Religious Studies and the Production of Critical Religious Moderation: Epistemic Humility and Reflexive Habitus in Indonesian Higher Education

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Abstract: This study analyzes the relationship between Religious Studies and the discourse of religious moderation in Indonesian higher education by challenging the dominant view that positions religious moderation primarily as a state-driven normative agenda or a mechanism for transmitting moral values. The purpose of this research is to explain how Religious Studies operates as an epistemic space that shapes intellectual dispositions for managing religious diversity, rather than as an instrument of normative harmonization. This study employs a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with lecturers and students at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga and Universitas Gadjah Mada, complemented by an analysis of curricular documents and institutional practices. The findings reveal three main results. First, Religious Studies systematically produces epistemic humility, enabling subjects to recognize the limits of truth claims without falling into relativism. Second, through the repetition of academic practices, a reflexive habitus emerges that shifts religious engagement from identity defense toward argumentative reasoning. Third, Religious Studies equips subjects with the capacity to manage tensions among religion, culture, and nationalism critically and contextually. This study offers an original contribution by proposing the concept of critical religious moderation as an intellectual-ethical capacity produced through scholarly practice. The implications of this research underscore the importance of protecting epistemic autonomy and strengthening reflective educational ecosystems within policies on religious moderation in higher education.

Keywords: Critical religious moderation; epistemic humility; reflexive habitus; Religious Studies.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menganalisis relasi antara Studi Agama-Agama dan diskursus moderasi beragama di perguruan tinggi Indonesia dengan menantang pandangan dominan yang memosisikan moderasi beragama terutama sebagai agenda normatif negara atau transmisi nilai moral. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menjelaskan bagaimana Studi Agama-Agama bekerja sebagai ruang epistemik yang membentuk disposisi intelektual dalam mengelola keberagaman agama, alih-alih sebagai instrumen harmonisasi normatif. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara mendalam dan diskusi kelompok terfokus (FGD) terhadap dosen dan mahasiswa di Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga dan Universitas Gadjah Mada, serta analisis dokumen kurikulum dan praktik institusional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan utama. Pertama, Studi Agama-Agama secara sistematis memproduksi kerendahan hati epistemik yang memungkinkan subjek mengakui keterbatasan klaim kebenaran tanpa terjebak relativisme. Kedua, melalui repetisi praktik akademik, terbentuk habitus refleksif yang menggeser keterlibatan keagamaan dari pembelaan identitas menuju kerja argumentatif. Ketiga, Studi Agama-Agama membekali subjek dengan kapasitas untuk mengelola ketegangan antara agama, budaya, dan nasionalisme secara kritis dan kontekstual. Penelitian ini menawarkan kontribusi orisinal dengan mengusulkan konsep moderasi beragama kritis sebagai kapasitas intelektual-etis yang diproduksi melalui praktik keilmuan. Implikasi penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya perlindungan otonomi epistemik dan penguatan ekosistem pendidikan reflektif dalam kebijakan moderasi beragama di perguruan tinggi.

Kata kunci: Moderasi beragama kritis; kerendahan hati epistemik; habitus refleksif; Studi Agama-Agama.

1. Introduction

Religious moderation, multiculturalism, and interreligious tolerance have long been positioned as normative pillars sustaining Indonesia as a plural nation (Subchi, Zulkifli, Latifa, & Sa'diyah, 2022). Through various policies and official documents, the state frames religious moderation as a cultural and ideological strategy to maintain social cohesion, prevent horizontal conflict, and curb the spread of religion-based radicalism and extremism (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019). This narrative gains historical legitimacy from depictions of the long-standing coexistence of world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, and local belief systems—that have lived side by side in the archipelago for centuries (Picard & Madinier, 2011; Prihantoro & Hestiningrum, 2020). Within this framework, religious moderation appears as a universal value seemingly inherent to the Indonesian experience.

