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Contemporary Islamic Moderation: Insights from al-Qaradawi, Nurcholis Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid

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Abstract

The concept of Islamic moderation has gained increasing relevance in response to the global rise of religious extremism and socio-political intolerance. This article explores the moderate Islamic thought of three influential contemporary scholars: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholis Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid. Each offers distinct yet complementary interpretations of moderation, bridging normative Islamic teachings with contemporary societal contexts. Their approaches emphasize tolerance, pluralism, and constructive engagement with modernity. Using a comparative and qualitative methodology grounded in primary sources and interpretive traditions, this study uncovers the epistemological foundations of their views. Despite differing cultural and political backgrounds, all three thinkers consistently advocate for the principle of *wasatiyyah* (the middle path) as both a theological and sociological framework. Their contributions provide a normative basis for educational reform, interfaith dialogue, and the cultivation of civic ethics in pluralistic societies.

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Introduction

Islam, which is often described as a religion of *rahmatan lil alamin*, carries a message of peace, justice, and balance in all aspects of human life. Its teachings are not limited to spiritual devotion but extend to ethical and social aspects, encouraging harmony, tolerance, and inclusive relationships that transcend the boundaries between religions and cultures (Hidayatullah, 2016). Ideally, Islam serves as a unifying force in society, fostering civil coexistence and a positive response to diversity (Rahmatika & Khoirullina, 2021). This vision culminates in the formation of a civil society based on spiritual commitment and social sensitivity to pluralism.

However, reality is always the opposite of these expectations. Islam is often viewed as a religion that condones violence, intolerance, and radicalism, both globally and in Indonesia. This misconception has led to the emergence of many extremist movements that claim to represent Islamic values, thereby damaging the image of the religion. Indonesia, historically known for its tradition of religious moderation, is now facing increasing social polarization and the strengthening of exclusive religious narratives that signal a weakening of moderate values (Subchi et al., 2022).

This phenomenon shows that the principles of Islamic moderation (*wasathiyah*) have not been fully integrated into the daily practices of Muslims.

It is important to re-examine the ideas of renowned Islamic thinkers in order to demonstrate how to live moderately and overcome these challenges. Their thinking essentially has a working structure in reinterpreting Islamic teachings without changing anything, while remaining within tradition and engaging with contemporary realities (Syafieh & Anzhaikan, 2023). Fazlur Rahman's double movement theory, for example, presents a helpful perspective on addressing extremism by emphasizing the need for a historical understanding of religious texts and applying their ethical principles in a modern context (Sifa' & Aziz, 2018). This approach provides space for Islamic thought to grow constructively while remaining true to its fundamental values.

This study focuses on three figures renowned for their thinking—Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid—whose contributions represent the practice of Islamic moderation in diverse cultural and political contexts. Al-Qaradawi, a scholar from the Middle East, combines classical jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) with contemporary demands through the framework of *Maqashid al-Shariah* (the main objectives of Islamic law). His thinking emphasizes the importance of flexibility, sensitivity to context, and an orientation toward the welfare of society in legal reasoning (Hidayat & Bin Rosele, 2024).

Nurcholish Madjid, an influential Indonesian intellectual, presented reformist ideas that emphasized the separation of religious values from practical political orientation. His slogan, “Islam yes, Islamic parties no,” reflects his commitment to depoliticizing religion and promoting inclusivity (Imi & Mardhotillah, 2025). Madjid emphasized tauhid (monotheism) as the ethical foundation for all believers and called for tajdid (renewal) in Islamic thought to overcome intellectual stagnation (Yufriadi et al., 2023).

Abdurrahman Wahid, or Gus Dur, combined classical Islamic scholarship with liberal democratic ideals. In his capacity as president and religious leader, he consistently fought for pluralism, human rights, and interfaith dialogue (Royani, 2022). His vision of Islam was rooted in the pesantren tradition but open to global philosophical currents. Wahid was known as a figure who promoted tolerant and democratic principles of Islam by advocating for the rights of minorities and rejecting exclusivism.

This research is important to examine because it offers a different description of Islamic moderation and is analyzed comparatively, representing the uniqueness of the three thinkers with different backgrounds (Graham, 2010). Through a comparative study of their ideas, this research seeks to identify common principles, context-specific differences, and the relevance of their thoughts to local and global challenges. This comparative approach affirms the diversity of moderate Islamic discourse while showcasing its potential as a unifying paradigm in facing contemporary issues.

The method used is almost identical to that used in previous comparative studies. Tazul Islam and Amina Khatun (2015) examined the differences between Eastern and Western views on Islamic moderation. They found that Western scholars often emphasize liberalism and political integration, while Muslim scholars root moderation in Qur'anic values such as *wasatiyyah*, ADL (justice), and *tawazun* (balance). Based on the same findings as this study, this underscores the importance of contextualizing moderation within a specific intellectual and cultural framework.

