



BRILL

EXCHANGE 52 (2023) 220–240

EXCHANGE

brill.com/exch

Religious Moderation as Good Life: Two Responses to the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Directive on Religious Moderation in Indonesia

Emanuel Gerrit Singgih

Professor, The Theological Faculty, Duta Wacana Christian University,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
gerrit@staff.ukdw.ac.id

Received 18 April 2022 | Accepted 2 October 2023 |

Published online 24 November 2023

Abstract

In 2019, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia launched the book *Moderasi Beragama* (“Religious Moderation”) with a supplement in the form of question and answer, followed in 2020 by *Peta Jalan Penguatan Moderasi Beragama* (“Road Map for Strengthening Religious Moderation”), with *Road Map* (in English) as the main title. The Ministry of Religious Affairs aimed to establish an official governmental directive for expressing religious convictions and aspirations, both internally and in public. The directive is intended to neutralize religious radicalism through awareness of the religiously plural context of Indonesia, and the fact that all religions of Indonesia have accepted Pancasila as the state ideology. The purpose of this study is to discuss and evaluate the concept of religious moderation proposed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The examination will be conducted through a dialogue involving two public Christian responses to *Moderasi Beragama*.

Keywords

religious moderation – religious violence – religious practices – Good Life – Protestant virtue ethics – categorizations – the shadow of the state/government – religious freedom – human rights

1 Introduction

Since the fall of Soeharto in 1998, Indonesia has been following the precepts of democracy, where there is respect for freedom, including the freedom to express models of religious life in society, as long as it is in line with the state ideology, i.e. Pancasila. Although Indonesia is a country with Islam as the majority religion, Islam is not the state religion. Six world religions (Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Hindu, Buddha, Confucianism) are recognized, but how they act in public space is formally controlled by the workings of Pancasila. However, as Islam is the religion of the majority, the public space is becoming more and more dominated by the symbols of the majority religion, while the state seems to be content with playing the role of a spectator.

This has caused resentment from Christians, which culminated in communal violence in the eastern part of Indonesia from 1999–2002. Afterwards, Indonesia experienced a series of terrorist acts, all in the name of radical Islam, up until the first term of Joko Widodo’s (“Jokowi”) presidency (2014–2019). During his first term, pressure was also applied by Muslim organizations such as HTI¹ and FPI² to erase discourse on pluralism in the public space. Wary of these terrorist acts, in the second term of Jokowi (2019–2024), he has taken action against these terrorist groups. Many terrorist secret cells have been destroyed by a special counter-terrorist police detachment, popularly known as “Densus 88”.³ To restore a balanced discourse on pluralism in the public space, both the HTI and FPI have been banned.⁴

At the same time, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia deems that the deradicalization policy alone is insufficient, and so it has taken the initiative to counter the interpretation of Islam by such organizations mentioned above, by providing information that could foster moderate views of religion. In 2019 the Ministry of Religious Affairs published the book *Moderasi Beragama* (Eng: “Religious Moderation”) with a supplement in

1 *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (Eng: “Indonesian Freedom Party”), which campaigned for a caliphate state.

2 *Front Pembebasan Islam* (Eng: “Islamic Defenders Front”), which under its charismatic leader, Muhammad Rizieq Shihab, staged mass demonstrations to thwart the election of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (“Ahok”), a Chinese and a Christian as the governor of Jakarta in 2016.

3 Acronym for “Detasemen khusus 88” (Eng: “Special Detachment 88”).

4 For the reasons by the government to disband FPI see *Kompas.com*, December 30, 2020, 09.39 pm (accessed Monday, September 11, 2023); for the reasons of disbanding HTI, see *The Jakarta Post.com*, July 19, 2017 (accessed Monday, September 11, 2023).

the form of question-answer which consists of the gist of the book, and followed in 2020 by *Peta Jalan Penguatan Moderasi Beragama* (Eng: “Road Map for Strengthening Religious Moderation”), with *Road Map* (in English) as the dominant title.⁵ The Ministry aimed to establish an official governmental directive for the people to express religious convictions and aspirations, both internally and in public.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the concept of religious moderation by the Ministry as a government body in the context of religious plurality of Indonesia, where Islam is the majority religion, and to evaluate the published responses to this concept by the public (here Christians and academics). This evaluation aims to get an estimate of whether the assumption of the Ministry, that their concept of religious moderation will help in fostering religious moderation in internal or in public life, is sufficiently feasible to be accepted by the public. My thesis statement is that the publication of the directive *Moderasi Beragama* (abbr: “MB”) and the support it gets from certain groups will have a considerable influence on public life, and eventually, despite some opposition, it will help in creating an atmosphere of religious moderation as an alternative to religious violence.

In the two responses discussed below, religious moderation is seen as a public policy and a virtue that ironically comes out from practical wisdom and not from a religious or theological viewpoint. I will show the reason for this traditional separation between virtue ethics and theological or religious practice in the Christian Protestant tradition, and how the growing discourse of religious moderation in Indonesia could contribute to overcoming this separation. As the discourse touches on the problem of religion and violence, I will also examine to a certain extent the relationship between religion and violence. While acknowledging that religion has its problematic sides, at the same time, I hold that religious sources and religious practices could become incentives for public virtues. This positive view of religion in public life could also become a contribution to the global discourse on the significance of religious practices in public. For the theory and perspective, I will refer to the theme of “Good Life” by looking for clues in Pieter Vos, *Longing for Good Life*.⁶ As the discourse on religious moderation also involved sacred texts, it is also important to deal

5 Ministry of Religious Affairs, *Moderasi Beragama* (“Religious Moderation”) (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama, 2019). At that time the Minister of Religious Affairs was Lukman Hakim Saifuddin. *Road Map* is not published but is available on the internet, see <https://pendispress.kemenag.go.id/index.php/ppres/catalog/view/7/5/231> (accessed March 12, 2022). At the time of its completion in 2020, the Minister of Religious Affairs is Fachrul Razi.

