

MAINSTREAMING RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN INDONESIA: READING AND UNDERSTANDING *WASAṬIYYAH* IN THE QUR'AN

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Abstract: Religious moderation in Indonesia emerged as a response to increasing intolerance, radicalism, and religious-based conflicts. Despite having a strong foundation, the implementation of this concept still faces challenges such as political and religious polarization, the spread of hoaxes, and the low level of public understanding of religious moderation. M. Quraish Shihab, as one of the contemporary tafsir figures, actively voices the importance of moderation through his writings, including the book “*Wasathiyah: Wawasan Islam tentang Moderasi Beragama*”. This study aims to analyze the concept of religious moderation according to M. Quraish Shihab’s perspective, explain its relevance in the context of Indonesian society, identify challenges in its implementation, and provide strategic recommendations for strengthening religious moderation in society. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a library research approach. The analysis was carried out on primary and secondary sources, including books, journals, scientific articles, and relevant official documents. The analysis technique used is content analysis with a thematic approach. This study found that the concept of religious moderation put forward by M. Quraish Shihab emphasizes balance in belief, thought, and action. Moderation is defined as an effort to maintain a balance between various poles, such as the soul and body, religion and state, and reason and religious texts. This study provides theoretical contributions in enriching the study of religious moderation as well as practical contributions as

references for the government, educational institutions, and society in realizing harmony in religious and state life.

Keywords: Islamic Moderation, Quraish Shihab, Wasatīyah

Introduction

How to understand religion (Islam) properly and by the guidance of the holy book (Al-Qur'an)? Some Muslims tend to be extreme and rigid in understanding religion and the laws contained therein. The effect can sometimes be anarchic actions to smooth their understanding. At other times, some are too loose in understanding religion, so the effect is that they easily accept negative thoughts, ideas, cultures, and other civilizations, without first filtering. Both of these attitudes will give rise to erroneous understandings and tend to reject opposing opinions which will result in actions that are contrary to moderate Islamic teachings. For that, in order not to get caught up in extreme and too loose understandings, religious understandings are needed that are between the two attitudes above, namely moderation in religion. If the understanding of religious moderation can be applied by every person in this country, then the adage "*Islam rahmah li al-'ālamīn*" will truly be realized.

In Indonesia, the issue of religious moderation has been a fairly intense topic of discussion in recent years, both at the academic and government levels. In this regard, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) through his government has made strengthening religious moderation one of the priorities of the mental revolution and cultural development as outlined in Presidential Regulation (Perpres) Number 18 of 2020 concerning the National Medium-Term Long-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020-2024 (Indonesia, 2022).

At the ministerial level, to welcome the Presidential Decree, the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia (Kemenag RI) 2022 made religious moderation a priority program, one of which is stated in the Decree of the Minister of Religion

(KMA) number 494 of 2022 concerning the Year of Tolerance 2022. This year of tolerance is intended as one of the steps to increase the effectiveness of strengthening religious moderation and implementing the mandate of the results of the 2022 National Working Meeting of the Ministry of Religion (Hefni, 2023).

At the level of the general public, middle to lower class, it turns out that not everyone understands the meaning, purpose, and how to apply and realize religious moderation in everyday life, both in the family, nation, and state. For this reason, socialization and mainstreaming of religious moderation are needed by parties in various elements, so that gradually our society can interpret, apply, and realize it completely so that harmonious relationships are established between each other. In this case, one of the parties who is trying to spread and mainstream religious moderation is M. Quraish Shihab through the book "*Wasathiyah: Wawasan Islam tentang Moderasi Beragama*" which can help readers understand the basics of religious moderation according to the rules of the Qur'an, the holy book of guidance for mankind.

M. Quraish Shihab is one of the intellectual and exegete figures who is known for his moderate attitude. Through his many works, he is known as a figure who upholds the values of national unity and unity amidst the plurality of religions in Indonesia. Even though he was once labeled as a Shiite and liberal figure, all of this was not proven, until finally many people considered that he was a representation of a contemporary exegete who was more moderate than the others (Huda et al., 2020).

Although in general, the conflict in the middle of society has begun to decrease, the tension that could one day become a time bomb can still be felt. It seems that there was a case of persecution against a group of Muslims who were considered deviant. The persecution was carried out by a group of laskar in the city of Solo on August 8, 2020 (Kumparan, 2020).

