attitudes of tolerance among religious communities. Leaders and religious figures have a responsibility to set an example for society in establishing harmonious relationships. This attitude of tolerance aligns with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who serves as the foremost role model for treating others with kindness. As Allah says in Surah Al-Ahzab, verse 21: *"Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah you have an excellent example for whoever hopes for Allah and the Last Day and remembers Allah often."* (Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 21). The moral values exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ teach Muslims to live side by side with respect and compassion, creating a harmonious and peaceful society within diversity.

## CONCLUSIONS

Interreligious tolerance is a fundamental element in maintaining the unity and cohesion of Indonesia as a plural nation. Diversity in ethnicity, culture, and religion is not an obstacle but rather a blessing that must be managed with mutual respect and appreciation. In Islamic teachings, tolerance is emphasized in the Qur'an, including in Surah Al-Hujurat verse 13 and Surah Al-Kafirun verse 6, which underscore the importance of knowing one another and respecting each other's beliefs.

An attitude of religious tolerance can be realized through internal harmony within one religion, harmony among different religions, and harmony between religious communities and the government. This principle is supported by various fundamental values, such as religious, cultural, humanitarian, social, historical, and moral values. These values serve as the foundation for society to coexist harmoniously without generating conflict. However, in practice, challenges remain in upholding tolerance, such as discrimination against minority groups and resistance to the construction of houses of worship. Therefore, it is essential for the majority, particularly Muslims in Indonesia, to set an example in upholding the values of tolerance and providing space for followers of other religions to practice their faith freely.

History has demonstrated that Indonesia's diversity can be a strength that reinforces national unity, as evidenced during the struggle for independence. For this reason, preserving the values of tolerance is a shared responsibility to ensure that national life remains harmonious. By fostering mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation, society can create a peaceful and blessed life within the framework of diversity.

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