6 Pieter Vos, *Longing for Good Life: Virtue Ethics after Protestantism* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

with the interpretation of texts that could be regarded as related to religious moderation, the Middle Way, and the Good Life.

I will give a summary of the contents of MB. Then I will describe and analyze the two responses using the lens of Good Life by Vos, and also by discussing the views of Keith Ward and William Cavanaugh, who disassociate religion from violence.⁷ After that, I will give my evaluation of MB and further evaluation of the responses. I will close with a conclusion that includes the significance of the publication of MB and the responses to it for the local and global discourse on religious practices.

2 What is Moderasi Beragama?

According to MB, religious moderation came to attention after Indonesia experienced a bitter conflict of religions, and very often these conflicts resulted in violence. For many, religion belongs to the sphere of emotion and subjectivity. This sphere could be easily triggered and raised to the extreme, and the result is claims of truth which create antagonism and enmity.⁸ As MB understands it, in Indonesia there are two poles in religious life. On one side, there are extremely religious groups that are absolutely convinced about the truth of one textual interpretation. They regard different interpretations as deviant and untrue. Those who belong to this pole are the “ultra-conservatives”. On the other side, there are extremely religious groups that rely on rational considerations only. They ignore the sacredness of religion and sacrifice the fundamental truth of religion, in order to be able to tolerate others. They are the “extreme liberals”. According to MB, these two poles need to change their extreme positions to become moderates.⁹ The spirit of religious moderation is to look for meeting points between two extreme poles in religious life, to look for commonalities, and to avoid sharpening the differences.

MB emphasizes that religious moderation is important, as religion highly regards the life of human beings. Extremists are only concerned with the glory of God and put aside humanity. Religious moderation is also important, as religions developed to contain diversity in the interpretation of religious tenets. If people cling to one interpretation only, conflict is inevitable. Religious moderation means being open and tolerant toward different interpretations. It is also

7 Keith Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Oxford: Lion Book, Lion Hudson plc, 2011); William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

8 Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 6–7.

9 Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 7.

important as a cultural strategy, which means caring for the continuation of pluralism as agreed in the Pancasila, which is the foundation of the Republic.¹⁰

According to MB, the roots of religious moderation in Islam can be seen in the terms *wasath* and *wasathiyah*, which means “the best way”, and the best way is always the middle way. The Arabic word *wasith* has been incorporated to become the Indonesian word “wasit”, which means, referee (in soccer matches), but also mediator or conciliator. The middle way means just and balanced, inclusive, and not exclusive. The term *wasathiyat Islam* means “justly-balanced Islam”, or even the essence of Islam as a middle path. The followers of Islam are called *ummatan wasathan*, “people who are prepared to mediate”, “people of the middle way”, and this way of life is based on the Qur’an (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:143) and the Hadith (“the best way of dealings is the middle way”).¹¹

MB also refers to other religions that practice moderation such as Protestant Christians, Catholic Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians.¹² After the explanation of religious moderation, the content of the book becomes more concrete in describing indicators of religious moderation, which are: 1. Commitment to nationality (Ind: “kebangsaan”). 2. Tolerance. 3. Non-violence. 4. Accommodative toward local culture. In discussing point 2, the term Tolerance is not placed in opposition to Intolerance, but always in opposition to Radicalism, which according to MB, is an ideology for changing the social and political system in violent ways, be it conceptual, verbal, or physical, in the name of religion. Radicalism is linked to terrorism, and although many associated this link with a certain religion, it could also be linked to all religions.¹³ Moderation is a middle position between extreme left and extreme right. At the extreme left stand the liberals, and at extreme right stand the ultra-conservatives. The antithesis between the ultra-conservatives and the liberals in the introduction is reiterated, but now it is identified with the expressions “extreme left” and “extreme right”.¹⁴

The expression “religious moderation” is not common in ethical or theological discourses in the West. I translated the phrase from the Indonesian language, “moderasi beragama”. How it came into existence is as explained above in MB: the ideal religion practices moderacy, and the source of moderacy is situated within the body of religion and is one of its essences.¹⁵ But the term “moderation” is part of the discussion on the theme of Good Life or Happy Life

10 Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 8–10.

11 Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 16–27.

12 Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 28–41.

13 Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 43–45.

14 Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 47.

15 Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 25.

(Greek: *eudaimonia*, Latin: *beatitudo*) in ethics, and such can be included in the discourse on virtue ethics, which recently has been retrieved and defended by Vos as part of the Reformation heritage.¹⁶ One of his aims is to demonstrate that Protestantism has never abandoned virtue ethics. Vos argues that virtue ethics has developed in various ways and undergone several transformations throughout history. It allows for a variety of thoughts covering a range of moral questions, such as what it means to live a good life, which dispositions are virtues, and what it means to see the world from the perspective of virtue. Even in its many varieties, it has its own characteristics and is defined by the kind of answers that are given to three questions: “What is (the) good? What ought to be done? How do we know the good?”