This study aims to analyze the concept of religious moderation according to M. Quraish Shihab's perspective, explain the relevance of the concept of religious moderation in the context of current Indonesian society, identify challenges in implementing religious moderation in Indonesia, and provide recommendations regarding strategies for strengthening religious moderation among the community. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study can enrich the study of religious moderation from the perspective of contemporary Islamic figures. Practically, this study is expected to be a reference for the government, educational institutions, and the general public in understanding and implementing religious moderation as a solution to building harmony in religious and state life.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a library research approach, by analyzing relevant primary and secondary sources. The object of the research is M. Quraish Shihab's thoughts on religious moderation contained in his written works, especially the book "*Wasathiyah: Wawasan Islam tentang Moderasi Beragama*". The research sources come from books, journals, scientific articles, and official documents related to religious moderation and M. Quraish Shihab's thoughts. The analysis technique used is content analysis, with a thematic approach to find relevant patterns and concepts in M. Quraish Shihab's thinking.

Background to the Emergence of Religious Moderation in Indonesia

The discourse on religious moderation in Indonesia emerged as a response to the increasing intolerance, radicalism, and religious-based conflicts in recent decades. Cases of violence triggered by differences in religious understanding have become an important alarm for the government and society to seek more comprehensive solutions.

The Indonesian government, through Presidential Regulation No. 18 of 2020 concerning the 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN), has determined the strengthening of religious moderation as one of the national priority programs. In addition, the Indonesian Ministry of Religion has also determined religious moderation as one of the strategic pillars in building national character.

The following image explains the legal basis for moderation in Indonesia over time:



Figure 1. Legal Basis for Moderation in Indonesia

From the figure 1 above, it can be seen that from time to time the mainstreaming of religious moderation in Indonesia has been regulated in such a way. Despite having a strong foundation, the implementation of religious moderation in Indonesia still faces various challenges, including: a) political and religious polarization, where religious issues are often used as political tools for the interests of certain groups, b) the spread of hoaxes and hate speech, where social media is often used to spread information that triggers hatred between religious communities, c) lack of public understanding, where many people still misunderstand the concept of religious moderation.

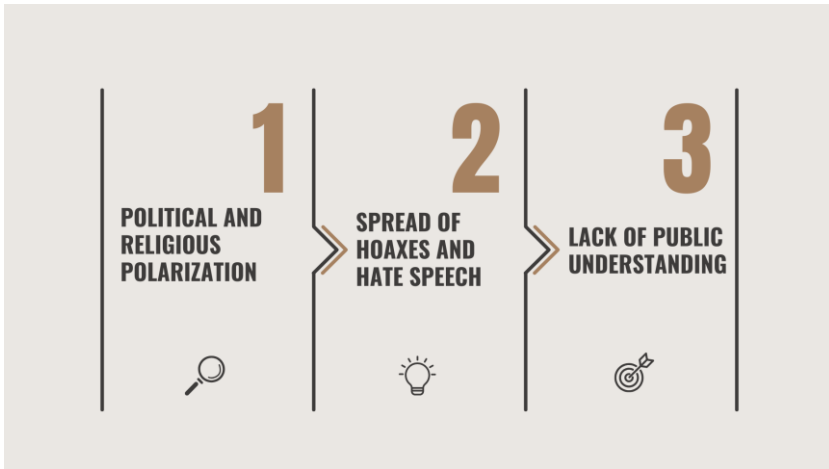


Figure 2. The challenge of religious moderation in Indonesia

From the picture 2 above, it can be said that the steps to mainstream religious moderation in Indonesia are not easy. However, one of the most consistent figures in voicing the importance of religious moderation in Indonesia is M. Quraish Shihab. Through his works, such as the book “*Wasathiyah: Wawasan Islam tentang Moderasi Beragama*”, he emphasizes that Islam is a religion that teaches balance, justice, and tolerance. M. Quraish Shihab’s view emphasizes that moderation is not a gray attitude, but rather an active choice to maintain harmony in diversity.

