The Concept of Al-Wasatiyyah (Moderation) in Building Social Cohesion and Religious Tolerance in a Multicultural Society

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Abstract: Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelago, has a high level of cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, which is both a source of national strength and a source of social conflict, intolerance, and extremism. In this context, a theological and practical paradigm is needed that can promote social cohesion, tolerance, and national unity. This study aims to analyze the theological concept of Al-Wasatiyyah as the foundation of Islamic moderation, identify strategies for its implementation in increasing religious tolerance, and explore the relevance of Tamadun Islam Nusantara as the embodiment of Al-Wasatiyyah values in Indonesia. The research method employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach with a literature study of secondary data in the form of academic literature, the Qur'an, hadith, books by scholars, journal articles, proceedings, theses, and dissertations, analyzed through content analysis and comparative-analytical methods. The results show that Al-Wasatiyyah, through the principles of justice ('Adalah), balance (Tawazun), and rejection of extremism (Ghuluw), contributes to the formation of social cohesion and the strengthening of tolerance, as reflected in the practices of interfaith dialogue, moderate Sufism, contextual fiqh, and inclusive Islamic boarding school education. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach that connects theological, historical-cultural, and social praxis dimensions, so that it not only describes theory or history, but also the applicable strategies of Al-Wasatiyyah in the context of a multicultural society. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of strengthening education, socialization, and policies based on Islamic moderation as instruments for building an inclusive society, reducing social conflict, and strengthening national unity, while also opening up opportunities for field research to evaluate more contextual practices of religious moderation in Indonesia.

Keywords: al-wasatiyyah, religious moderation, social cohesion, religious tolerance, Islam Nusantara.

Introduction

Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelago, is blessed with extraordinary cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. With more than 1,300 ethnic groups, around 700 regional languages, and six official religions, Indonesia is a unique laboratory of multiculturalism, but at the same time vulnerable to social and religious conflict[1]. This diversity is actually the strength of the nation, as reflected in the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity),* but at the same time it poses a serious challenge to social cohesion and national unity. In recent decades, intolerance, social polarization, and extremist movements have become issues that threaten social stability[2]. Conflicts are often triggered by literal, rigid, and exclusive interpretations of religion, in which certain groups reject plurality, consider views outside their group to be heretical, and even justify discriminatory or violent actions in the name of religion. In addition, the politicization of religion in the public sphere and the spread of extremist ideologies through digital media have further exacerbated social fragmentation[3].

In this context, there is an urgent need for a theological and practical foundation that can promote peace, tolerance, and harmony in a pluralistic society. One relevant concept is Al-Wasatiyyah, which literally means "middle" or moderation. This concept is derived from the Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah verse 143, which emphasizes the position of Muslims as a middle community (*ummatan wasaṭan*), which is just, balanced, and acts as a witness to human deeds[4]. According to Yusuf Al-Qardhawi (2011), Al-Wasatiyyah has important dimensions, namely balance (*tawazun*), justice (*al-'adalah*), tolerance and openness (*tasamuh*), and rejection of extremism (*ghuluw*)[5]. These dimensions show that moderation is not merely a sociological attitude, but a fundamental teaching of Islam that can be translated into social practice, interfaith interaction, and public policy.

Various studies have discussed Al-Wasatiyyah from theological and historical perspectives. Qardhawi (2011) emphasizes the normative basis of Al-Wasatiyyah as a principle that balances right-wing extremism (ghuluw) and unlimited liberalism (tafrīt), thus becoming a guideline for ethics, faith, and fiqh[6]. On the other hand, Azra (2013) and Hefner (2000) highlight the historical-cultural practices of Islam Nusantara as the embodiment of Al-Wasatiyyah in Indonesia. Islam Nusantara developed through a process of indigenization that produced an accommodative, inclusive, and moderate civilization, in which peaceful local traditions were integrated with Islamic values, creating practices of tolerance and respect for differences[7]. In addition, Mujiburrahman (2014) emphasizes the social dimension of Islamic moderation by highlighting religious tolerance practices related to local wisdom, such as mutual cooperation, deliberation, and family values, which serve as social glue in a multicultural society[8].