According to Vos, virtue ethics answers the first question in terms of happiness, that is, the good that makes life indeed a good life. If we relate the first question to our discourse on religious moderation in Indonesia, then the answer could be related to the consensus on what makes life in Indonesia a happy life, namely by relying on the Pancasila as the foundation of togetherness in society. The second question is defining moral action as acting from virtue, either acquired by habituation or received as a (divine) gift. It involves the answer to the question of what we ought to do in relation to the sort of persons we ought to become. The second question could be related to character building, that is, the development of the concept of religious moderation by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the context of plurality of religions in Indonesia. The third question is answered from an understanding of human nature, whether in terms of potentiality that is to be actualized according to reason or as fundamentally in need of external (divine) revelation. Knowledge of the good is in one way or another rooted in human nature, whether defined as natural law (*lex naturae*) or as reason, whether potentially sufficient for self-realization or as damaged and in need of external transformation. The third question could be related to the public scrutiny (here done by the representatives of religious bodies and academics) on the concept of religious moderation, to test its feasibility. Vos did not refer to the term “religious moderation”, but as he understood Good Life as a gift and that moral excellence on the one hand, and acknowledgment that one’s character will remain imperfect because of sin on the other hand, can go together, then Good Life as moderation can include people who follow religious observances, either Christians or Muslims. So we can talk about religious moderation in the context of virtue ethics, and even as a theological issue. Vos did not refer to the term “religious

16 Vos, *Good Life*, 6–15.

moderation”, but as he understood Good Life as a gift¹⁷ and that moral excellence on the one hand, and acknowledgment that one’s character will remain imperfect because of sin on the other hand, can go together,¹⁸ then Good Life as moderation can include people who follow religious observances, either Christians or Muslims. So we can talk about religious moderation in the context of virtue ethics, and even as a theological issue.

In his historical survey on the meaning and position of virtue ethics, Vos explained the dominant view (which he disagrees with) that regarded the Christian Protestant tradition as making a separation between virtue ethics and theological or religious practices. This tradition has been criticized by Catholic thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Brad Gregory. According to them, the Reformation is responsible for ‘the catastrophic breakdown’ of the teleological view of life in modernity which resulted in the abandonment of the concept of Good Life.¹⁹ But Vos has argued convincingly that Protestant theology is not opposed to virtue ethics. Even if it acknowledges that imperfection as the result of sin will be part of one’s character, moral excellence is possible, as can be seen in Protestant discourses on ‘role examples’ and ‘existential examples’.²⁰ As in MB, where the Islamic sources of religious moderation are described at length, so too, the Christian theological or religious practices of religious moderation can be demonstrated through the concept of Good Life.

3 Patty’s Response to Moderasi Beragama

In 2021 Albertus Patty published his book, *Moderasi Beragama: Suatu Kebajikan Moral-Etis* (Eng: “Religious Moderation: a Moral-Ethics Virtue”).²¹ Judging from the fact that the title of his book is the same as the directive and that it contains a foreword from the Director-General of the Christian Department of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, it can be seen as an implicit response to the directive in the form of a Christian version of religious moderation. Patty started by describing two recent violent acts that are related to religion: a terrorist attack

¹⁷ Vos, *Good Life*, 48.

¹⁸ Vos, *Good Life*, 71.

¹⁹ In Vos, *Good Life*, 63. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, [1981] 2007), 53–54; Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), Chap. 4

²⁰ Vos, *Good Life*, chapter 7.

²¹ Albertus M. Patty, *Moderasi Beragama: Suatu Kebajikan Moral-Etis* (Eng: “Religious Moderation: a Moral-Ethics Virtue”) (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2021).

at a Christian village in Poso, Central Sulawesi, on November 27, 2020, where four people were murdered and six houses, including the prayer house, were burned; and a suicide bombing on the court of the Cathedral-church of Makassar, March 28, 2021, which fortunately left no victims except the perpetrator himself. Patty did not comment on these two events, but probably he wanted to show the irony, that while the government, i.e. the Ministry of Religious Affairs is trying hard to internalize the programs of MB (that is from 2019), others seem to be content in implementing their violent acts, which Patty termed as “sacred violence”.²²

History of religions is full of violent acts done in the name of God by followers of religion toward others, and such there is this paradox in religion: on one hand it is about love, on the other hand, it produces hatred. Religion is like a knife, it can be used to cut vegetables, but it can also be used to kill. Why do we have this paradox? According to Patty, it is because religion has a secular dimension, and because of that, its followers need to be critical and ready to examine why many choose to become radical and extremist in matters of religion. They become so because they adhere to fundamentalism, which is a closed and rigid religious ideology.²³ It means the culprit is to be looked for in the secular dimension of religion. So religion is good, while secularity is bad.

This antithesis between religion and secularity, and religion as the source of good while secularity as the source of evil is common in Indonesia, but it is problematic and needs to be addressed to some length. Every religion has its secular dimension, and it is rash to state that the source of evil in religion is its secular dimension. It is better to stay with the parable of the knife above: religion has its bright side, but also its dark side. But it is good to follow the

22 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 3. “Sacred violence” is violence done in the name of religion (or God). Robert Setio criticized Patty as anti-Muslim, because Patty only mentioned religious violence done by Muslims to Christians, and was silent on religious violence done by Christians to Muslims, see Robert Setio, “Pembentukan Wacana Moderasi Beragama” (“The Formation of the Discourse on Religious Moderation”) in Julianus Mojau (ed.), *Bersama Sang Hidup* (“Together with the Life-Giver”) (Jakarta-Makassar: BPK Gunung Mulia-Oase Intim, 2022. 351–369). It means that religious moderation is designed for Muslims and not for Christians. I think Setio is a little too harsh on Patty. Patty could indeed add to his reference, religious violence done by Christians to Muslims (for example the Tolikara incident in Papua, 2015) to provide a balanced picture, but on the whole, the tone of Patty’s book is irenic: Christians could learn from Muslims about religious moderation.