Abdul Hadi et al. (2025) in this study compared Islamic education models in Indonesia and Turkey, where moderation is taught differently in each country's curriculum. In Indonesia, it is associated with Pancasila values and local wisdom, while in Turkey, it shows tension between

Islamic and secular values. These findings reinforce the idea that moderation is pluralistic in its teachings, shaped by historical and institutional contexts.

Ahmad Nurrohim et al. (2024) further examined this diversity by comparing two traditions of interpretation in Indonesia—Tafsir An-Nur and the official interpretation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Both emphasize the importance of tolerance and rejection of extremism, but differ in their methods and points of emphasis. These findings reinforce the view that comparative analysis can reveal both commonalities and differences in the discourse on Islamic moderation.

By examining the thoughts of al-Qaradawi, Madjid, and Wahid comparatively, this study contributes to mapping Islamic moderation in various intellectual fields. It highlights the richness and adaptability of moderate Islamic thought and affirms its relevance in overcoming religious, social, and political challenges.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrative framework, which transcends the boundaries of partial biographical and thematic studies. This study examines how moderation functions as both a theological orientation and a socio-political practice (Pahrudin et al., 2025). This approach shows that Islamic moderation is not only a theoretical concept but also a living reality that can inform education, public policy, civic ethics, and interfaith engagement (Jati, 2024; Leniawati & Haq, 2024).

In the context of rising extremism and ideological fragmentation, the thinking of al-Qaradawi, Madjid, and Wahid offers important guidance. Their commitment to the principles of balance, justice, and inclusivity offers an alternative narrative to rigid, exclusive interpretations of Islam (Hidayat & Bin Rosele, 2024; Ilmi & Mardhotillah, 2025; Royani, 2022). Their works demonstrate that Islamic thought can be developed without compromising its spirituality and ethical integrity.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the importance of moderate Islamic thought in building a peaceful, progressive, and pluralistic society. By actualizing the intellectual legacy of these three figures, this study contributes to global efforts to revive Islam's message of universal compassion and reinforce its role as a force for social unity and moral renewal in the modern era.

Method

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a library research method (Bowen, 2009; Sugiyono, 2019). This study focuses on analysing the concept of Islamic moderation as proposed by three major thinkers: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid. The literature research procedure was carried out in several stages, namely: (1) identification of relevant sources by mapping keywords and grouping themes; (2) systematic search for primary texts in the form of books, speeches, and essays written by these figures; (3) selection of secondary sources in the form of journal articles, academic books, and previous studies that critically discuss their thoughts; and (4) organization and classification of data based on thematic relevance to Islamic moderation.

This method allows for a comprehensive approach to the concept of *wasathiyah*, resulting in a deep and applicable understanding of the relevance of the three figures' thoughts in the context of contemporary challenges facing Muslims. This library research approach is widely used in studies of Islamic moderation to systematically and critically examine primary texts and academic sources (Warsono et al., 2022).

The selection of these three figures is based on the characteristics of thought in the perspective of Islamic moderation. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, with his scholarly foundation at Al-Azhar and his global influence through contemporary fiqh, represents the Middle Eastern approach to moderation,

rooted in jurisprudential reform and *maqashid al-shariah* (Hidayat & Bin Rosele, 2024). Nurcholish Madjid, as an Indonesian Muslim intellectual shaped by pesantren tradition and Western education, offers a philosophical and cultural reinterpretation of Islam in relation to modernity and national identity (Ilmi & Mardhotillah, 2025; Yufriadi et al., 2023). Abdurrahman Wahid, a thinker-practitioner from Nahdlatul Ulama, embodied moderation as praxis through his advocacy for pluralism, democracy, and interfaith engagement in the highest echelons of government in his time (Royani, 2022). Their inclusion enables a comparative analysis across geographical, intellectual, and socio-cultural contexts.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis techniques (Eriyanto, 2015), focusing on textual interpretation and thematic coding. The unit of analysis includes selected passages from the figures' writings that discuss key concepts such as tolerance, pluralism, renewal (*tajdid*), democracy, and civic ethics. Coding was performed manually by categorizing statements into thematic clusters—for example, “religious tolerance,” encompassing views on interfaith relations, and “Islam and democracy,” reflecting political ethics. These themes were then interpreted contextually to understand how each thinker constructs moderation as both a theological stance and a socio-political praxis.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation, which involved comparing texts across data sources and cross-referencing them with scientific interpretations (Nurfajriani et al., 2014). Member checking was also carried out through informal consultations with academic colleagues and experts in Islamic thought. This step aims to verify thematic consistency and accuracy of interpretation. Furthermore, peer debriefing sessions were held to refine the coding categories and minimize researcher bias.

This methodological framework allows this study to transcend the limitations of descriptive biography and develop into an analytical comparison (Sugiyono, 2019). By combining document analysis and contextual interpretation, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Islamic moderation as a living, dynamic paradigm. The use of various data sources and validation strategies not only strengthens the credibility of the findings but also affirms the relevance of moderation in shaping religious discourse and inclusive public policy.