However, social realities indicate that this harmonious narrative does not always align with empirical dynamics on the ground. Since the early 2000s, the rise of terrorism and extreme violence—from the 9/11 attacks in the United States to a series of bombings in Bali, Jakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar—has demonstrated that religion can also be mobilized as a source of legitimacy for violence that threatens national integrity and shared life (Alvian, 2023). These events prompted the state, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2019), to formulate religious moderation as a strategic agenda to address religion-based radicalism, extremism, and intolerance.

Nevertheless, various reports suggest that these institutional efforts have not fully mitigated intolerance and violations of religious freedom. Setara Institute reports the persistence of intolerance practices, including hate speech, rejection of houses of worship, criminalization under blasphemy accusations, and the closure and destruction of worship places across regions (Setara Institute, 2018). In 2023 alone, 217 incidents with 329 actions violating freedom of religion or belief occurred, increasing from 2022 (333 actions), including 65 disruptions of worship places, with Christians and Catholics as the primary victims (Ryn, 2023). Furthermore, Setara Institute findings reveal that radical and extremist ideologies have infiltrated public higher education institutions, including state Islamic universities, with at least ten institutions indicated as exposed to radical discourse (Yasir, 2019). Suyanto, Sirry, & Sugihartati (2022) even identifies a troubling correlation between increasing student and youth involvement in extremist networks and the weakening of critical reflective spaces in higher education.

These conditions place higher education in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, universities function as strategic instruments for the state and civil society to instill moderation, tolerance, and deradicalization (Khasanah, Hamzani, & Aravik, 2023; Musyahid, 2023). On the other hand, higher education institutions also serve as arenas of ideological contestation, where religious interpretations, identity politics, and critiques of the state intersect. This paradox demands a deeper analysis of how religious moderation actually forms, operates, and becomes negotiated within academic spaces.

Research on religious moderation in Indonesia has expanded significantly over the past decade and can be grouped into several main trends. First, a number of studies focus on religious moderation as a state normative policy and program, particularly through analyses of Ministry of Religious Affairs policies and their implementation in educational institutions. These studies emphasize the urgency of religious moderation as an instrument for social stability and conflict prevention and assess program effectiveness in shaping tolerant attitudes among learners (Muhsin, Kususiyanah, & Maksum, 2024; Nasir & Rijal, 2021). However, this approach tends to accept religious moderation as a settled normative category and rarely interrogates its epistemic foundations.

Second, other studies examine the perceptions and attitudes of academic communities—lecturers and students—toward religious moderation. These studies primarily focus on understanding, religious attitudes, and moderation tendencies in campus life (Baba, Zainal, & Subeitan, 2023a; Razak, A. Rasyid, Syah Putra, Khatami, & Muntazhar, 2025). Findings generally conclude that academic communities

perceive religious moderation positively and consider it relevant for managing interfaith relations. Yet, these studies remain largely descriptive and do not address how specific scholarly frameworks shape— or even tension—understandings of religious moderation.

Third, several studies concentrate on the design of religious moderation education and training programs, including curriculum development, student training as moderation agents, and the integration of tolerance values into co-curricular and extracurricular activities (Ardiansyah, Mukarom, & Nugraha, 2024; Handajani, 2024). Although important, this approach often reduces education to value transmission and insufficiently considers the critical-epistemological dimensions of learning processes.

In contrast, studies on Religious Studies in Indonesia remain relatively limited and largely historical-descriptive. Beck (2002), drawing on Mukti Ali's thought, positions Comparative Religion as a foundation for socio-religious harmony in Indonesia. Bahri (2014) documents a shift in nomenclature and approach from Comparative Religion to Religious Studies as a more interdisciplinary field, responding to the inadequacy of classical comparative approaches in addressing contemporary issues such as fundamentalism, religious conflict, democracy, and environmental crises. Pohl (2015) argues that interreligious dialogue within Religious Studies curricula contributes to peaceful coexistence. However, these studies tend to affirm Religious Studies as a supporter of harmony without critically examining its relationship to state-centric and normative projects of religious moderation.