23 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 7. The link between fundamentalism and secularity in Patty’s argument is odd. The fundamentalists usually reject the process that once was termed as “secularization”, see Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Knopf/HarperCollins, 2000).

bright side. Ward has a good explanation: “If one thinks that the good is what enables all sentient beings to flourish, and that spiritual reality is supremely beautiful, wise and compassionate, then one’s religion can be a tremendous force for human good”.²⁴

On the other hand, secularity too, has its bright and dark side. Hence, it is problematic to place secular societies and religious societies in antithetical positions. The idea that religion is a source of violence has been criticized by William Cavanaugh in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence*.²⁵ His book is not a defense of religion against the charge of violence. Rather he argues that religious motives as well as economic and political motives can contribute and have contributed together to produce violence. They cannot be separated from each other. According to Cavanaugh, in contemporary Western secular societies, religious violence is condemned while other factors such as nationalism are ignored. Why? Because religion is a secular Western construct, in which religion is regarded as the dangerous Other.²⁶

Cavanaugh comes to this conclusion by an examination of the ‘invention’ of religion. The view that religion is invented by academics comes from Jonathan Z. Smith.²⁷ Religion is not something out there, *sui generis*. Human practices are not religious because they contain intrinsic values that can be measured objectively. They are religious because the followers of religion place them in a narrative context or a speech community. Cavanaugh shows that many of the supposedly bad traits of religion in the arguments of those who think of religion as essentially bad are not religious at all but social, cultural, and ideological. But it can be asked whether implicitly, Cavanaugh wants to show that religion is essentially good. However, Cavanaugh stresses that his aim is not to dissolve the problem of religion and violence. Rather, Cavanaugh

24 Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* 175.

25 Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, chapter I. He criticized those who traced religious violence to religion’s tendency to become absolutist, divisive, and irrational.

26 Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 4–6.

27 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jamestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); cited in Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 58. My focus is on religious violence. I refer to Cavanaugh because he refutes the assumption that religion must be violent. It is not my intention to enter the debate on the deconstruction of religion. For those who are interested in the debate see Frans Wijsen, *Christianity and Other Cultures* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2015) 212. Wijsen accepted Smith’s deconstruction effort. The context of Wijsen’s reference to Smith is the shift from phenomenological to the discursive study of religion. Paul Hedges has a qualified acceptance of the deconstruction of religion. He rejected ‘hard deconstruction’ but accepted ‘soft deconstruction’, see Paul Hedges, “Deconstructing Religion: Some Thoughts on Where We Go From Here – A Hermeneutical Proposal”, *Exchange* 47 (2018) 10–12.

wants to show that what counts as religion and what does not in any given context is contestable and depends on who has the power and authority at any given time and place. If the very definition of religion is part of the history of Western power, then the idea that religion is fraught with violence might perhaps have an ideological function in legitimizing and delegitimizing certain practices.²⁸

Although Cavanaugh relies on Smith's claim that religion is an invention of Western academics, or that religion is not a *sui generis* phenomenon, his conclusions come close to the opposite view of Smith, namely that religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon. Daniel Pals has examined the claim of Smith and others. Citing Bleeker, Pals holds that the phenomenology of religion is not a reduction of religion to non-religious factors.²⁹ Criticisms against advocates of the phenomenology of religion often miss their points. He also refers to Imre Lakatos, the philosopher of science, who pointed to the importance of "hardcore" principles that must be held immune to falsification while the belt of secondary hypotheses which surround them lies open to amendment and revision.³⁰ According to Pals, an axiomatic version of irreducible religion amounts to no less and no more than the sort of precept which undergirds every other discipline of the modern academy. The concept of religion as *sui generis* in academic terms is valid. In line with Cavanaugh's argument, I consider that Patty is wrong in separating religion from its secular dimension and that religion can only be explained by its secular dimension. So we are back to the view above that both religion and secularity have their positive and negative sides. Because our discourse is about religious moderation, it is valid if we start from the reality of religion and religious violence. When religion becomes violent, then it is appropriate that the issue of religious moderation is brought to the fore.

In chapter two Patty followed the categorizations in MB.³¹ He is not happy with these categorizations which seem too rigid and do not always correspond with reality, but nevertheless, he thinks we need them for identifying what position one takes.³² But the trend toward religious violence nowadays

28 Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 59.

29 Daniel Pals, "Is Religion a *sui generis* Phenomenon?", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LV/2 (1987), 259–282.

30 Pals, "Is Religion a *sui generis* Phenomenon?", 276. See also the long introduction by Hent de Vries, "Why still Religion?", in Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond A Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 1–98, especially the statement in p. 13, which is explicitly opposed to Smith's position.

31 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 12–17.

32 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 19.

also revives the opposite trend, namely the longing for religious moderation. A good example is the “Human Fraternity Document for World Peace and Coexistence”, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Sheik of Al Azhar, Ahmed El-Tayyeb on February 4, 2019, at Abu Dhabi.³³ In chapter three Patty delineates how in Indonesia people should strive for religious moderation. He starts by interpreting Plato’s metaphor of people in the cave in *The Republic*. Too often religious people are like people in the cave. They rely too much on their own perception of truth. They should come out of the cave, to meet people with different convictions and different religions, and become aware that we are living in a religiously pluralistic world.³⁴ In the context of religion, the moderates are those who open themselves to the dynamics of plurality and strive to bridge all interests.