M. Quraish Shihab, in the introduction (*sekapur sirih*) of this book, wrote that this book was born after the author was asked by the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, Lukman Hakim Saefuddin, on June 14, 2019, to speak about religious moderation in front of officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Chancellors of UIN and IAIN throughout Indonesia (M. Q. Shihab, 2019)— even though the initial idea to write a book about religious moderation had existed since M. Quraish Shihab was still a student at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt. Thus, this book was written in three months, in the period from June to September 2019. One book is ready to serve in just three months, which is an extraordinary achievement, that

not just anyone can do, especially considering M. Quraish Shihab whose activities are very busy, starting from managing the Qur'an Study Center (PSQ) which he pioneered to serving requests from invitees to fill studies, seminars, and workshops to various corners and agencies.

According to several students who studied directly with him, one of the author's productive recipes is that he consistently writes after dawn until midday. This habit has been maintained until now and has become a daily habit. According to his confession, the author often feels like he can't stop writing, especially when writing the book *Tafsir Al-Mishbah* which takes 10 hours every day to write (Fahmi, 2023).

In his old age, M. Quraish Shihab is still productive in writing a whole book about *wasatiyyah*. This is certainly motivated by M. Quraish Shihab's attitude regarding the issue of Islamic moderation, which is not something he considers trivial. He admitted that he has been interested in issues of Islamic moderation since studying at Al-Azhar, the oldest Islamic campus that emphasizes the values of moderation.

M. Quraish Shihab's personality was shaped early on when he was born in a religious and devout environment. Since childhood, he used to accompany his father teaching in various places. His father, Abdurrahman Shihab, was a professor of tafsir and once served as the rector of the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Alaudin Makasar (A. Shihab, 1998). This is where the shaping of M. Quraish Shihab began. Together with his siblings, he intensively received religious education from his father, both related to the Qur'an, tauhid, fiqh, morals, and others. His father always encouraged his children to achieve the highest education possible. It was proven that all of that ultimately had a big influence on his intellectual horizon and thinking later on (Junaidi, 2012). Based on his admission, the seeds of his love for the Qur'an by his father had been planted early on. Habib Abdurahaman

Shihab often invited him to sit together. On that occasion, his father gave religious advice which he later learned came from the Qur'an, hadith, and the words of friends and other scholars (Iqbal, 2010).

M. Quraish Shihab's formal education began at an elementary school in his village, Lotassalo, Sidenreng Rappang, South Sulawesi. After graduating, M. Quraish Shihab moved to Malang, becoming a student at the Darul Hadis Al-Fiqhiyyah Islamic Boarding School. That's where he went through his secondary and higher education. After graduating from Malang, M. Quraish Shihab continued his studies in Egypt, specifically in the Tafsir and Hadith Department, Faculty of Ushuluddin, Al-Azhar University. It was on this campus that M. Quraish Shihab's undergraduate studies were completed from Bachelor's to Doctoral (Masduqi, 2009). While at Al-Azhar University, M. Quraish Shihab had many talaqqis with several Shaykhs, including Shaykh Abdul Halim Mahmud who would later become a very influential figure in his intellectual work, including the ideology of moderation which was not anti-diversity around him (Huda et al., 2020).

After returning from his intellectual wanderings in Egypt in 1973, after completing his Master's education, M. Quraish Shihab obtained a position as Vice Rector for Academic and Student Affairs at IAIN Alauddin Ujung Pandang. He held this position until 1980. He also served as Coordinator of Kopertais Region VII of Eastern Indonesia and Assistant Chief of the East Indonesian Police in the field of mental development. Then, in 1980 he returned to Al-Azhar to continue his Doctoral program. Two years later he successfully obtained a Doctorate with the predicate *Summa Cum Laude* (*Mumtaz ma'a Martabat al-Syaraf al-Ula*) (Level I Award) and became the first doctor in Southeast Asia to achieve such a degree (Iqbal, 2010).

It seems that, from the family background, education, and personality mentioned above, M. Quraish Shihab has become a

renowned interpreter in this country. His work experiences are very high. Some of the positions he has held are: Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council, Member of the Qur'an Pentashih Committee, Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, and Extraordinary Ambassador to Egypt. Furthermore, M. Quraish Shihab's religious thoughts and views can be grouped into moderate scripturalism, where in understanding religious texts and realities he emphasizes the importance of interpreting the Qur'an and realizing it into the reality of society, by paying attention to the developing socio-cultural context of society. This is different from the scripturalism developed by fundamentalist Muslim groups who strongly adhere to the text (Anshori, 2008).