Based on this literature review, a significant conceptual gap emerges. Most studies treat religious moderation as a normative goal to be strengthened through education, while assuming that Religious Studies automatically aligns with that goal. In fact, Religious Studies epistemologically operates within a scholarly tradition that emphasizes methodological objectivity, the suspension of normative judgment (epoché), and critical stances toward absolute truth claims. The tension between this epistemic framework and religious moderation as a public policy discourse remains underexplored.

This study aims to critically analyze the relationship between Religious Studies and the discourse of religious moderation in Indonesian higher education. Specifically, it seeks to explain how Religious Studies does not merely function as a normative instrument of moderation but operates as an epistemic space that shapes particular intellectual dispositions for understanding religious diversity. By examining academic communities at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga and Universitas Gadjah Mada, this study addresses a research gap by foregrounding the epistemological and pedagogical dimensions of religious moderation.

This article argues that the primary contribution of Religious Studies to religious moderation lies not in moral value transmission or the reinforcement of state normative consensus, but in the formation of critical religious moderation as an intellectual disposition. Unlike approaches that emphasize harmony and social stability, Religious Studies operates within an epistemic framework that cultivates reflexivity, epistemic humility, and awareness of plural truth claims. This position aligns with Peter L. Berger's concept of pluralization (2014), which emphasizes that religious diversity in modern societies demands the capacity to live with uncertainty and difference rather than mere compliance with normative consensus. Through non-confessional and analytical approaches—including the practice of epoché in the phenomenology of religion—Religious Studies habituates academic subjects to suspend absolute judgments and understand religion as a historical, social, and symbolic phenomenon. This study contends that Religious Studies, through its interdisciplinary and reflective approach, forms a reflexive habitus (Bourdieu) that remains relatively resistant to religious exclusivism and absolutism. The epistemic humility it produces—as emphasized in theories of interreligious dialogue by Cornille (2013) and Ward (2000)—enables individuals to manage difference critically without reducing it to enforced harmony. Accordingly, this article not only affirms the role of higher education in religious moderation but also offers a theoretical contribution by shifting the understanding of religious moderation from a normative-instrumental framework toward an intellectual and ethical capacity for managing tensions in plural societies.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach that focuses on Religious Studies as a scholarly practice and its role in shaping understandings of religious moderation in higher education settings. The unit of analysis encompasses three main dimensions: (1) the educational system of Religious Studies, (2) the academic community involved in it (lecturers and students), and (3) the intellectual views and dispositions that develop within this community regarding religious moderation. These three dimensions are formulated with reference to an epistemological framework concerning the manifestation of knowledge in the domains of education, scientific communities, and academic worldviews (Hoodbhoy, 1991). Through this unit of analysis, the study examines religious moderation not merely as a normative concept but as an intellectual practice that is produced and negotiated within academic spaces.

The qualitative research design was chosen because the primary objective of this study is not to measure levels of religious moderation quantitatively (Maxwell, 2008), but to gain an in-depth understanding of the epistemic and pedagogical processes through which religious moderation is formed, interpreted, and practiced. Religious moderation is understood as a concept laden with meaning, ambiguity, and reflexivity, making it inadequate to reduce it to purely statistical indicators. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to capture the nuances of reasoning, experience, and conceptual tensions encountered by research participants, particularly in the context of the relationship between Religious Studies and the state-centric discourse of religious moderation.

