

# RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN ART: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN SURAKARTA AND CAIRO



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## Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of art students in Surakarta regarding religious moderation in artistic expression and compares them with the context in Cairo through a literature review. The research employs a qualitative method with a literature-based approach and thematic analysis techniques. The analysis integrates Talcott Parsons' AGIL theory (adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency) and Dahrendorf's conflict theory to examine the tension between freedom of expression and social norms. Religious elements in art often spark controversy, especially in culturally diverse regions like Surakarta. The study aims to understand how future artists view and incorporate religious values into their work. Participants were purposively selected, considering religious diversity and artistic experience. Findings reveal that art students in Surakarta view religious moderation as an effort to create harmony in art, despite challenges in balancing religious values and creative freedom. Using AGIL theory, the study identifies students' adaptation to religious values, their goal to produce inclusive art, integration of artistic freedom with religious norms, and the latency of internalizing moderation values. Meanwhile, Dahrendorf's conflict theory highlights social tensions influencing students' creative processes. The literature review on Cairo underscores religious moderation as a foundation for social harmony, with Al-Azhar University exemplifying tolerance through religious education. This research contributes to the academic field by offering deeper insights into the relationship between art, religion, and religious moderation. It provides practical guidance for art institutions to develop inclusive and harmonious art practices in diverse cultural and religious contexts.

**Keywords: Religious Moderation, Artistic Expression, Art Students, Art And Religion**

## INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia initiated the concept of religious moderation as a response to the increasing social polarization and the complexity of diversity within society. This effort can be realized through various initiatives, such as policy formulation, training, and outreach programs (Sumarto and Kholilah Harahap 2021). Higher education institutions have become one of the main focuses of the religious moderation program launched by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, considering their role as centers of education and character development for the younger generation.

Universities are considered ideal places to instill values such as tolerance, rejection of violence, and appreciation of diversity through teaching, interfaith dialogue activities, and research (Anam 2019). The Ministry of Religious Affairs also encourages universities to serve as intellectual spaces that facilitate discussions and learning on issues of religious and cultural diversity (Khamim et al. 2024). Higher education institutions are viewed as strategic because they play a role in shaping the younger generation who will lead the nation, making it essential for students to understand religious moderation as an ethical foundation for living in society.

The Indonesian Institute of the Arts Surakarta is one of the higher education institutions in Indonesia that focuses on the arts and is not exempt from the influence of religious moderation. On the other hand, Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, also offers a unique perspective on implementing religious moderation, particularly given the shared foundation of Islam as the basis of religious values. This aligns with research by Aini, Munir, and Munafiah (2023) which explains that institutions act as extensions of the Ministry of Religious Affairs to promote and facilitate an understanding of moderation within student learning environments. Art students, in particular, can utilize art as a medium to realize distinctive forms of religious moderation that are not typically found in other educational settings.

Art students play a crucial role in driving social change through their works. Through art, it is expected to create a peaceful space for dialogue, where society is encouraged to reflect and see beauty from the perspective of universal humanity (Chapman and O’Gorman 2022). Interfaith participation in social, cultural, artistic, and sports activities can serve as an effective means to foster mutual understanding and strengthen relationships between groups (Rofiq 2024).

Therefore, students' understanding of the relationship between religion and art is crucial, as it can serve as the foundation for forming an inclusive and diverse artistic identity (Damodaran 2024). Given the multidimensional nature of the relationship between religion and art, art plays a significant role in revealing cultural identity and has the potential to bridge differences within society (Al-Zadjali 2024).

In the process of art creation, religious moderation becomes a significant consideration. Art students face the challenge of integrating religious values with freedom of expression. While artistic freedom is generally supported in democratic cultures (Němec 2023), certain limitations exist to prevent religious intolerance (Eltayeb 2010). Religious moderation enables them to create works that are acceptable to diverse audiences without compromising the intended message. This approach is based on the premise that religious moderation facilitates positive interfaith dialogue, alleviates religious tensions, and enhances understanding of diversity (Gumuruh 2023). Therefore, art with an inclusive approach has the potential to serve as a medium that unites differences and creates a dialogical space, enriching the understanding of cultural and spiritual diversity.