Although these studies have made significant contributions, previous research tends to be fragmented. The normative theological foundation is often discussed in depth without linking it to contemporary social practices; conversely, studies of local tolerance practices or the history of Islam in the archipelago often fail to link social phenomena with the theological basis of Al-Wasatiyyah. In other words, there is a gap between the normative-theological dimension and the practical-sociological dimension. This gap indicates the need for research that places Al-Wasatiyyah as an operational paradigm, which not only explains its principles and history, but also its implementation strategies in enhancing tolerance, social cohesion, and national unity amid diversity.

This study presents novelty with an integrative approach that combines three dimensions: theological, historical-cultural, and social praxis. This novelty is evident in the effort to systematically map out how the normative principles of Al-Wasatiyyah can be translated into practical strategies in the context of society, education, policy, and cross-community interactions in Indonesia. Thus, this study not only describes the theory or history of Al-Wasatiyyah, but also examines its application as an instrument for building social cohesion and countering extremism. The hypothesis of this study is that the implementation of Al-Wasatiyyah values can increase tolerance, strengthen *social bonding*, and maintain national unity in a multicultural society.

Based on the background, gap analysis, and previous literature review, the objectives of this study are: first, to analyze the philosophical and theological concepts of Al-Wasatiyyah in building social cohesion in a multicultural society; second, to identify strategies for implementing Al-Wasatiyyah to increase religious tolerance; and third, to explore the relevance and role of Tamadun Islam Nusantara

as a manifestation of Al-Wasatiyyah values in Indonesia. This study is expected to make practical and academic contributions by emphasizing that Islamic moderation is not merely an ideal concept, but also a strategic instrument for the sustainability of social cohesion and national unity.

Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach through a descriptive-analytical approach, as it focuses on analyzing the concepts, theories, and practices of Al-Wasatiyyah in the context of social cohesion, religious tolerance, and Tamadun Islam Nusantara. The type of data used is secondary qualitative data obtained from academic literature, with primary sources in the form of verses from the Qur'an and hadith related to the principle of wasatiyyah, as well as secondary sources in the form of books by scholars and intellectuals such as Yusuf Al-Qardhawi, Azyumardi Azra, Robert Hefner, accredited scientific journal articles (Sinta 1–3), proceedings, theses, and relevant dissertations. Data collection was carried out through a literature study with critical literature review, examining religious texts, social theories, and contemporary academic analyses. The data obtained was analyzed using content analysis and comparative-analytical approaches to identify, classify, and synthesize the values of Al-Wasatiyyah that support social cohesion and religious tolerance practices in Indonesia.

Results and Discussion
The Theoretical Relevance of Al-Wasatiyyah to Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is defined as the bonds that unite members of society, reduce conflict, and enable individuals to achieve mutual prosperity (Smith, 2016). Al-Wasatiyyah contributes directly to the formation of these bonds through its emphasis on three core values: Justice, Dialogue, and Rejection of Extremism. Meanwhile, justice (*'Adalah)* and Protection of Minorities. Justice in Islam (*'Adalah)* is an absolute prerequisite for stability and cohesion. Al-Wasatiyyah places justice as a central value, which means that every citizen, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or political views, must be treated equally before the law and society. Injustice (such as the marginalization of minority groups) is a major trigger for social disintegration. By promoting inclusive justice, Wasatiyyah ensures that social bonds are not fractured by feelings of discrimination, thereby strengthening citizens' loyalty to the nation.

a. Deliberation, Dialogue, and Balance (*Tawazun*)

    The principle of balance (*tawazun*) in Wasatiyyah is translated in the social sphere as openness to differences of opinion (*tasāmuh*). Social cohesion requires a healthy public space for interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Philosophers such as Habermas (1998) emphasize the importance of rational and open communication in forming social consensus. Wasatiyyah provides a theological framework that validates this dialogue, viewing it not as a form of sacrifice of belief, but as the implementation of religious teachings to find common ground and build mutual understanding for the public good (*maslahah 'āmmah)*.

b. Rejection of Extremism (*Ghuluw*) as an Antidote to Disintegration.

    Moderation inherently serves as an antidote to radicalism and extremism (*ghuluw*). Extremism is always based on rigid and exclusive religious interpretations, which automatically reject and antagonize other groups, thereby threatening social cohesion. In contrast, moderate interpretation (*Wasatiyyah)* encourages acceptance of plurality and understanding that truth has many dimensions (Zada, 2018). The rejection of violence and takfiri attitudes (excommunicating others) that characterize Wasatiyyah directly protects the social order from ideological divisions.