The research sites were Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga and Universitas Gadjah Mada, both located in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. These institutions were selected based on academic considerations, as both have played significant historical roles and made important contributions to the development of Religious Studies in Indonesia, within the contexts of a state Islamic university and a public university, respectively. The data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from 18 informants, including 3 lecturers/researchers, 2 department heads, 3 alumni, and 10 students who have direct academic experience in Religious Studies at the two universities. Secondary data were collected from academic documents such as books, reputable journal articles, curricula, and other relevant media sources related to the research topic.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with the informants in June 2023 and focus group discussions (FGDs) on July 17, 2023. The interviews were semi-structured in order to explore informants' views, experiences, and reflections on Religious Studies and its relationship to religious moderation. FGDs were held in two sessions and attended by 15 participants. FGDs were used to capture collective discussion dynamics and variations in perspective among members of the academic community. The research instruments consisted of interview guides and FGD guidelines developed in line with the research focus, particularly on three main themes: interreligious relations, the relationship between religion and culture, and the relationship between religion and nationalism.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic and historical analysis, and yet no analysis software program was used to read the data. Thematic analysis was applied to identify, categorize, and interpret patterns of meaning emerging from interview and FGD data, especially those related to how informants understand religious moderation within the framework of Religious Studies. Historical analysis was employed to examine the development of Religious Studies as an academic field in Indonesia by considering the social, political, and intellectual contexts surrounding it. This historical approach is essential because every academic discipline develops within what has been described as an environmental context for science (Açıkgenç, 1996), making an understanding of the institutional and intellectual history of Religious Studies an integral part of the analysis of the research findings.

3. Results

Religious Studies as a Space for the Production of Epistemic Humility

This study finds that Religious Studies functions as an academic space that systematically produces epistemic humility in understanding religion. In this context, epistemic humility does not

signify normative relativism or a weakening of religious commitment. Instead, it refers to a reflective awareness of the limits of human truth claims when confronted with religious plurality. This awareness enables religious subjects to remain committed to their own beliefs while acknowledging that these claims coexist with other claims that are equally meaningful to their adherents. Accordingly, religious moderation does not operate through the homogenization of values or the regulation of belief, but through the formation of intellectual dispositions capable of living with difference, ambiguity, and tension without falling into absolutism.

This finding consistently emerged in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with lecturers and students at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga and Universitas Gadjah Mada. H. (senior lecturer in Religious Studies, UIN Sunan Kalijaga) explained that from the outset, first-year students receive exposure to concepts of pluralism and tolerance. The curriculum institutionalizes this exposure through compulsory courses such as sociology of religion, phenomenology of religion, comparative religion, and philosophy of religion. These academic components are reinforced by mandatory seminars on religious moderation specifically designed for new students. According to H., this early engagement with diverse religious expressions does not aim to equate religious truths, but to train students to understand religion as a historical, social, and symbolic phenomenon that always operates within specific contexts (U.H., Senior Lecturer, UIN, FGD, Session 2, July 17, 2023). This approach aligns with the phenomenology of religion (SAA, 2024), which emphasizes *epoché*, or the suspension of normative judgment, in order to understand religion from the perspective of its adherents (Smart, 1996).

Student experiences illustrate how these academic processes operate at the level of epistemic disposition. F.K.A. and S.R. (Students, UIN, Personal Communication, June 21, 2023) acknowledged that their engagement with courses in sociology of religion, phenomenology of religion, comparative religion, and philosophy of religion exposed them to intellectually challenging experiences, as beliefs previously regarded as settled were questioned from alternative perspectives. This discomfort did not culminate in a crisis of faith. Instead, it became a reflective moment that fostered greater openness and a less defensive stance in responding to difference. This shift marks an important transition from an apologetic orientation toward a reflective one—from claims of absolute truth toward an awareness of plural religious perspectives.

A similar narrative emerged among students at the Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies (CRCS) (Singgih, 2017), Universitas Gadjah Mada. B.S. (CRCS student, UGM) emphasized that studying religion academically helped him understand that tolerance and moderation cannot be built merely through normative slogans, but require serious and empathetic engagement with the internal logic of other religious traditions (B.S., Personal Communication, 2023). Awareness that each religious tradition possesses its own structures of meaning, lived experiences of faith, and historical trajectories reinforced his conviction that peaceful coexistence demands epistemic humility, namely a willingness to recognize that one's own perspective is never fully final. This view resonates with Cornille's (2013) argument that epistemic humility constitutes an ethical and intellectual prerequisite for authentic interreligious dialogue.