On the other hand, religious moderation in Cairo, Egypt, which is based on Islam as the majority religion, provides a relevant comparative perspective for the Indonesian context. In Egypt, Al-Azhar University plays a central role in promoting the values of moderation, emphasizing social harmony, tolerance, and respect for diversity (Tinambunan et al. 2025). The shared majority religion between Indonesia and Egypt allows for a deeper analysis of how the principles of religious moderation can be applied to create a balance between religious traditions and freedom of expression (Hasibuan 2023). Egypt demonstrates how moderation can be utilized as a tool to resolve social tensions through education- and religion-based approaches, which are also relevant in the context of art in Indonesia.

The role of the sociology of art in uncovering the relationship between religious moderation and art becomes highly significant. The sociology of art can investigate how religion influences politics, education, and health in modern society, while also highlighting the complex relationship between religion and social factors (Clarke 2009). In this context, Coser's conflict theory helps explain the tensions between freedom of expression, often characteristic of art, and social norms rooted in religious values. This conflict creates a space for dialogue, enabling art to not only reflect these tensions but also serve as a tool for resolving and navigating such dynamics (Mazzone and Elgammal

2019; Němec 2023; Yusup and Haryana 2022). Furthermore, through Mead's symbolic interactionism approach, it can be understood how art students shape their identities through symbols present in their artworks, reflecting their interpretations of religious values and freedom of expression (Nikolenko et al. 2024).

In the context of Surakarta and Cairo, both rich in diversity, research on students' perceptions of religious moderation is highly relevant. This understanding can strengthen intercultural harmony and interfaith dialogue through art. Multicultural societies like Indonesia and Cairo require art that reflects inclusive values to foster unity in diversity. Therefore, the findings of this research are expected to provide valuable insights into promoting inclusivity, tolerance, and mutual understanding in society, as art serves as a medium for inclusivity and tolerance in multicultural communities.

**METHODS**

This research employs a qualitative approach, with data collection techniques conducted through in-depth interviews (Zuldafrial 2012). Data were obtained by interviewing seven students from the Fine Arts Department, Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts Surakarta. The participants consisted of three women and four men, all of whom practiced different religions.

No.	Informant's Initials	Sex	Age	Religion
1	AC	Female	19 years old	Islam
2	ZC	Female	20 years old	Catholic
3	HA	Female	20 years old	Hindu
4	VK	Male	19 years old	Javanese Islam (Kejawen)
5	BL	Male	20 years old	Catholic
6	KK	Male	21 years old	Protestant
7	RS	Male	20 years old	Islam

Table 1. Informant Data

The selected students were those with experience in creating artworks based on the concept of religious moderation or similar concepts, as well as those who had participated in socialization programs on religious moderation both within and outside the institution. The selection of these participants aimed to obtain relevant insights into the application of the concept of religious moderation in the artworks they created (Sugiyono 2018). Research on religious moderation in Cairo was conducted using an in-

depth literature study approach. This approach involved analyzing various academic sources and literature to understand the context of religious moderation practices at Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

Data processing was conducted through interview transcription, which was then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Kaelan 2012). Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes that emerge from the data. In this study on religious moderation, thematic analysis was carried out in several stages.

First, the familiarization stage involved reading and understanding the interview transcripts to gain an initial understanding of art students' perceptions of religious moderation. Second, the coding stage began with labeling relevant data segments, such as views on the relationship between art and religion, challenges in balancing religious values with freedom of expression, and experiences of interfaith participation. Third, the searching for themes stage involved grouping similar codes into main themes, such as adaptation to religious norms in art (aligned with the adaptation dimension of AGIL theory), the goals of artworks reflecting social harmony (goal attainment), and the challenges of integrating religious values and art (integration dimension) (Talcott and Turner, 2013). Fourth, the reviewing themes stage ensured that the themes consistently represented the data. Fifth, the defining and naming themes stage assigned definitions and names to the established themes, such as “tension between social norms and artistic freedom,” which aligns with Dahrendorf's conflict theory. Finally, the results of this thematic analysis were used to connect empirical insights from the data with Talcott Parsons' AGIL theory and Dahrendorf's conflict theory, providing a deeper understanding of how art students perceive and practice religious moderation in the context of art.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