Findings

Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the Concept of Islamic Moderation

Yusuf al-Qaradawi was born on September 9, 1926, in the village of Shafth Turaab, Egypt, and died on September 26, 2022, in Qatar. He completed his studies at Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest and most influential Islamic institutions in the world, where he later obtained a doctorate in Islamic studies. From a young age, al-Qaradawi was known for his active involvement in the Islamic reform movement and was considered an active scholar, with more than 120 works published in various languages. His life, which took him from Egypt to Qatar, and his involvement in various international forums shaped his global perspective on the challenges facing contemporary Muslims (A. Putra & Rumondor, 2020).

Yusuf al-Qaradawi's education at Al-Azhar University provided him with a solid scholarly foundation rooted in Islamic tradition, while also fostering an openness to *ijtihad* and renewal (Skovgaard-Petersen, 2009). This academic background enabled him to cultivate a moderate perspective that integrates religious texts with contemporary social realities, emphasizing dialogue, tolerance, and practical solutions to the challenges faced by modern Muslim communities. (Desk,

2025). Graduating from Al-Azhar also strengthened al-Qaradawi's relationship with the influential Muslim Brotherhood movement in shaping his vision of preaching and renewal.

The discourse on Islamic moderation (*Al-wasathiyah al-Islamiyyah*) occupies a strategic place in contemporary Islamic thought, especially when Muslim societies face the dual challenges of extremism and secular liberalism (Bahri, 2012; Wahab, 2025). In this context, moderation is not merely political jargon but a comprehensive framework that connects loyalty to revelation with responses to contemporary challenges. Yusuf al-Qaradawi occupies an important position in articulating this framework, as his works have influenced the global discourse on Islamic moderation. His thinking demonstrates a structured effort to formulate, justify, and operationalize moderation as a theological foundation and socio-political approach (Azizah, 2024; Skovgaard-Petersen, 2009).

For al-Qaradawi, the Qur'anic description of Muslims as *ummata wasatan* (a middle nation) in Surah al-Baqarah (2:143) is the cornerstone of moderation. He interprets this verse as a mandate for Muslims to embody justice, balance, and universality. In his work *Fiqh al-Wasathiyah wa al-Tajdid* (2010), he argues that moderation should not be understood as a passive compromise between two extremes, but rather as an active approach that emphasizes excellence and balance. His statement, "*al-wasathiyah laysat maqaman bayna al-ifrat wa al-tafrat, bal hiya manhaj tamayyuz wa i'tidal*" (moderation is not simply a middle position between excess and neglect, but rather a methodology of distinction and balance), highlights that moderation is an attitude based on revelation that also responds to the practical needs of Muslim society. In this framework, moderation is not a dilution of principles but rather the wise application of values in context.

Al-Qaradawi's framework of moderation is most clearly expressed through his methodological innovations. In *Fiqh al-Awlawiyat* (1995), his idea of jurisprudence of priority stems from the view that religious obligations have different weights, so that a Muslim is required to prioritize obligations that are more urgent and beneficial. His saying, "*Laysa kulla mā huwa ḥaqq, yajibu an yuqāl wa yuqām bibi fī kulla waqt*" (not every right thing must be said or acted upon at every time), teaches that not all truths must be revealed or applied at all times, because the application of Islamic teachings requires wisdom, sensitivity to timing, and awareness of context. This principle emphasizes moderation as an effort to avoid rigid literalism and foster proportionality. This is closely related to his emphasis on *maqāṣid al-ṣyari'ah*, the higher objectives of Islamic law in which include protecting religion, life, reason, offspring, and property (Rasito & Mahendra, 2022). With this orientation, al-Qaradawi moves beyond a legalistic approach to fiqh, one oriented towards human welfare and adaptive to social dynamics. He complements this with the idea of *fiqh al-wāqi'* (2022), or jurisprudence of reality, which requires a deep understanding of social, political, and economic conditions before establishing law. This contextual awareness keeps Islamic law relevant, humane, and responsive. Taken together, these principles illustrate his vision of harmony between text and context, revelation and reason, tradition and modernity.

The moderation advocated by al-Qaradawi is also a response to the extremism that has marked modern Islamic discourse. On the one hand, he criticizes rigid fundamentalism that applies texts without regard for context, leading in harsh and impractical fatwas. On the other hand, he rejects liberal tendencies that separate Islam from its textual foundations and risk undermining its identity. His *Wasathiyah* thus seeks to strike a middle ground that is faithful to revelation but open to renewal. In *al-Halāl wa al-Harām fī al-Islām* (1993), for example, he demonstrates this balance by discussing everyday ethical issues with textual fidelity and practical flexibility. In *Fiqh al-Jihād* (2009), he condemns indiscriminate terrorism and violence while affirming the legitimacy of just resistance,

showing how moderation can be applied to one of the most controversial issues in contemporary Islam.