But Patty hastens to add that moderation is not identical with the middle way. Moderation is more an act of balancing. In a pluralistic society, one needs moderation. In certain situations, he/she may take sides. But taking sides here is done within the framework of balancing. If a religious community is too exclusive, then it is good to tip the balance with inclusiveness. Religious moderation is not a theological stance, but practical wisdom.³⁵ It is clear that here Patty is following the traditional Protestant separation between theology and ethics, i.e. practical wisdom. But we have seen above, the argument of Vos that it is precisely as practical wisdom that it belongs to Protestant theology and ethics.

As in MB, Patty also confirms that all religions in Indonesia have accepted moderation. He is even prepared to acknowledge that as the majority religion, Islam in Indonesia is the pioneer in this matter. As a concrete example he mentioned the proposal by the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) clergy in a conference at Banjar, West Java, in 2019, to stop referring to non-Muslims as “kafir” (Eng: “pagans”).³⁶ The background of this proposal was the atmosphere of the 2019 general election when tension mounted as many Christians openly protested to be labeled as such. Of course, it can also be asked whether Christians never labeled others as pagans. Long ago the translators of the Indonesian Bible already decided not to render *goyim* or *ta ethne* as “pagans” but as “nations”,

33 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, Ministry, *Moderasi Beragama*, 11. Before that, The United Nations in its 68th General Assembly in 2017 already declared the year 2019 as “The International Year of Moderation”. The document is also mentioned in *Road Map*, 18.

34 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 31–41.

35 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 44.

36 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 50, 67. He misread it as a decision by the *Muktamar* (which is the highest decision-making body of NU), while it is not, see *The Jakarta Post.com*, Friday, March 1, 2019 (accessed September 11, 2023).

except in Matthew 5:22. Despite this effort, many Christians still understand the term “kafir” in Matthew 5:22 in the same sense as their Muslim neighbors. So in the context of a religiously plural society such as Indonesia, where the relationship between Muslims and Christians is often tense, to withhold labeling one another as “kafir” could be seen as the workings of religious moderation, and it will surely help in the reconstruction of Good Life in society.

Despite his insistence that virtue or practical wisdom is unrelated to theology, in chapter four Patty provided theological reflections. He refers to Reinhold Niebuhr, known for his realistic view of humans. On the one hand, they are images of God, moral humans. But on the other hand, they are also sinful humans.³⁷ This ambiguity of humans is also reflected in the way they live the tenets of their religion. Because of that, followers of religion must have an open mind, and always be ready for dialogue and cooperation with others. Niebuhr’s position is actually in accordance with the Protestant virtue ethics as explained by Vos above. Then Patty moved to look for religious moderation in some biblical texts, such as the story of the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–9, the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:24–35, and the story of Solomon’s wisdom in 1 Kings 3:16–28. Between the story of Peter and Cornelius and the story of Solomon’s wisdom, he inserted explanations of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37.³⁸

I am not convinced that the passages above are about religious moderation. Other passages are better suited: for example, Luke 9:51–56, where the disciples of Jesus were offended by the Samaritan villagers who refused to let them through on their way to Jerusalem. James and John ask whether they should command fire to come down from heaven and consume the villagers. Jesus rebukes them, and they just leave, looking for another village. Paul’s view on the issue of eating food (meat) that has been offered to an idol in 1 Corinthians 8:7–9 is also worthy of consideration. Strict Christians who refuse to eat that kind of meat are considered by Paul as having “a weak conscience”. Those who have “a strong conscience” will have no problem with this issue. Strict people usually regard themselves as strong (in this context: the non-moderates), but here they are precisely the weak ones.

The book of Ecclesiastes also contains reference to virtue ethics. Eccl. 7:16–17 could be read through the perspective of religious moderation. Despite the vehement denials by Roger Whybray and Roland Murphy that the writer was influenced by the concept of the middle way, I think it was precisely this

37 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 56.

38 Patty, *Moderasi Beragama*, 60–69.

vehemence that betrayed the influence of what they were trying to deny.³⁹ The writer of Ecclesiastes lived in the time of encounter between Hebrew and Greek thought during the period of the Ptolemaic rulers in the 3rd century BC, and may well have been influenced by Greek thought. In Eccl. 9:1–2, death is the great leveler. The same fate (*miqre*) comes to all, including the religious people. One important but frequently ignored reason why religious people should become moderate followers of religion is the factor of death. Distinct from the New Testament, in the Old Testament not all aspects of death are to be regarded as negative. Violent death is condemned, but natural death, that is death in old age is regarded as normal, and because of that, one has to live in a religiously moderate way.⁴⁰

This is why after referring to acceptance of death, the writer of Ecclesiastes turned to acceptance of joy in ordinary things of life, for instance, enjoying the company of the wife (Eccl. 9:7–10). As Vos explained in the introduction of his book, the context of Protestant virtue ethics is the ordinary things of life. They are not ordinary in the sense of having no spiritual values but are precisely the opposite. Vos gave examples of life such as profession or married state.⁴¹ The common interest in ordinary things of life is again evidence that the Old Testament does not only provide divine commandments, but also, practical counsels for a Good Life. In evaluating death, there is a difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. But as we have seen above, the New Testament is also very practical. A combined study of biblical sources and the revived interest in virtue ethics among Protestants could become a proper theological response to the concept of religious moderation in MB.