Secondary data from the official website of UIN Sunan Kalijaga further support these empirical findings. In the report *"Kerendahan Hati dan Toleransi"* (Makin, 2022), UIN Sunan Kalijaga affirms that humility constitutes a foundational principle in religious studies for fostering tolerance, diversity, and interreligious understanding. The institution conceptualizes humility as openness to learning, respect for others, recognition of personal limitations, and an emphasis on service and modesty in scholarly practice. This orientation connects directly to the university's vision of *ulul al-bab*, namely intellectually grounded individuals who remain open-minded, reflective, and socially responsible. In this sense, epistemic humility does not function as a passive attitude, but as a scholarly ethos that demands self-awareness and intellectual openness in the study of religion (Kemenag, 2021).

A comparable approach appears in the academic practices of CRCS UGM. The official CRCS platform emphasizes humility as a fundamental disposition for understanding Indonesia's religious diversity, which encompasses more than 1,300 religious groups. In this context, humility signifies

recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge, rejection of absolute truth claims, and readiness to engage in egalitarian dialogue with other traditions. Academic discussions and graduate-level activities at CRCS, including engagements with issues such as religion and mental health, demonstrate that the study of religion requires openness to learning from diverse and often ambiguous realities. This emphasis shows that epistemic humility operates simultaneously as a methodological principle and an academic ethos in Religious Studies.

Theoretically, these findings resonate with international literature on interreligious dialogue and epistemic virtues. Several studies emphasize that humility constitutes a crucial epistemic virtue in interreligious dialogue because it enables epistemic justice and reduces prejudice (Centa & Strahovnik, 2020). Kato (2016) even proposes a kenotic approach, understood as the relinquishment of excessive epistemic self-confidence, as a necessary condition for productive interfaith dialogue. In the Indonesian context, recent research demonstrates that interreligious dialogue grounded in humility contributes significantly to conflict management, the strengthening of religious moderation, and the construction of social harmony amid challenges of intolerance and the politicization of religion (Al Qurtuby, 2025).

Pedagogical practices within Religious Studies further reinforce this process of disposition formation. D.A. (Program Coordinator, Religious Studies, UIN, FGD., Session 1, July 17, 2023) explained that the curriculum does not merely transmit knowledge, but deliberately creates dialogical experiences through interactive classes, interfaith discussions, visits to places of worship, and programs of interreligious encounter. In these practices, students do not study other religions solely as objects of knowledge; they engage in dialogical situations that require empathy, self-reflection, and the management of tension. Such processes cultivate a reflective habitus that remains relatively resistant to exclusivism and claims of singular truth.

Through the lens of pluralization, Peter L. Berger (2014) argues that pluralization in modern societies does not automatically lead to relativism. Instead, it requires individuals to develop reflexivity, namely an awareness that religious beliefs always coexist with other beliefs that likewise claim truth. Within Religious Studies, pluralization does not prompt defensive reassertions of identity, but encourages the development of intellectual capacities to live with uncertainty. Religious moderation thus emerges not as compliance with normative consensus, but as the ability to manage epistemic tension productively.

The experience of A.M. (CRCS student) reinforces this argument. He stated that academic training in Religious Studies helped him anticipate prejudice and potential interreligious conflict in a more reflective manner. According to him, multi-religious communities that lack epistemic humility tend to fall easily into generalization and stereotyping. By contrast, an academic understanding of religious plurality encourages individuals to restrain absolute claims and open spaces for dialogue (Personal Communication, 2023).

Historically, these findings also resonate with the vision of Mukti Ali, a pioneer of comparative religious studies in Indonesia. Mukti Ali emphasized that the study of religion should aim to build harmonious coexistence among religious communities without demanding the homogenization of faith (M. Ali, 2007). However, rather than interpreting this vision normatively, the present study demonstrates that the primary contribution of Religious Studies lies in the formation of epistemic awareness: a willingness to take other religions seriously, to recognize the limits of one's own perspective, and to suspend final judgment.

In this way, Religious Studies produces critical religious moderation not through the internalization of state-defined moral values, but through the cultivation of epistemic humility that enables individuals to live in plural societies without absolutism. Religious moderation, in this sense, constitutes an intellectual and ethical capacity to manage difference reflectively, a disposition that emerges from scholarly practice rather than from normative doctrine alone.