Although he has considerable impact, al-Qaradawi's concept of moderation has not escaped criticism. His relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood has led some to question the neutrality of his scholarly work, suggesting that political considerations sometimes impact his fatwas. His views on jihad are described as ambiguous: although he opposes terrorism, his support for some armed struggles is considered inconsistent with his call for moderation (Purwaningtyas & Hasanah, 2024). Another criticism concerns the applicability of his framework beyond the Arab world. Although his emphasis on *maqāṣid* and *fiqh al-wāqī'* implies universality, the examples he uses often reflect the Middle Eastern context, requiring adaptation for Muslim communities in Southeast Asia and other regions. These criticisms highlight the tension between the universal aspirations of his thinking and the uniqueness of its practical application.

Nevertheless, al-Qaradawi's contributions remain significant both academically and practically. His understanding of moderation has influenced Islamic education curricula, encouraging Muslim generations to think critically about priorities and goals rather than simply memorize fatwas (Rizza & Nursobah, 2024; Wahab, 2025). His acceptance of democracy as compatible with Islam provides a framework for Muslim-majority societies to pursue governance that respects religious values and human rights (Hakim et al., 2023). His advocacy for interfaith dialogue reflects a commitment to peaceful coexistence, which is especially important in pluralistic societies (Skovgaard-Petersen, 2009). Furthermore, his explanation of wasathiyah is in line with international initiatives such as the Amman Message (2004), which affirms the legitimacy of various schools of Islamic thought and rejects extremism. In this way, al-Qaradawi's thinking has contributed to shaping the global discourse on moderation, transcending national and sectarian boundaries.

In conclusion, Yusuf al-Qaradawi's thoughts on Islamic moderation represent one of the most systematic and influential expositions of wasathiyah in the modern era (Al-Qaradawi, 2010; Skovgaard-Petersen, 2009). By grounding moderation in the Qur'anic concept of *ummatan wasatan* and operationalizing it through *fiqh al-awlawiyyāt*, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and *fiqh al-wāqī'*, he provides a comprehensive framework for addressing contemporary challenges (Al-Qaradawi, 1995; Rasito & Mahendra, 2022). Although his thinking is not without controversy, his methodological innovations continue to inspire scholars, policymakers, and activists who seek to realize Islam's message of justice, mercy, and balance (Mutaqin & Ahmad, 2019). His works—*Fiqh al-Wasathiyah wa al-Tajdid*, *Fiqh al-Awlawiyyāt*, *Fiqh al-Jibād*, and *al-Ḥalāl wa al-Ḥarām fī al-Islām*—remain important references for understanding how moderation can be theorized and practiced in the modern Muslim world.

Nurcholish Madjid and Inclusive Islamic Thought

Nurcholish Madjid, widely known as Cak Nur, occupies a central position in the intellectual history of Indonesian Islam. Born in Jombang, East Java, on March 17, 1939, and died in Jakarta on August 29, 2005, his life journey reflects a synthesis of the pesantren tradition and modern academic training. After completing his early education at a pesantren, he pursued higher studies at IAIN Jakarta. He later earned a doctorate in Islamic studies at the University of Chicago under the supervision of Fazlur Rahman, a leading reformist thinker. This dual formation—a traditional pesantren foundation and exposure to critical Western scholarship—enabled Cak Nur to articulate a vision of Islam that was deeply rooted in Indonesian religious culture while also open to global intellectual discourse. His thinking is often described as neo-modernist, a term that captures his efforts to reconcile Islamic orthodoxy with modern values such as democracy, pluralism, and

rationality (Madjid, 1988; Mukaffan & Siswanto, 2019; Munawar Rachman, 2022). In his own words, Cak Nur emphasized that “Islam must be understood as a moral and spiritual force, not merely as a political ideology,” a belief he developed through his comparative studies of Islamic reform movements and modern democratic thought (Madjid, 1988). Recent studies also highlight how his pesantren background shaped his inclusive theology and his call for the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia (Mukaffan & Siswanto, 2019).

The unique feature of Nurcholish Madjid's moderation lies in his criticism of the politicization of Islam. In his most famous speech in 1970 at Taman Ismail Marzuki, he introduced the tagline “Islam yes, Islamic parties no,” which became a pivotal moment in the discourse on Islam in Indonesia. With this declaration, Cak Nur rejected reducing Islam to a purely political ideology and argued that it should serve as a source of moral and ethical guidance for society. For him, the significance of Islam was not limited to the narrow interests of political parties but to inspire a broader public sphere with values such as justice, honesty, and compassion. This position was radical and reformist, challenging the dominant paradigm of Islamic politics at the time while opening space for Islam to flourish in a pluralistic and democratic Indonesia (Amir & Sembiring, 2025; Ilmi & Mardhotillah, 2025; Madjid, 1988; Munawar Rachman, 2022; Nata, 2024).