#### **The Support for Religious Moderation and the Desire for Artistic Expression**

All respondents view religious moderation as a principle that supports the creation of an inclusive and harmonious artistic environment. One of the respondents, VK, expressed a strong belief in the importance of religious moderation: “Yeah, it's necessary. Without it, the world would be a mess. I mean, there are already so many intolerant people now,” (VK, 2024). They feel that by adopting religious moderation, they can better understand and respect differing perspectives. ZC shared a similar sentiment, saying,

“Moderation brings peace, you know. That’s what makes living here feel good,” (ZC, 2024). Overall, religious moderation provides a space for more open creative expression while still considering the sensitivities of a diverse society.

The respondents also believe that religious moderation can serve as a guiding principle to help them create works that are not only artistic but also promote dialogue and cross-cultural understanding. RS, one of the respondents, even expressed a desire to preach through their art: “Honestly, I really want to convey Islamic messages through my work,” (RS, 2024). They believe that art can act as a bridge between different community groups, and religious moderation provides a framework to ensure that this bridge is strong and functions effectively.

Although they support religious moderation, four out of seven respondents acknowledge the limitations on artistic expression. They feel the need to be cautious when selecting themes and presenting their art to avoid offending certain groups. One respondent, AC, even shared a negative experience with a local organization: “One time, back in my village, I was doing some art stuff, and then a hardline group stormed in,” (AC, 2024). This is especially true for sensitive issues, such as those related to race, religion, ethnicity, and inter-group relations. Another respondent, BL, recounted drawing something sensitive and facing backlash from their own friends: “Yeah, a few friends got really mad at me. They were like, ‘Who do you think you are, drawing something like this?’” (BL, 2024). The respondents admit that these limitations sometimes restrict their creativity, but they also understand the importance of maintaining harmony and avoiding unnecessary provocation.

All respondents, including those who value creative freedom, acknowledge certain boundaries that must not be crossed. They understand that in the context of religious moderation, there are norms that need to be respected to maintain social harmony. The respondents admit that these limitations challenge them to be more creative in conveying their messages, finding new ways to avoid offense while still effectively communicating their ideas. BL, for instance, now opts for a safer approach: “I usually just go with metaphors now—keeps things safe and doesn’t upset anyone,” (BL, 2024).

### **Freedom of Expression Limited by Social Agreement**

Two out of the seven respondents expressed a strong desire to remain free in their creative work, without feeling constrained by religious moderation. HA remarked, “I just think, you know, art has its own world. It should be free,” (HA, 2024). For HA, art is a medium for expressing ideas and emotions that should not be restricted by social norms.

They believe that artists should have complete freedom to explore any theme they choose, even if it means challenging existing norms and values.

However, this respondent also recognizes that in a diverse society like Indonesia, freedom of expression must come with responsibility. They acknowledge that absolute freedom could invite controversy and potentially cause conflict. VK agreed, saying, “If freedom goes overboard, it’ll just cause problems. Better to have some limits,” (VK, 2024). Therefore, they strive to find a balance between creative freedom and social responsibility, hoping to produce works that remain authentic while avoiding offense to others.

All respondents agreed that social agreements impose limits on the creative space of art students, encompassing various factors such as cultural norms, religious values, and societal expectations. In the context of art, these limitations often manifest in several forms: social and religious norms, pressure from the social environment, and public perception.

## Discussion

### The Phenomenon of Religious Moderation in Cairo

Religious moderation has become a global issue, not merely a domestic concern. Al-Azhar University in Egypt, as one of the world’s leading Islamic educational institutions, employs the concept of *wasathiyah*, which shares similar goals with religious moderation (Fadhil and Rahman 2023; Khamim et al. 2024). This concept emphasizes the middle path, balance, and rejection of all forms of extremism. These shared objectives highlight that the threat of extremism in the name of religion, particularly Islam, is widely recognized across various parts of the world, making the pursuit of moderation an urgent necessity.