Implementation of Al-Wasatiyyah in Building Tolerance

Religious tolerance is the recognition and respect for the existence and practice of other religions. In the context of Al-Wasatiyyah, tolerance is manifested through two key approaches rooted in the Islamic tradition of the Indonesian archipelago.

a. Recognition of Plurality through Moderate Sufism.

The tradition of Sufism in Islam Nusantara (Haidar, 2004) plays a major role in shaping tolerant attitudes. Moderate Sufism teaches that diversity is *sunnatullah* (God's will), which must be responded to with humility (*tawāḍu'*). This approach effectively avoids *religious monism,* which often triggers intolerance (Hick, 1999). By focusing on spiritual essence and ethics rather than textual formalism, moderate Sufism encourages people to see the good in others, regardless of their differences in belief.

b.   Contextual Fiqh (*Fiqh Muwajahah*)

The application of Islamic teachings in Indonesia is shaped by Contextual Fiqh (sometimes called *Fiqh Muwajahah* or Interfaith Fiqh). This is a method of interpreting Islamic law that not only adheres to the text (*nash*) but also actively considers the local context (*local wisdom*) and the main objectives of sharia (*maqāshid syari'ah)* in promoting peace, justice, and the common good (Mas'udi, 2015). Examples of this can be seen in the fatwas of major religious institutions that support: First, interfaith cooperation in social and community affairs. Second, respect for the state constitution (Pancasila) as a mutual agreement (*mīthāq)* that must be obeyed.

The Contribution of Tamadun Islam Nusantara as the Embodiment of Al-Wasatiyyah

Tamadun Islam Nusantara is the concrete and historical embodiment of Al-Wasatiyyah in Indonesia (Azra, 2013). The success of Islam in the archipelago is due to its ability to absorb and integrate local values without losing its Islamic identity. Wasatiyyah values such as *tasamuh (*tolerance), *tawassuth (*moderation/middle ground), and *ta'adul (*fairness) have been integrated into religious and cultural practices.

First, Islamic boarding schools as centers for the formation of moderation. Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia play a vital role as centers of moderate Islamic scholarship. They produce scholars who adhere to the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah tradition, which is characterized by: A balance between reason and *nash (*sacred texts), Preserving local traditions (*ḥifẓ al-'urf)* that do not conflict with sharia, A *tawāzu' (*prudent) attitude in dealing with controversial issues (Amin, 2017). This educational model produces scholars and students who are nationalistic, reject violence, and are able to bridge differences. Second, Cultural Diversity (Cultural Accommodation). The success of Islam Nusantara lies in its ability to position Islam as a religious identity without damaging national identity or local wisdom. This process of Islamization differs from models in other regions that tend to conflict with local cultures (Hefner, 2000; Ricklefs, 2007). In Islam Nusantara, culture is seen as a vessel for the expression of Islamic values, not as an enemy. This analysis shows that Al-Wasatiyyah's contribution to strengthening the values of Tamadun Islam Nusantara lies in its ability to offer a responsive, inclusive, and peaceful model of Islamic civilization in the midst of a highly diverse society. Moderation is the strategic key to ensuring that Tamadun Islam remains relevant, contributes positively to social cohesion, and provides solutions to the challenges of globalization and multiculturalism.

Conclusion

The concept of Al-Wasatiyyah (Islamic moderation) is a fundamental theological and strategic foundation for building social cohesion and maintaining religious tolerance in Indonesia's multicultural society, adhering to the principles of justice ('Adalah), balance (Tawazun), and rejection of extremism (Ghuluw) that strengthen social bonds and suppress radical ideologies. This concept is realized in practice in Tamadun Islam Nusantara through the adaptation of Islamic teachings into peaceful local cultures, making Indonesia a living laboratory for global religious moderation. The implications of this understanding show that strengthening Al-Wasatiyyah can encourage an inclusive society, reduce social conflict, and become a strategic reference for religious moderation. Its limitation lies in its focus on literature review without examining field practices, thus empirical research is needed to enrich the understanding of the implementation of this concept. Therefore, it is recommended that education and socialization of Al-Wasatiyyah be strengthened in various institutions, and further studies be conducted to evaluate more contextual practices of religious moderation in Indonesia.

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