In his book *Islam, Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan*, Cak Nur explains that the instrumentalization of Islam in politics risks distorting its universal message and alienating it from the ethical foundations of society (Madjid, 1988). He argues that Islam should be understood as a spiritual and moral force that transcends partisan interests. Recent studies reaffirm this view, noting that Cak Nur's slogan is not a rejection of political involvement itself, but a call to purify religious discourse from narrow sectarianism and to promote civic values rooted in Islamic ethics (Nata, 2024). His critique remains relevant today, as Islamic parties continue to navigate the tension between religious identity and democratic pluralism in Indonesia.

The core of Nurcholish Madjid's inclusive Islamic thought is a reinterpretation of *tawḥīd*, the basic concept of Islamic monotheism. Although traditionally understood as a theological affirmation of the oneness of God, Cak Nur expands its meaning to a comprehensive social and ethical principle. For him, *tawḥīd* is not merely a metaphysical doctrine but a moral imperative that demands the recognition of human equality, the rejection of authoritarianism, and the promotion of justice and pluralism in society (Nafis et al., 2023). This reinterpretation allows him to bridge the gap between theology and civil ethics, positioning *tawḥīd* as the spiritual foundation for the values of democracy and interfaith harmony.

In his seminal work *Islam, Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan*, Cak Nur wrote, “Semakin kuat keislaman seseorang, semakin dalam pula komitmennya terhadap kemanusiaan” (the stronger one's Islamic faith, the deeper one's commitment to humanity), a statement that sums up his belief that genuine religiosity must lead to inclusiveness, not exclusivity; to peace, not violence (Madjid, 1988). He argued that the oneness of God implies the unity of humankind. Therefore, all forms of discrimination, sectarianism, or religious violence are a betrayal of the core message of Islam. In this way, *tawḥīd* becomes not only a theological claim but also a call to uphold human dignity and social justice.

This ethical reading of *tawḥīd* also serves as a critique of both religious and political authoritarianism. Cak Nur believes that the misuse of religion to justify coercion or domination is a form of *syirk siyāsī* (political polytheism), because it places human authority above divine justice. His thinking thus resonates with the broader reformist tradition in Islam, which seeks to liberate religion from the grip of power and restore its role as a moral compass for society. Scholars such as Munawar-Rachman (2022) and Abdullah (2021) have noted that the reinterpretation of *tawḥīd* lays the foundation for liberation theology in the Indonesian context, which affirms pluralism, democracy, and the common good.

The latest study also highlights how Cak Nur's concept of *tawḥīd* influences Islamic education and interfaith dialogue in Indonesia (Nafis et al., 2023; I. M. Putra et al., 2023; Safitri et al., 2022). By framing *tawḥīd* as a unifying principle rather than a sectarian boundary, he encourages Muslims to engage constructively with people of other religions and to see diversity as part of God's will. His approach aligns with the Qur'anic ethos of *li-ta'ārafū* (so that you may know one another, Q.S. al-Ḥujurāt: 13), reinforcing the idea that religious identity should foster mutual respect rather than conflict. In this sense, Cak Nur's theology of *tawḥīd* offers a powerful alternative to exclusive piety and secular relativism, grounding pluralism at the heart of Islamic belief.

Methodologically, Nurcholish Madjid uses a hermeneutic and rationalist approach in interpreting Islamic texts. Influenced by Fazlur Rahman's double movement theory, he emphasizes the need to contextualize the teachings of the Qur'an in contemporary reality (Fazlur, 1982; Sifa' & Aziz, 2018; Yusuf et al., 2021). For him, the Qur'an is not a static text but a dynamic source of guidance that must be continually reinterpreted in light of changing social conditions (Akbar, 2020; I. M. Putra et al., 2023). This hermeneutical approach allows him to argue for the compatibility of Islam with democracy, human rights, and pluralism. He rejects rigid literalism, which he sees as the cause of Muslim stagnation, and secularism that seeks to exclude religion from public life. Instead, he envisions a middle way in which Islam can flourish in an open, democratic, and inclusive public sphere.

Despite his influence, Cak Nur's thinking has not gone unchallenged. Conservative groups accuse him of being too liberal, even questioning his orthodoxy for reinterpreting fundamental concepts such as *Tawhid* and *secularization* (Hamudy & Hamudy, 2020). His call for the “desacralization” of worldly affairs is often misunderstood as support for secularism in the Western sense, whereas he meant it as a way to preserve the sanctity of religion by preventing its misuse for political purposes (Jamal, 2023; Yusuf & Mawalidin, 2022). Others argued that his emphasis on pluralism risked diluting Islamic identity (Maku et al., 2024). However, this criticism also highlights the transformative nature of his ideas, which seek to push Indonesian Islam beyond rigid boundaries toward a more inclusive and dialogical engagement with modernity.