Accordingly, this study identifies four consistent patterns in how Religious Studies produces epistemic humility. First, a pattern of reflective pedagogy emerges from the earliest stages of education, in which students encounter religious plurality through phenomenological and sociological approaches that consciously suspend normative judgment (*epoché*), allowing religion to be understood

as a contextual historical-social phenomenon rather than a singular truth claim. Second, the data reveal a pattern of intellectually disruptive yet productive experiences, marked by discomfort when established beliefs face questioning, which functions as a catalyst for shifting from apologetic stances toward reflective openness to ambiguity. Third, the findings indicate the institutionalization of humility as an academic ethos at both UIN Sunan Kalijaga and CRCS UGM, where humility operates not merely as a personal attitude, but as a methodological principle and scientific disposition for understanding extreme religious diversity. Fourth, the data demonstrate a close connection between epistemic humility and conflict management capacity, showing that individuals academically trained in Religious Studies tend to restrain absolute claims, avoid stereotyping, and open dialogical spaces across religious boundaries. In conclusion, the contribution of Religious Studies to religious moderation lies in the formation of epistemic dispositions—humility, reflexivity, and readiness to live with tension—that enable religious moderation to function as an intellectual-ethical capacity rather than as normative compliance or enforced harmonization.

The Formation of a Reflective Habitus: Religious Moderation as an Intellectual Disposition

This study further finds that Religious Studies operates primarily as an arena for the formation of a reflective habitus—a set of cognitive and ethical dispositions shaped through the repetition of academic practices—rather than as an instrument for the indoctrination of religious moderation. In Bourdieu's terms, habitus does not emerge from declarative moral instruction, but from processes of socialization that embed particular ways of thinking as habitual practices: ways of asking questions, evaluating evidence, managing difference, and restraining the impulse to close debate through win–lose truth claims (Pierre Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Accordingly, religious moderation does not appear here as a checklist of normative values to be memorized, but as an intellectual disposition that enables subjects to inhabit the tensions of plurality—without falling into exclusivism and without slipping into shallow relativism.

These findings must be situated within the historical development of the field and departments of Religious Studies in Indonesia. From early exposure to comparative religious inquiry as early as the seventeenth century through the works of al-Raniri (Azra, 2004), to more institutionalized forms of instruction in the early twentieth century, and later to the establishment of post-independence academic institutions such as PTAIN (1951) and ADIA (1957) (Soetjipto & Sitompul, 1986), Religious Studies has developed as a distinct intellectual field. A critical moment occurred when UIN Sunan Kalijaga opened the Department of Comparative Religion in 1960 under the leadership of Mukti Ali, which later evolved into Religious Studies. This field expanded further through the establishment of CRCS at Universitas Gadjah Mada in 2000 and the collaborative ICRS network in 2006, both of which explicitly articulated interdisciplinary and critical orientations (H. M. Ali, 1974; M. Ali, 1990; CRCS, 2024). In this sense, the reflective habitus observed among students and lecturers cannot be understood merely as an individual psychological effect, but as an institutional product of a field of knowledge deliberately designed to train ways of understanding religion as a plural historical-social phenomenon.

At the level of learning experience, data from FGDs and interviews show that the formation of a reflective habitus operates through the normalization of discussion practices that shift the logic of identity defense toward the testing of arguments. U.H. (Senior Lecturer, UIN, FGD, Session 2, July 17, 2023) explained that new students receive early exposure to religious moderation through annual campus orientation programs. Within the Religious Studies department, students must also complete core courses in sociology of religion, phenomenology of religion, comparative religion, and philosophy of religion, with course materials that focus explicitly on interreligious dialogue (U.H., FGD, 2023). The pedagogical key does not lie in encouraging students to equate all religions, but in habituating them to read religious claims as products of specific social, historical, and symbolic contexts. This reflects a distinctly Bourdieuian logic of "training": the repetition of academic procedures—comparing, contextualizing, testing concepts, and posing critical questions—allows religious moderation to operate as an intellectual skill rather than as an externally imposed morality (Pierre Bourdieu, 1977).