Religious Moderation in the Qur'an

This book is very suitable for consumption by readers from various circles. Its contents are very applicable without having to be long-winded. It only contains three important discussions, each chapter of which tries to explain the meaning of moderation (*wasatiyyah*), its objectives, and how to apply it. The three discussions are formed by questions; what is *wasatiyyah*?, why *wasatiyyah*?, and how to apply *wasatiyyah*?

In the first chapter, the author presents in detail the definition of moderation from various perspectives, both etymologically and terminologically, various terms for the use of moderation, and the nature, characteristics, and practices of extremism that are at odds with moderation. According to him, moderation is not just an individual matter or interest. More than that, moderation is a moderate attitude and perspective that is also linked to the community in general (M. Q. Shihab, 2019). Moderation comes from Arabic from the root word *wasatha*, which in practice has various meanings. According to Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), moderation is defined as reducing

violence and avoiding extremism (Bahasa, 2016). In *Al-Ma'jum al-Wasith* the word wasath is interpreted as anything that is between the two ends and at the same time becomes part of it. The same term also means the middle of everything, as well as fair and good (Dhaif, 2004). In addition, M. Quraish Shihab also explains the word wasath in the Qur'an and several hadiths. In short, in its various forms, the word wasath in the Qur'an is found five times, namely in QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 143 and 238, QS. Al-Maidah [5]: 89, QS. Al-Qalam [68]: 28, and QS. Al-Adiyat [11]: 4-5.

In discussing the nature of moderation, M. Quraish Shihab emphasized that Islam itself is moderation. In the sense that all teachings of this religion are characterized by a middle vision. Therefore, all its adherents should also instill a moderate attitude and way of thinking. Muslims must be moderate in various aspects; their beliefs, thoughts, and feelings. This is important because a moderate attitude is one of the characteristics of Islamic teachings as a balance between various poles, such as the balance between the soul and the body, the world and the hereafter, religion and state, individuals and society, ideas and reality, old and new, reason and *naql* (religious texts), and the like. However, moderation is not a ready-made recipe, but it is a concept that must be continuously sought to find and apply in everyday life. If not, extremism will occur and become a daily practice.

According to M. Quraish Shihab, extremism has three forms. First, harsh words such as excessive cursing, lying, and spreading negative issues or even excessive praise. Second, actions, whether in the form of worship that is excessive from what is taught by religion or not worship. Third, the heart and feelings, both in the form of beliefs and emotions and love. Islam strongly condemns people who are extreme in their religiosity, whether in terms of worship, morals, or *mu'amalah*. In articulating Islamic teachings, sometimes singular (black-and-white), exclusive, and extreme views and understandings emerge by some groups, thus triggering intolerant and violent actions. Quraish Shihab also

underlined and emphasized that what is taken from both poles or two opposing ends (different opinions) does not have to be in the same condition, there could be some that are slightly excessive or slightly reduced depending on the conditions and situations faced (M. Q. Shihab, 2019).

Furthermore, to combat extremism and strengthen Islamic moderation, the author outlines 7 (seven) important points, namely: 1) correct understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith contextually, by paying attention to the maqasid sharia, 2) cooperation with all groups of Muslims in matters agreed upon, and tolerance in differences, including with non-Muslims, 3) collecting and bringing together knowledge with faith, as well as material creativity and spiritual nobility, economic strength, and moral strength, 4) emphasis on social humanitarian principles such as justice, deliberation, freedom, and human rights, 5) inviting renewal in accordance with religious guidance and carrying out *ijtihad*, 6) paying great attention to fostering unity and oneness, not differences and disputes, and approaches not distancing, and 7) making the best use of all old legacies and thoughts, between the logic of theologians, the spirituality of the Sufis, the exemplary behavior of the predecessors, and the thoroughness of the *fuqaha'* (jurisprudence experts).