4 PGI-ICRS Response to Moderasi Beragama

The Communion of Churches in Indonesia (Ind: “Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia, abbr: “PGI”) and The Indonesian Consortium of Religious Studies (abbr: “ICRS”) reported their evaluation of the Ministry’s directive on religious moderation in a webinar.⁴² They voiced the same concern as Patty on the categorizations of people in the directive, but in contrast to Patty, they disagreed with the categorizations as they consider them to be confusing:

39 Roger N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 120; Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992) 72.

40 James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and Hope of Immortality* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

41 Vos, *Good Life*, 5.

42 PGI-ICRS, “PGI-ICRS view on Religious Moderation” <https://youtu.be/Lr8bwatrlVs> February 25, 2022 (accessed March 10, 2022).

“ultra-conservatives” is contrasted with “extreme liberals”, but the “extreme left” is identified as the liberals and contrasted with “extreme right”, namely the fundamentalists. “Tolerant” is identified with non-violent people and contrasted with “radical”, namely violent people. What about the conservatives, the liberals, and the intolerant people? According to the report, *Road Map* is better, as it avoided the categorizations and went directly to explain what are non-moderate acts (acts against humanity, against commitment to Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, and acts against the law of the country) and moderate acts (commitment to nationality, tolerant acts, non-violent acts and openness to the local tradition).

Important too is the emphasis on reform of the curriculum in the religious boarding schools (“pesantrens”) to include the principles of religious moderation.⁴³ If so, then the same principle should also be applied to Christian schools, and schools that belong to other religions in Indonesia. The report weighs whether the principles of religious moderation with its background in the situation of the Muslims, could also be applied to the situations of the Christians and others. In this case, the role of the state is crucial. How far is the state prepared to apply these principles to religious communities (pesantrens, seminaries, mosques, churches, temples, viharas [Buddhist monasteries])? And how far are these communities prepared to face the socialization of the principles of religious moderation from the side of the state? The report encouraged non-Muslim communities to give more public responses to the directive. But then it could be asked, why is it that PGI which represents a large section of Protestant communities, and also a few large and influential Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, does not give a public response in the form of public theology, or at least a response from the perspective of Christian theology and ethics toward the discourse on religious moderation?⁴⁴

The evaluation by PGI and ICRS is developed further and combined with other articles from non-Christian writers to become an anthology, which makes it difficult to regard it as a Christian response. I separated the evaluation on the internet and in the anthology, which is edited by Zainal Abidin

43 For the concern that these religious boarding schools could become nests of radicalism, see MENKOKESRA-INPEDHAM, *Pesantren, Radikalisme dan Konspirasi Global* (Pesantren, Radicalism and Global Conspiracy) (Jakarta: MENKOKESRA-INPEDHAM, 2005) chapter 3.

44 Setio starts precisely from here, “Pembentukan Wacana Moderasi Beragama” (The Formation of the Discourse on Religious Moderation), 1. For him, most important is that religious moderation has to come from within, from self-awareness or consciousness of the people, and not something which is forced from outside, be it from the government or the ministry.

Bagir and Jimmy Sormin.⁴⁵ But I still consider the anthology as part of the second response, because the back cover of the anthology still bears the name of PGI-ICRS and the symbols of the two institutions. In this anthology, politics of religion is suspected as the background of the discourse on religious moderation. It means that religion is an integral part of a concrete social-political struggle.⁴⁶ Four writers, Trisno S. Sutanto, Suhadi Cholil, Woro Wahyuningtyas and Danial Sutami Putra prepared the first part of this anthology. They quoted Syamsul Maarif, a faculty member of CRCS-ICRS, who adopts Talal Asad's view concerning power that was taken over and reformulated as a political effort by a group of people who use religion as a means of legitimating their power and control over others. This political effort is done through the majority religion, political parties, and judicial decisions.⁴⁷ According to them, there are two dimensions of this effort: the first is concerned with the policy of the state or the government, and the second is claims of interest by many groups as a means of power and control. Why this kind of effort? Because in the era of post-secular society, the position of religion is getting stronger and has caused religion to have a double face: one face is of love and humanity, and the other is of violence.⁴⁸

It seems the four writers have shifted from the claims of the state and many groups to use religion as legitimating their power and control, to those who try to control religion because they are afraid of the potential of religion to spread violence. Those who try to control religion make a dichotomy between 'good Muslims' (the moderates and the a-political) and 'bad Muslims' (the extreme radicals). According to the four writers, this dichotomy is created by people who follow an essentialist approach to religion.⁴⁹ Religious moderation has become a global academic construction that supports the politics of religion. This politics of religion functions to tame religion or religious interpretations which could endanger democratic societies. So it is the result of a security approach. It seems that the four writers disagree with MB, which proposed religious moderation as a religious or cultural approach, and not as a security approach. However, they hasten to add that the context of Indonesia is

45 Zainal Abidin Bagir and Jimmy M.I. Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama: Suatu Tinjauan Kritis* ("Politics of Moderation and Religious Freedom, A Critical Review") (Jakarta: Kompas-Gramedia, 2022). I do not know the reason of combining Christian and non-Christian responses.

46 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 10.

47 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 11–12.

48 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 19.

49 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 21–22.

different from the above description,⁵⁰ and later on, they stated that they are not against the Ministry's concept of religious moderation.