Both religious moderation in Indonesia and the concept of *wasathiyah* at Al-Azhar emerged as responses to extremist ideologies carried out in the name of Islam. Al-Azhar employs a systematic and comprehensive educational approach (Dayem et al. 2024). It begins with building foundational Arabic language skills for children, followed by the study of the Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah along with supporting sciences. This is further strengthened through teachings in the fields of *aqidah* (Islamic creed), *usuluddin* (fundamental Islamic sciences), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism). Interestingly, Al-Azhar strives to align all these branches of knowledge with contemporary developments at every stage, ensuring that religious teachings remain

relevant and contextual (Arifin et al. 2021).

Unlike the approach at Al Azhar, which focuses on formal education and classical Islamic scholarship, in Indonesia, particularly in Surakarta with its rich cultural atmosphere, the approach relies more heavily on art and culture. This can take the form of art performances, interfaith dialogues, or cultural activities that promote tolerance and harmony. This approach is considered effective because it is more readily accepted by a diverse society and is able to deeply touch emotional and spiritual aspects.

**The Tension Analysis between Artistic Freedom and the Social Norm Existence with AGIL Theory and Conflict Theory**

The following table outlines how data obtained from the informants were analyzed based on the AGIL framework: Adaptation (adjustment to the environment), Goal Attainment (achievement of objectives), Integration (maintenance of social cohesion), and Latency (preservation of long-term values and motivation) (Talcott and Turner 2013).

No.	Function	Findings
1	Adaptation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Pressure from Social Norms:</b> Art students face the fear of violating social norms based on religious and cultural values. This fear arises primarily from the reactions of those closest to them, which makes them cautious in choosing themes and artistic styles. This reflects how they adapt to social expectations to ensure their work remains acceptable.</li> <li>2. <b>Balancing Creativity and Social Harmony:</b> Students strive to navigate between their desire for free self-expression and the need to maintain social harmony. This illustrates an adaptation process in creating works that not only reflect personal values but also consider societal sensitivity.</li> <li>3. <b>Discussion and Consensus:</b> Within the art campus environment, dialogue among students, lecturers, and the community serves as a platform for managing conflicts positively. This process helps students adapt to norms while still finding space for freedom of expression.</li> </ol>



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| 2     | Goal Attainment | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <b>The Desire to Avoid Social Conflict:</b> Five out of seven respondents stated that they strive to maintain good relationships with those closest to them, such as family and community, by choosing themes and artistic styles that do not cause discomfort or disappointment. This indicates their aim to achieve social harmony while continuing to create within existing boundaries.</li><li>2. <b>Creating Universally Acceptable Artworks:</b> Students demonstrate efforts to create artworks that not only align with their personal perspectives but are also widely acceptable to a diverse audience, including those from varied cultural and religious backgrounds. This goal motivates them to adapt the content and delivery of their artworks to prevailing norms.</li><li>3. <b>Positive Conflict Management Through Dialogue:</b> Discussions among students, lecturers, and the community regarding religious moderation and freedom of expression serve as tools to achieve flexible consensus. This reflects the students' aim to find a balance between artistic freedom and respect for social norms.</li></ol> |
| <hr/> |                 |   |
| 3     | Integration     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <b>Maintaining Relationships with Close Ones:</b> Five out of seven respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining good relationships with family, friends, and the community. They are cautious in creating artworks to avoid violating social norms or causing tension with those around them. This reflects students' efforts to remain integrated within their social structures.</li><li>2. <b>Social Norms as a Control Mechanism:</b> In the context of an arts campus, social norms based on religious values function as a mechanism to maintain harmony and prevent interfaith conflicts. Students navigate these norms to create works that align with social standards while preserving space for creative expression.</li></ol>   |
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		<p>3. <b>Intergroup Dialogue to Achieve Consensus:</b> The process of discussion among students, lecturers, and the community regarding religious moderation and art demonstrates how social integration is achieved. Through such dialogue, students can bridge differing perspectives and create an inclusive space for expression.</p>
4	Latency	<p>1. <b>Internalization of Religious Moderation Values:</b> Social norms based on religious values create pressure for art students to produce works that align with the principles of religious moderation. The fear of negative reactions from those closest to them motivates students to internalize these values in their creative processes, ensuring their works respect societal values.</p> <p>2. <b>The Influence of Social Environment on the Formation of Personal Values:</b> Art students demonstrate caution in selecting themes and styles for their artworks as a response to social expectations. This process not only reflects adaptation but also the formation and maintenance of values that underpin their actions in creating art.</p> <p>3. <b>Art as a Medium for Diversity Values:</b> Students' artworks are often designed to reflect the values of moderation, tolerance, and interfaith harmony. This process illustrates how these values are preserved and transmitted through art, serving as a symbol of their understanding of social harmony.</p>