The practical implications of Nurcholish Madjid's moderation are evident in several domains. In education, his ideas have influenced curricula that emphasize critical thinking, openness to diversity, and the integration of Islamic values with modern science (Abdurrohim et al., 2024; Safitri et al., 2022). In politics, the push to separate Islam from partisan interests has contributed to the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia, where Islam functions as a moral compass rather than a political ideology (Amali, 2019; Jamal, 2023). In interfaith relations, its inclusive theology has encouraged dialogue and cooperation between religious communities, strengthening Indonesia's identity as a pluralistic nation (Aripudin & Junaedi, 2024; Nuha et al., 2024). His thinking resonates strongly with the global discourse on Islamic moderation, particularly with initiatives such as the Amman Message (2004), which affirms the legitimacy of diverse schools of Islamic thought and rejects extremism. In this sense, Cak Nur's contribution transcends the Indonesian context and speaks to broader Muslim concerns about how to live faithfully and responsibly in a pluralistic world.

In conclusion, Nurcholish Madjid's inclusive Islamic thought is one of the most significant articulations of moderation in Southeast Asia. By basing his vision on the Qur'anic principle of *Tawhid* and operationalizing it through hermeneutics, rationalism, and contextualization, he provides a comprehensive framework for reconciling Islam with democracy, pluralism, and modernity. While his ideas sparked controversy, they continue to inspire scholars, policymakers,

and activists who seek to realize Islam's message of justice, equality, and peace in contemporary society. His works—*Islam, Doktrin dan Peradaban, Islam, Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan* (1988), and his numerous essays and speeches— remain important references for understanding how Islamic moderation can be theorized and practiced in the Indonesian context.

Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) and Islamic Moderation in the Context of Pluralism

Abdurrahman Wahid, or Gus Dur, occupies a unique place in Indonesian and global Islamic thought. Born in Jombang, East Java, on September 7, 1940, into a prominent Islamic boarding school family, he inherited the intellectual legacy of his grandfather, Hasyim Asy'ari, founder of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and his father, Wahid Hasyim, Indonesia's first Minister of Religious Affairs (Ensiklopedia Telkom University, 2024). His early education at a pesantren was complemented by studies in Baghdad and exposure to European intellectual traditions. This combination of traditional Islamic learning and modern critical scholarship shaped his inclusive worldview, which consistently emphasized tolerance, pluralism, and human rights as the foundations of religion and nationality (Barton, 2002; Wahid, 2006).

The hallmark—a characteristic feature of Gus Dur's moderation—was his rejection of the politicization of Islam. He believed that Islam should not be reduced to a political ideology or partisan tool, but should serve as a moral and ethical compass for society. His famous statement, “*Islam yang rahmatan lil ‘alamin harus membawa kedamaian, bukan permusuhan*” (Islam as a mercy to all creation must bring peace, not hostility), reflects his belief that religion should inspire compassion and reconciliation rather than division (Royani, 2022; Wahid, 2006). For Gus Dur, moderation is not just about taking the middle ground, but about an active commitment to justice, equality, and the protection of minority rights (Wahid, 1999b).

The essence of his inclusive thinking is the affirmation of diversity as a divine gift. He often repeats: “*Tidak penting apa agamamu atau sukumu. Kalau kamu bisa melakukan sesuatu yang baik untuk semua orang, orang tidak akan pernah tanya apa agamamu.*” This saying sums up his belief that the essence of faith lies in serving humanity. In his writings, such as *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita* (2006), he argues that Islam should be understood as a religion of compassion (*rahmah*) that promotes dialogue and cooperation. In *Mengurai Hubungan Agama dan Negara* (1999), he explores the delicate balance between religion and politics, warning against theocracy and secular authoritarianism. His essay in *Ilusi Negara Islam* (2009) criticizes the idea of an Islamic state, insisting that democracy and pluralism are more faithful to Islam's universal values.

As president of Indonesia (1999–2001), Gus Dur translated these principles into concrete policies. He repealed discriminatory regulations against Indonesian Chinese, lifted bans on Chinese cultural expressions such as lion dances (*barongsai*), and declared Chinese New Year (*Imlek*) a national holiday (Afat, 2024; Alamsyah et al., 2022). He also defended the rights of religious minorities, including Ahmadiyah and Christians, insisting that the state must guarantee freedom of belief for all citizens. These policies were not merely symbolic; they embodied his belief that Indonesia's diversity was its greatest strength and that moderation must be enforced through governance (Afat, 2024; Ridwan, 2024).

The moderation of Gus Dur was also evident in his leadership of NU, where he steered the organization away from political partisanship and emphasized its role as a socio-religious movement dedicated to education, welfare, and cultural preservation. Under his leadership, NU became a strong advocate of Islam Nusantara, an interpretation of Islamic that embraces local culture and pluralism while remaining faithful to Islamic principles (Bruinessen, 2012). His theological orientation, influenced by *Tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism), reinforced his humanistic views: spirituality, for him, must be translated into ethical responsibility and social justice.