The four writers emphasized that the challenge is how to manage both plurality and unity, and it is the task of a 'politics of plurality' to achieve a balance between plurality and unity. Religion plays a central role in the application of this 'politics of plurality'. According to the four writers, Pancasila is a kind of compromise between the nationalists-secularists and the nationalists-religionists, and following Jeremy Menchik, the result is a 'Godly-nationalism' which very much becomes the color of politics of religion. The first principle of Pancasila, "Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa" ("One Godhead only") practically becomes the criterion for the state to decide which religion is recognized and which is not.⁵¹ The workings of this 'Godly nationalism' can be seen in dividing society into three groups: first, groups who do not adhere to any recognized religion. They are known as spiritual groups or groups that follow the beliefs of their ancestors. Their existence is not acknowledged by the state; they are not protected and are even discriminated against by the state. Recently this group has been recognized by the decision of the Mahkamah Konstitusi ("Constitutional Court") in 2017, regarding the column "religion" on the citizen's registration card (Ind: "Kartu Tanda Penduduk", abbr: "KTP"). Formerly they had to register as members of one of the recognized religions, but now they can disregard the column. Still, discrimination against them has not disappeared.

Second, non-theistic groups have to conform to the vocabulary of the state to be recognized as a religion. For example, the process of recognition of the Balinese religion as "Hindu", one of the recognized religions of Indonesia. Third, individuals or groups who or which are regarded by the state as blasphemers of religion by referring to the law (Legislation No. 1/PNPS/1966 and chapter 156a of the Criminal Code). Efforts by many for a judicial review of these laws by the Constitutional Court have failed and could make the position of these laws stronger than before.⁵²

The strong position and role of the state in politics of religion caused the four writers to question the phrase "Middle Way", which is the focus of MB. The confusing categorizations above are mentioned again and deemed to happen because the state decides who is in the middle way and who is not. Excessive state intervention could make people ignore freedom of belief and religious freedom (Ind: "Kebebasan Beragama dan Berkeyakinan", abbr: "KBB"). During the period of the New Order, under the totalitarian rule of Soeharto, religious

50 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 28.

51 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 30.

52 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 31–32.

relationships were based on harmony (Ind: “Kerukunan”) and not on freedom (Ind: “Kebebasan”).

But even now, despite the introduction of Human Rights (Ind: “Hak-Hak Asasi Manusia”, abbr: “HAM”) in the amendments of the Constitution from 1999 to 2002, the existence of Legislation no. 39/1999 concerning Human Rights and many ratifications to the products of International Human Rights, the paradigm of KBB has not been given proper consideration in MB,⁵³ and in the One Term National Development Plan of the Ministry’s program 2020–2024 nothing is said of KBB.⁵⁴

According to the four writers, the concept of religious moderation alone is not sufficient and needs to be supplemented with KBB and HAM. The lack of KBB and HAM could be detrimental to the interests of the adherents of ancestors or local religions.⁵⁵ They also reminded that religious moderation could become a tool of politics, as exemplified by the bitter experience of PGI who were wrongly accused as supporters of radicalism because they defended the staff of Corruption Eradication Commission (Ind: “Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi”, abbr: “KPK”) who failed the National Vision Test for government employers in 2021.⁵⁶ The four writers also questioned the continuing existence of Blasphemy Law which according to them is incompatible with religious moderation, KBB and HAM.⁵⁷

How do we see the four writers’ (Sutanto, Cholil, Wahyuningtyas and Sutami Putra) views about religious moderation? Although they take a critical position, in the end, they concluded that religious moderation is not entirely opposed to religious freedom, and there is room for meeting points. This concept could become the means to strengthen religious freedom in Indonesia.⁵⁸ They stated that they are not against the concept of religious moderation. They only want to state that religious moderation alone is not enough. However, their negative evaluation of the phrase ‘Middle Way’ could give the impression that what worries them is not only the possibly negative impact of the application of this concept in society but also that the program itself is negative, in the sense that it is a construct of religion by the state or the powerful ones to control religion.

53 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 87, 130.

54 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 37–39, 52–57, 61.

55 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 36, 89.

56 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 59, 79 fn 70, 71. The test questions is about moderation in matters concerning the state, which is a wrong application of the concept of religious moderation.

57 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 32, 179.

58 Bagir-Sormin, *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama*, 131.

In my observation, there are two contrasting politics of religion in their discourse of religious moderation. The first is as defined above by Syamsul Maarif, who stated that there is a politics of domination by a group of powerful people who claim that they represent the majority religion and push their aspirations through political parties, government policies, and legislation. The context of this definition is the contemporary situation in Indonesia, which sorely needs a middle-way policy or religious moderation, as the followers of minority religions have to struggle very hard to counter discrimination and intolerance by this dominating politics of religion. The second is as defined by the writers who see politics of religion as an effort by the state to tame religion so that it does not harm the life of secular democracies. According to them, religious moderation is an essentialist and dichotomous construct, produced by the state to control religion. It might be so. If the state thinks that religion is essentially bad, then it could distinguish between the moderates and the radicals. However, the writers are also caught in the same essentialist attitude, but from the opposite side, in thinking that religion is essentially good. A non-essentialist view of religion looks at what its followers do concretely, and it can be good things or bad things. I think the metaphor of religion as a knife still holds in the context of discourse on religious moderation.