Table 2. AGIL analysis based on research data

On the other hand, the conflict theory dimension by Ralf Dahrendorf focuses on the analysis of social conflicts arising from differences in interests, the distribution of power, and authority within the social structure. According to Dahrendorf, social conflict is an inherent part of society and plays a crucial role in driving social change. The following table presents the key dimensions of Dahrendorf's conflict theory (2018) applied to the research data:

No.	Dimensions	Findings
1	Conflicting Interests	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Tension Between Freedom of Expression and Social Norms:</b> Art students face a dilemma between their desire for free expression in their artworks and their obligation to adhere to social norms based on religious and cultural values. These norms, designed to maintain social harmony, are often perceived as obstacles to the creative freedom of art students. This conflict reflects the differing interests between students (seeking freedom of expression) and social norms (representing the control of authority groups).</li> <li>2. <b>Influence of Close Relationships:</b> Five out of seven respondents stated that the fear of negative reactions from close ones, such as family or friends, prompts them to limit the themes and styles in their artworks. This highlights the conflict between students' interests in producing innovative works and the social expectations of their more conservative environments.</li> <li>3. <b>Control by Social Norms in the Arts Campus Environment:</b> Social norms based on the values of religious moderation function as control mechanisms enforced by authorities, such as lecturers or educational institutions, to maintain social harmony. For students, these norms are often seen as limitations on more free and experimental artistic exploration.</li> </ol>
2	Power Distribution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Social Norms as a Control Mechanism by Authority Groups:</b> In the arts campus environment, social norms based on the values of religious moderation serve as a tool of control enforced by authorities, such as lecturers, educational institutions, or majority groups within society. Art students are in a subordinate position, where they must navigate their work in accordance with</li> </ol>

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		<p>the rules set by those in power to maintain social stability.</p> <p>2. <b>Influence of Social and Cultural Authority:</b> Students’ fear of negative reactions from close individuals, such as family or the surrounding community, illustrates how social and cultural authority influences the boundaries of artistic creation. While students possess creative freedom, they remain bound by the expectations and social control imposed by more dominant groups.</p> <p>3. <b>Dominance of Religious Values in Art:</b> Norms based on religious values act as instruments for authority groups to establish boundaries in artistic works, particularly to prevent potential interfaith conflicts. For students, these values represent limitations that must be respected, even though they sometimes conflict with their desire for free expression.</p>
3	Conflict Groups	<p>1. <b>Art Student Groups Advocating for Freedom of Expression:</b> Art students who view art as a limitless means of expression often form groups with shared interests. They tend to oppose social norms or religious-based restrictions that are perceived as hindrances to artistic innovation and exploration.</p> <p>2. <b>Groups Supporting Religion-Based Social Norms:</b> Social norms upheld by community authorities, such as family, community members, or lecturers, reflect groups that advocate for restricting artistic works to ensure alignment with religious and cultural values. These groups act as social overseers, maintaining harmony and preventing controversy in the arts.</p>