Despite his popularity, Gus Dur's ideas drew criticism. Some conservative groups accused him of weakening Islamic identity or being too liberal, while others saw his defense of minorities as politically risky. However, this criticism underscored the transformative nature of his leadership. He challenged the dominant narrative of Islamic politics and offered an alternative vision rooted

in compassion, dialogue, and civic responsibility. Surveys conducted years after his presidency, such as those by Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (2019), confirm that Gus Dur remains one of Indonesia's most respected Muslim leaders, admired for his defense of minorities and his role in democratization.

In conclusion, Abdurrahman Wahid's contribution to Islamic moderation was both intellectual and practical. By grounding his vision in the values of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, pluralism, and social justice, he provided a framework for Muslims to engage constructively with diversity and democracy. His legacy continues to inspire scholars, activists, and religious leaders who seek to realize Islam's message of compassion and justice in a complex world. His works—*Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita, Mengurai Hubungan Agama dan Negara, Illusi Negara Islam* (2006), and *Prisma Pemikiran Gus Dur* (1999)—remain important references for understanding how moderation can be theorized and practiced in the Indonesian context.

Discussion

Similarities and Differences in the Thought of Moderation of Islamic Figures

The three scholars, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid, all embraced the idea of moderation as an effort to bridge Islamic teachings with social realities and contemporary challenges. They reject extreme attitudes that can trigger conflict and division of the ummah. The concept of *wasathiyah*, or the middle way, emphasized by Qaradawi, is also reflected in the thoughts of Madjid and Gus Dur, although in different contexts and with different emphases. All three agree that Islam must appear as a religion of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, which upholds justice, peace, and respect for diversity.

However, differences arise in the focus and context of their respective thoughts. The three figures have different approaches to moderating Islam. The following is a matrix comparing the moderate Islamic thinking of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid, based on epistemological dimensions, issue focus, implementation strategies, and contemporary relevance.

Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Islamic Moderation Thought: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid

Dimension	Yusuf al-Qaradawi	Nurcholish Madjid	Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)
Epistemological Foundation	Contemporary fiqh, <i>ijtihad</i> , and <i>maqasid al-shariah</i> as instruments of renewal	Islamic rationality, inclusiveness, and integration of national values	Islamic humanism, pluralism, and Indonesia's socio-political experience
Issue Focus	Democracy, women's rights, interfaith relations, and global extremism	Modernity, nationalism, depoliticization of religion, and moral education	Tolerance, human rights, cultural and religious diversity, and inclusive policies
Implementation Strategy	Moderate fiqh formulation, <i>maqasid</i> approach, global <i>da'wah</i> based on <i>wasathiyah</i>	Public education, intellectual discourse, and criticism of the politicization of religion	State policy (e.g., revocation of Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967), human rights advocacy, interfaith dialogue

Contemporary Relevance	Responding to the global challenges of Islam, extremism, and interfaith relations	Building an Indonesian Islam that is adaptive to democracy and modernity	Becoming a model of inclusive Islam in a multicultural and democratic society
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Source: Euben & Zaman, 2009; Fikri & Susilo, 2023; Hakim et al., 2023; Madjid, 1998; Narendra et al., 2022; Wahid, 2006

Thus, while all three share a spirit of moderation and renewal efforts, geographical, social contexts, and personal experiences shape the distinctive colors of their thinking. Yusuf al-Qaradawi is more versatile and grounded in Islamic fiqh tradition; Nurcholish Madjid integrates Islam with Indonesian nationalism and modernity. At the same time, Abdurrahman Wahid prioritizes the human dimension and pluralism as the key to social harmony.

Transformative Power of Islamic Moderation in Contemporary Society

In the context of rising religious extremism, identity polarization, and declining civil tolerance, Islamic moderation serves as an important strategic and ethical response for contemporary society (Asmiati et al., 2025). Drawing on the multidimensional framework articulated by influential Islamic thinkers such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid, this concept of *wasathiyah*, or the middle path, bridges normative Islamic principles with the complexities of modern pluralistic societies. This framework not only rejects radicalism but also affirms Islam as a religion rooted in compassion (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*), justice, and peaceful coexistence. Therefore, Islamic moderation is not passive neutrality but an active and dynamic stance that balances textual fidelity with contextual relevance and spiritual depth with civic responsibility. The thinking of Madjid and Wahid, emphasizing openness to progress without losing Islamic identity, alongside al-Qaradawi's emphasis on moderation, provides practical guidelines for overcoming contemporary challenges related to radicalism, polarization, and the crisis of tolerance (Nur, 2024). Thus, Islamic moderation offers a valuable model for fostering an inclusive, peaceful, and productive society in diversity, promoting a balanced middle ground in navigating differences and maintaining social cohesion.