Figure 3. Key points to counter extremism and affirm Islamic moderation according to M. Quraish Shihab

From the figur 3 above, it should be noted that to fight extremism and strengthen Islamic moderation, a precise strategy is needed. Extreme and overly loose attitudes are not new in the reality of the religiosity of Muslims. History has recorded the existence of the extreme ideology of the Khawarij group which is affiliated with those who left the companions of Ali bin Abi Thalib and rebelled against the official leaders (Al-Syihristani, 1968), like to label (major) sinners as infidels and those who do not use the law of Allah, a person's faith is fixed and stagnant, legalizes rebellion against oppressive leaders, and is reckless without considering the conditions and consequences (Harras, 1986). In addition to the Khawarij, there is also the Al-Mu'tazilah al-Judud (new Mu'tazailah) group which upholds unlimited freedom in religion. According to him, as quoted by Huda, et al. in Qadir, 1999: 23 (Huda et al., 2020), Islam is rational and always by the development of the times, subject to new cultures and civilizations—including the West, without any previous filters.

It should be noted that religious moderation is not a school of thought in Islam nor is it a new school of thought. Religious moderation is one of the main characteristics of Islamic teachings and therefore it is inappropriate if religious moderation is attributed to a particular group of Muslims to the point of ignoring other groups. This is the same as if there was a group that claims its group as the owner of *wasatīyyah* which is identical to its group. Therefore, it is also possible that in the search for the application of *wasatīyyah* (religious moderation) one group in one situation or time is different from another group but the difference can still be accepted as long as it can still be accommodated because of the content of the meaning of *wasatīyyah* in it (Putri & Fadlullah, 2022).

Next, moving on to the second chapter of this book, M. Quraish Shihab analogizes the importance of *wasatīyyah* to be mainstreamed until now by looking far back, reminding how Allah explained the process of creation of the universe and humans in

the Qur'an, where the universe was created with the principle of balance, by the principle of moderation. Since the beginning of its creation, the children of Adam were given the mandate to maintain balance obey all His commands, and avoid His prohibitions, by giving humans various physical and spiritual potentials. They are expected to be able to apply balance in their daily lives. Thus, it is not surprising to say that in essence moderation is in harmony with the nature of every human being.

Finally, to apply moderation in a person's daily life, a number of knowledge is needed to apply moderation, namely a set of *maqashid fiqh*, *al-awlawiyat fiqh*, *al-muwazanat fiqh*, and *al ma'alat fiqh*. In short, there are at least three main things related to moderation, namely faith, sharia, and character. For that, all of them must be considered, to uphold religious moderation in its entirety. Implementing moderation in everyday life requires serious efforts, with correct knowledge and understanding, balanced and controlled emotions, and vigilance. With correct knowledge and understanding, moderation can be applied appropriately and correctly. Through emotional control, a person will avoid extreme tendencies. And with caution, a person will introspect to continue to develop and become better than before.

Mainstreaming Religious Moderation in Indonesia

In Indonesia, in mainstreaming religious moderation, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has and carries out several strategic steps through counselors, religious figures, and education. Several of these steps can be seen more clearly in the following image:



Figure 4. Steps for the Ministry of Religion to Strengthen Religious Moderation

In figure 4 above, M. Quraish Shihab also took part in distributing books, among them the book “*Wasathiyyah: Wawasan Islam tentang Moderasi Beragama*”. This work can present an explanation that is easy for readers to understand. Moreover, this 204-page book also includes verses from the Qur’an and hadith as references. The book is worthy of being a reference, especially for Muslims who want to know more about religious moderation. In addition, what is interesting about this book is that if so far society has understood moderation abstractly, through this book M. Quraish Shihab provides aspects of the reality of society about the depiction of living Islamic moderation. For example, in the aspect of divinity. Society is polarized into adherents of polytheism (many Gods) and atheism (do not believe in God). Here, Islam is present as a moderate religion by believing that there is a God, but only one.

In another aspect, he explains the polarization in understanding human actions and God's will, whether God intervenes in human will completely, or humans are free to determine whatever they want to do. Moderate Islam is present with an understanding that is in the middle between the two. After explaining about moderation in this case, he concluded.:

“From the explanation above, it can be seen that there is a balance in the Muslim view between the belief in the absolute power of Allah and His grace in establishing the Sunnatullah that can be utilized by humans with His permission. Likewise, there is a side-by-side awareness of the absolute power of Allah with an awareness of the limited capabilities of humans. That in turn makes the spiritual potential of humans go hand in hand and balance with their intellectual potential. Then this leads them to carry out activities to the best of their ability but still remember and believe that Allah is Almighty over all things. This balance does not make humans passive in waiting for Allah’s decision but encourages them to try as hard as they can and then accept with grace what Allah has determined after their efforts, accepting it with the belief that Allah’s choice is the best”.