In my opinion, the writers of the second definition referred to a theory of politics of religion which is misplaced and not applicable to the contemporary context of Indonesia. The first definition by Syamsul Maarif is more suited to it. We need religious moderation, not to tame religion in a secular society, but to break the dominant, intolerant, and discriminating attitudes, which tend to disrupt good relationships in a religiously plural society. On the whole the book *Politics of Moderation and Religious Freedom, A Critical View* focused on the negative role of the state in regulating religious practices in the public space, and not on the problem of religious violence. On one hand, they might be right. I accept their view that religious moderation is not enough. To create a good relationship in a religiously plural society, religious freedom, and human rights must be upheld, and they are not opposed to religious moderation. Without religious freedom and human rights, the promotion of religious moderation could become a nostalgic longing for the introductory courses of the totalitarian past (i.e. the New Order era).⁵⁹ On the other hand, they might be wrong in dismissing the role of the state in defining and socializing religious moderation. The link between moderation as a virtue and religion in Islam can also be seen by applying the Good Life perspective of Vos from the context of Christianity to the context of Islam. In MB, the origin of religious moderation

59 The sequel to MB, the *Road Map*, hints in this direction.

is stated as coming from the Qur'an (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:143) and Hadith ("the best way of dealings is the middle-way"). The essence of Islam is as a middle path. But these religious tenets are not taken into consideration, as the four writers assumed that religious moderation is a construct by the state.

5 Conclusion

We have seen the effort by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to promote religious moderation in MB, which could function as an alternative to religious violence. The first response by Patty is on the whole positive toward the Ministry's concept and tries to see it from a Christian theological position. I put myself in a dialogue with Patty concerning his theological position and offered a different explanation of virtue ethics by referring to Vos. I also offer a hermeneutical explanation of some biblical texts that are more appropriate to the concept of religious moderation than his selection of texts. By making a link between religious moderation and the Good Life as part of Protestant virtue ethics, I believe the Ministry's concept of religious moderation can be responsibly accommodated by Christians in their everyday life. The second response by PGI-ICRS is more critical: politics of religion is an ambiguous concept. It could be used by the state or the dominant powerful groups to tame or control the minority religions, and the introduction of religious moderation to end this domination is regarded positively. But it could also be used by the state to control religion in general, to vouch for the continuation of a secular society. I have criticized this line of argument as misplaced, but I accept that religious moderation needs to be supplanted by religious freedom and human rights.

My examination of the two responses yields the conclusion that religious plurality is important for the people of Indonesia. Besides Pancasila as the state ideology, religion provides the necessary values of Good Life in society, where adherents of different religions can relate in a positive and neighborly way. They are also aware of religion's potential for religious violence, and that is why they feel the need for a program of religious moderation as an alternative to religious violence. But the execution of the program has to take into account religious freedom and human rights, and because of that the state or the government has to invite other elements in society to work together in the process of realization of this program. Observations on the ongoing process of negotiating a concept of religious moderation in Indonesia can contribute many insights to the study of theoretical development and the practice of religious life elsewhere.

Bibliography

- Armstrong, Karen. 2000. *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. (Knopf/HarperCollins, 2000).
- Bagir, Zainal Abidin-Jimmy M.I. Sormin. *Politik Moderasi dan Kebebasan Beragama: Suatu Tinjauan Kritis* (The Politics of Moderation and Religious Freedom: A Critical View). (Jakarta: Kompas Gramedia, 2002).
- Barr, James. *The Garden of Eden and Hope of Immortality*. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1992).
- Cavanaugh, William T. *The Myth of Religious Violence*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- De Vries, Hent (ed.). *Religion: Beyond A Concept*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
- Gregory, Brad S. *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012)
- Hedges, Paul. “Deconstructing Religion: Some Thoughts on Where We Go From Here – A Hermeneutical Proposal”, *Exchange* 47 (2018) 5–24
- Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia (Ministry of Religious Affairs, Republic Indonesia). *Moderasi Beragama* (Religious Moderation). (Jakarta: Badan Litbang Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).
- Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia (Ministry of Religious Affairs, Republic Indonesia). *Road Map* <https://pendispres.kemenag.go.id/index.php/ppres/catalog/view/7/5/231> (accessed March 12, 2022)
- Kompas.com, December 30, 2020, 09.39 pm, “Government disbands FPI” (accessed Monday, September 11, 2023)x
- Macintyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, [1981] 2007)
- MENKOKESRA-IPENDHAM. *Pesantren, Radikalisme dan Konspirasi Global* (Pesantrens, Radicalism dan Global Conspiracy). (Jakarta: MENKOKESRA-IPENDHAM, 2005).
- Mojau, Julianus (ed.). *Bersama Sang Hidup* (Together with the Life-Giver). (Jakarta-Makassar: BPK Gunung Mulia-Oase Intim, 2022).
- Murphy, Roland. *Ecclesiastes*. (Dallas: Word Books, 1992).
- Pals, Daniel, “Is Religion a *sui generis* Phenomenon?”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LV/2 (1987), 259–282
- Patty, Albertus M. *Moderasi Beragama: Suatu Kebajikan Moral-Etis* (Religious Moderation: A Moral-Ethics Virtue). (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2021).
- PGI-ICRS, “PGI-ICRS view on Religious Moderation”, <https://youtu.be/Lr8bwatrlVs> February 25, 2022 (accessed March 10, 2022)

- Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).
- The Jakarta Post.com, July 19, 2017, "Government disbands HTI" (accessed Monday, September 11, 2023)
- The Jakarta Post.com, March 1, 2019, "NU proposed to stop referring to non-Muslims as "kafir" (accessed Monday, September 11, 2023)
- Vos, Pieter. *Longing for Good Life: Virtue Ethics after Protestantism*. (London: T&T Clark, 2020).
- Ward, Keith. *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Oxford: Lion Book, Lion Hudson plc, 2011).
- Whybray, Roger N. *Ecclesiastes*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).
- Wijsen, Frans. *Christianity and Other Cultures*. (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2015).