This synthesis is in line with contemporary Islamic scholarship that emphasizes moderation—a concept deeply rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah—as essential for fostering tolerance, justice, and balance in religious and social life. It underscores that the principle of *wasathiyah* is not merely theoretical but a practical approach to reducing extremism and building harmonious communities, resonating strongly with the current socio-political challenges faced by Muslims worldwide (Arshad & Mahmood, 2020).

The educational implications of Islamic moderation are profound. Qaradawi's emphasis on *maqasid al-shariah* has inspired curriculum reforms that prioritize ethical goals over rigid legalism, enabling Islamic education to address contemporary issues such as gender justice, environmental stewardship, and interfaith understanding (Euben & Zaman, 2009; Hassan, 2023). Madjid's rationalist and inclusive approach has shaped a critical Islamic education model that encourages students to engage with sacred texts through contextual analysis and democratic values (Siroj & Ulfah, 2024). In comparison, Wahid's legacy of pluralism has led to the development of multicultural Islamic education programs that promote tolerance and civic ethics in diverse classrooms (Huda et al., 2022). These pedagogical innovations demonstrate that moderation is not only a theological stance but also a transformative educational paradigm.

Outside the classroom, Islamic moderation has informed public policy and civil advocacy. Gus Dur's presidency exemplified how religious values can underpin inclusive governance. The revocation of Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967, which had marginalized Chinese-Indonesian religious practices, was an important policy rooted in pluralistic ethics (Narendra et al., 2022). The Wahid Foundation continues this legacy through peace education and interfaith dialogue programs that operationalize moderation at the grassroots level. Similarly, Madjid's critique of political Islam has influenced civil society movements that promote Islam as a moral force rather than a partisan tool. Qaradawi's global influence has shaped the transnational discourse on Islamic renewal, offering jurisprudential tools for navigating democracy, human rights, and global ethics.

In the context of globalization and digital disruption, Islamic moderation provides a framework that stabilizes national cohesion. It affirms that religiosity need not conflict with diversity, and that modernity need not sever spiritual roots. A balance between principles and benefits, between belief and respect, is essential in navigating the complex dynamics of society. Surveys such as those by Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (2019) confirm that Gus Dur remains one of the most respected Muslim leaders in Indonesia, admired for his defense of minorities and democratic values. This public recognition underscores that moderation, when embodied in leadership and policy, resonates deeply with the aspirations of a pluralistic society..

Ultimately, the thinking of Qaradawi, Madjid, and Wahid converged in their vision of balanced citizenship—where faith informs ethics, and ethics informs civic engagement. Islamic moderation became a cultural project: one that fosters empathy, dialogue, and shared responsibility. In education, it nurtures critical thinking and moral clarity. In policy, it protects rights and dignity. In society, it builds bridges across differences. As Indonesia and the Muslim world face new challenges, this legacy of moderation offers not only resilience but also renewal.

Conclusion

This research found that Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid share a fundamental similarity in promoting moderate Islam (*wasathiyah*). All three agree that Islam should be presented as a balanced and inclusive religion that is relevant to the modern era. They reject all forms of extremism, whether rigid and inflexible or liberal and boundless, and emphasize the importance of contextualizing Islamic teachings through *ijtihad* oriented towards the benefit of the *ummah*. Thus, the moderate Islam they propose is not an abstract concept but a way of life capable of responding to contemporary challenges.

Although they shared the same foundation, these three figures displayed distinct styles and methodologies in articulating Islamic moderation. Yusuf al-Qaradawi emphasizes *wasathiyah* as a superior methodology (*manhaj*) that is operationalized through contemporary *fiqh*, such as *fiqh al-awlawiyyat* (fiqh of priorities), *fiqh al-waqi'* (fiqh of reality), and *maqasid al-shariah* (objectives of shariah). This approach balances text and context while affirming Islam's relevance on a global scale by emphasizing dialogue, democracy, and openness.

Meanwhile, Nurcholish Madjid (Cak Nur) emphasized an inclusive, rational, and humanistic face of Islam, especially in the context of Indonesianness and modernity. Through his idea of "Islam yes, Islamic parties no," he rejected the politicization of religion and affirmed pluralism as part of a universal social ethic rooted in monotheism. Thus, Islam is understood not only as a religious identity but also as a source of values that foster openness, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) interpreted Islamic moderation in real socio-political practice. As a pluralist, he championed Islam as *rahmatan lil'alam* (a blessing for all creation) by emphasizing tolerance, defending minority groups, and creating social harmony. For him, moderation was not just rhetoric, but concrete action in the struggle for human rights, democracy, and social justice.

Collectively, these three figures have made important contributions to the development of moderate Islam, which can provide solutions to social, political, and cultural problems in the modern era. The moderation they offer is not only a theoretical stance, but also a practice that prioritizes balance, justice, and respect for diversity. Through their ideas and examples, moderate Islam can continue to be developed as a relevant, adaptive, and solution-oriented paradigm in the face of global and local dynamics.

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