M. Quraish Shihab provides many other examples such as in the legal aspect, the sharia aspect, the social life aspect, the political aspect, the economic aspect, the social relationship aspect, the household life aspect, the thinking aspect, the understanding of religious texts, to the feeling aspect.

Another interesting thing about this book is how M. Quraish Shihab highlights religious extremism. That extremism in religion can be caused by a misunderstanding of religious demands. The author mentions that one of the perpetrators is a person who uses the verses of the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet but understands them textually and out of context. It could be that they read the works of old scholars who have provided great services and solutions to society at one time, but because of differences in space and time and the development of science and technology, the solution is not by the current conditions of society.

Just as no ivory is cracked, so is this book. At the end of this discussion, M. Quraish Shihab is less applicable in explaining the chapter on how to apply moderation. M. Quraish Shihab does

not explain in practical terms examples of religious moderation, so readers will have difficulty seeing practical steps from what has been explained previously. As an extension, readers can read other books that present practical examples of the practice of religious moderation. One example of a book that might be worth making a supporting reading for this book is the English book written by Mohammad Hashim Kamali entitled *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur'anic Principle of Wasatiyyah*. In this book, which is foreworded by Tariq Ramadan, examples of religious moderation in individuals are explained more practically—even juxtaposed with issues that are challenges for contemporary society, including moderation as a way to overcome environmental damage, reduce consumerism, overcome economic inequality, reduce the negative impacts of globalization, and realize good government to uphold justice and fight corruption (Kamali, 2015).

In addition to the book published by Oxford University Press above, there are also more practical supporting references in the example of the application of religious moderation, namely “*Tafsir Tematik Moderasi Beragama*” written by Muchlis M. Hanafi and his team (Hanafi et al., 2022). In this book published by Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur’an, practices of implementing religious moderation in everyday life are presented, such as the Implementation of Religious Moderation in the Fields of Faith, Morals, Rituals, Family, Economy, Social, Political, and Education. Examples of implementation in the family such as the explanation in the following quote:

” The instillation and implementation of the principles of religious moderation must begin in the family environment. One of the media is to establish effective communication between parents and children. The main task of parents is not to threaten or punish children, but to empower and equip them with good education. In the Islamic view, a child is born with his nature” (Hanafi et al., 2022).

In addition, the shortcoming of this book is that it does not include a list of references, either as footnotes or as a bibliography, so readers will find it difficult when they want to refer to the source in the quotation, either as a step to confirm data or for comparison..

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of religious moderation in the context of Indonesian society, especially in facing the challenges of intolerance, radicalism, and increasingly strong social polarization. Through the work "*Wasathiyah: Wawasan Islam tentang Moderasi Beragama*", M. Quraish Shihab emphasizes that moderation is not a neutral or gray attitude, but an active choice to maintain a balance between various dimensions of life, such as the soul and body, the world and the hereafter, and reason and religious texts. Religious moderation taught in the Qur'an is not just a theoretical concept but must be implemented in everyday life to build social harmony and inclusive diversity.

This study still focuses on the conceptual analysis of M. Quraish Shihab's thoughts on religious moderation without conducting empirical studies related to the implementation of the concept in the field. This study is also limited to text analysis from the work "*Wasathiyah: Wawasan Islam tentang Moderasi Beragama*", so it does not cover broader practical aspects in the application of moderation in various sectors of life so that the limitations of primary data sources that are direct from interviews or observations in society cause the research results to be more theoretical.

There are several recommendations for further research themes that have not been touched on by this study, including; a) empirical studies of religious moderation, where further research is expected to conduct field studies to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing the concept of religious moderation in educational

environments, government institutions, and the general public; b) comparative studies with other figures, where further research can compare the concept of religious moderation according to M. Quraish Shihab with the views of other contemporary Islamic figures, both in Indonesia and internationally; c) analysis of implementation in the digital world, where further research can explore how the concept of religious moderation can be implemented in the digital era, especially in responding to the spread of hate speech and hoaxes on social media; and d) practical studies of the implementation of moderation in educational institutions, where further studies can focus on practical methods in integrating the concept of religious moderation in formal and informal education curricula.

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