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Table 3. Conflict theory analysis based on research data

**The Comparison between Religious Moderation in Surakarta and Cairo and its Role in Arts Universities**

Religious moderation is key to maintaining harmony and unity among followers of different religions, particularly in a multireligious country like Indonesia. This concept, which emphasizes fairness, tolerance, and non-extremism in practicing religious teachings, aims to foster peaceful coexistence amid differences in beliefs (Kemenag 2020). Religious moderation also plays a significant role in the academic context, including in arts colleges, serving as a foundation for creating an inclusive learning environment. The Indonesian government supports this concept through various initiatives, including the publication of a pocketbook on religious moderation as a practical guide. This concept parallels the *wasathiyah* approach developed in Cairo, particularly at Al-Azhar University, which also emphasizes balance and rejection of extremism. A comparison of the implementation of these two concepts in the context of arts colleges will be the focus of the discussion.

In arts colleges such as the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Surakarta, religious moderation is essential for creating an inclusive and harmonious academic atmosphere. Students from various religious and cultural backgrounds are encouraged to prioritize tolerance and mutual respect. Religious moderation can be integrated into the curriculum, particularly in courses discussing arts and culture, as well as through extracurricular activities such as seminars and workshops promoting interfaith dialogue (Aini et al. 2023). This differs from the approach in Cairo, where moderation, in the context of *wasathiyah*, is more focused on strengthening a comprehensive understanding of religion through formal education in institutions like Al-Azhar. Comparing these approaches is crucial to understanding the contextual implementation of moderation in each region.

Art serves as an effective medium for conveying messages of religious moderation in Surakarta. Art exhibitions, performances, and other forms of artistic expression with themes of diversity and tolerance can encourage students from various backgrounds to express their views on the values of unity and tolerance. In Cairo, while art also plays a role, the primary emphasis in spreading *wasathiyah* lies in teaching and studying classical religious texts interpreted in a moderate manner. Challenges in implementing religious moderation in arts colleges, both in Surakarta and Cairo, often arise from potential interfaith conflicts or differing interpretations. To address these challenges, a dialogical and inclusive approach, supported by collaboration among student organizations, religious leaders, and educational institutions, is essential.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia has made religious moderation one of the national priority programs to maintain unity amidst diversity. In higher education settings, this program helps create a tolerant learning environment that supports students' academic achievement and creativity. Both in Surakarta and Cairo, the goal of implementing religious moderation, or *wasathiyah*, in universities is to produce graduates who are not only proficient in the arts but also deeply understand the importance of tolerance, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society. Support from faculty and academic staff is crucial in achieving this objective.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Talcott Parsons' AGIL theory dimensions, art students in Surakarta demonstrate the ability to adapt to social norms rooted in religious values by carefully selecting themes and artistic styles to avoid social conflict. Goal attainment is evident in the students' efforts to produce works that are both widely accepted by audiences and maintain social harmony. In the integration dimension, students successfully utilize dialogue and consensus with influential parties, such as lecturers and the community, to bridge differing perspectives. Meanwhile, the latency dimension reflects the internalization of religious moderation values, which are continuously nurtured through art as a medium for diversity.

From the perspective of Dahrendorf's conflict theory, the tension between students' freedom of expression and the control of religious-based social norms highlights conflicts of interest, unequal power distribution, and opposing group dynamics, which play a role in driving innovation and negotiation in their artistic works.

While this study provides comprehensive insights into the relationship between art, religion, and religious moderation, it has several limitations, such as the restriction of data to the perspectives of art students in Surakarta, without in-depth exploration of audiences or the public. Furthermore, the comparison with the context in Cairo relies primarily on literature review, lacking direct empirical data. Future research is recommended to expand participant scope to include art audiences and other stakeholders and to employ participatory observation methods in relevant locations. The scholarly contribution of this study lies in the integration of AGIL theory and conflict theory to analyze religious moderation in art, as well as offering practical guidance for art institutions to create inclusive and creative academic spaces within the context of cultural and religious

diversity.

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