Curricular structure further reinforces this process. The organization of core and elective courses—ranging from world religions and phenomenology to interfaith communication and minority community studies—produces habitual practices of consulting multiple sources, examining diverse traditions, and avoiding oversimplification (CRCS, 2024). From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, this pattern demonstrates how academic institutions do not merely transmit knowledge, but actively produce knowing subjects. Students internalize academic modes of legitimation—evidence, argumentation, and contextualization—so that their ways of viewing religion gradually shift from reactive certainty toward trained reflexivity (P L Berger, 1973).

This dispositional transformation appears most clearly when informants compare their experiences "before and after" exposure to Religious Studies. F.K.A. and S.R. (Personal Communication, 2023) recounted that prior to engaging with Religious Studies, they felt discomfort and even offense when encountering concepts such as pluralism, interfaith communication, and minority studies, because these required them to "rethink" established assumptions about their own religion. However, this discomfort did not culminate in a crisis of faith. Instead, it functioned as a pedagogical mechanism that shifted their habitus from defensive to reflective, enabling them to manage dissonance without closing it off through absolute claims (F.K.A. & S.R., Personal Communication, 2023). At this point, religious moderation appears as a highly practical disposition: the capacity to suspend judgment, restrain impulses to "defeat" interlocutors, and relocate difference from arenas of identity struggle to arenas of argumentative engagement.

A similar pattern emerged at CRCS UGM. B.S. (student, CRCS, Personal Communication, June 21, 2023) stated that tolerance does not arise from normative slogans, but from the ability to understand the internal logic of other traditions seriously and empathetically, so that interfaith discussions do not collapse into caricature or stereotyping (B.S., Personal Communication, 2023). In Bourdieu's language, this represents a transformation in the style of practice. Students do not merely "know" the concept of tolerance; they enact tolerance as a cognitive procedure by gathering data, examining contexts, testing terms, and allowing space for complexity (Pierre Bourdieu, 1990). For this reason, religious moderation in these findings is better understood as a cognitive practice rather than a declarative attitude.

Moreover, the reflective habitus that forms does not remain confined to interreligious relations, but extends to two other indicators of moderation examined in this study: cultural accommodation and the relationship between religion and nationalism. On the theme of religion and culture, E.D.C. (Student, UIN, Personal Communication, June 21, 2023) emphasized that an academic understanding of religion as a symbolic system (Geertz, 1973) enables cultural accommodation to be read not as "deviation," but as a historical-sociological fact inherent in religious practice. This perspective fosters a tendency to view local traditions as sites of meaning negotiation rather than as automatic threats to faith (E.D.C., Personal Communication, 2023). This argument gains support from historical frameworks of Islamization that demonstrate varied patterns of religious reception—between "conversion" and "adhesion"—which prepare subjects to live with ambiguity in religious practice (Azra, 2006; Nock, 1933).

S. (Alumnus, UIN, Personal Communication, June 21, 2023) further emphasized that openness to local wisdom correlates with more inclusive religious attitudes, while also acknowledging resistance from purification-oriented groups that tend to adopt rigid positions (S., Personal Communication, 2023). In relation to religion and nationalism, M.Az. (Graduate Student, UIN, June 21, 2023) described how academic learning helped cultivate a constructive understanding of the relationship between religion, citizenship, and social justice, framing national commitment as a shared ethical space rather than as a threat to faith (M.Az., Personal Communication, 2023). This account intersects with the institutional reality that Indonesian higher education mandates courses in Pancasila and Citizenship, creating pedagogical environments in which religious identity and national commitment are continuously negotiated. I.A. (Program Director, CRCS, July 17, 2023) added that religious moderation in academic settings functions as a reciprocal anchor amid competing identities—religious, national, and ideological—by emphasizing contributions to social justice and harmony as shared horizons (I.A., Personal Communication, 2023). In this way, the field of Religious Studies cultivates a non-sectoral

habitus: reflexivity initially trained to understand other religions expands into the capacity to navigate cultural difference and the tensions of identity politics in the public sphere.

Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that religious moderation within Religious Studies operates as a reflective habitus produced by institutional history, curricular design, and the repetition of academic practices across multiple spaces—classrooms, discussions, interactive programs, visits to places of worship, and interfaith encounters—that gradually shape non-defensive modes of thinking. D.A. (FGD., 2023) emphasized that structured dialogical experiences—interfaith discussions, visits, and encounter programs—are designed not merely as "activities," but as exercises in disposition formation: learning to listen, test arguments, manage tension, and cultivate informed rather than sentimental empathy. A.M. (Alumnus, CRCS, June 21, 2023) reinforced this view by noting that such training helps anticipate prejudice and potential conflict, as students become accustomed to scrutinizing generalizations and restraining absolute claims (A.M., Personal Communication, 2023).

Table 1. Mechanisms for Forming a Reflective Habitus of Religious Moderation in Religious Studies

Formation Mechanism	Observable Academic Practices	Indicators of a Reflective Habitus
Normalizing "argument testing" discussions (shifting identity defense to argument evaluation)	Analytically grounded classroom discussions; participants read religious claims as historical–social–symbolic phenomena, not as identities that must be "defended"	Dialogue without win–lose framing; non-defensive responses; sustained attention to context and the internal logic of traditions
Repetition of intellectual procedures (iterative training)	Comparing traditions, contextualizing, testing concepts, asking questions, and using diverse sources	Moderation as a cognitive skill (a way of thinking), not memorized values; capacity to manage complexity
Exposure to a structured curriculum (core–electives)	Core and elective courses: world religions, phenomenology, interfaith communication, minority studies, etc.	Habit of consulting multiple sources; rejection of simplification; analytic reading of difference
Experiences of "discomfort" as pedagogical moments	Alternative perspectives challenge settled beliefs; students manage dissonance in a safe academic space	Suspension of judgment; capacity to manage ambiguity; shift from defensive to reflective orientations
Training to grasp the "internal logic" of other religions	Serious and empathetic engagement with other traditions; testing terms, contexts, and data to avoid caricature	Tolerance as a thinking procedure: verification, contextualization, conceptual precision; anti-stereotyping
Extending habitus to cultural issues (accommodation)	Reading religion as a symbolic system; understanding cultural accommodation as a historical-sociological fact (not "deviation")	Context sensitivity; ability to interpret negotiations of meaning; readiness to live with ambiguity in religious practice
Extending habitus to nationalism and citizenship	Reading religion–nationalism as a shared ethical space (social justice, harmony), not as an identity threat	Moderation as a skill for navigating public identities; dialogue across ideological positions
Interactive interfaith programs (field practice)	Interfaith discussions, visits to places of worship, intercommunity encounters; practicing listening and argument testing in real contexts	A dialogical habitus "tested" beyond the classroom; knowledge-based empathy (not sentimentalism)

Effects in the public sphere: preventing prejudice and conflict	Reading sensitive issues reflectively; checking generalizations; restraining absolute claims in social interaction	Reduced stereotyping; proportionate responses; capacity to manage socio-religious tensions
Long-term institutional and historical foundations of the field	Institutional tradition from comparative religion to Religious Studies; academic centers (UIN–CRCS–ICRS) as an ecosystem	Reflective habitus as a product of the knowledge field (not an individual effect); intergenerational continuity of dispositions

Accordingly, these findings reaffirm that religious moderation in the context of Religious Studies operates as a reflective habitus—an intellectual disposition that enables the argumentative, empathetic, and contextual management of difference without exclusivism. Religious moderation does not emerge as a product of a "moderation doctrine," but as the outcome of producing intellectual subjects within an academic field marked by a long institutional history, robust infrastructure, and repetitive scholarly practices (M. Ali, 1990; Peter L Berger, 1996; Pierre Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Therefore, the data show four core patterns in how Religious Studies shapes religious moderation. First, it consistently shifts from a logic of identity defense to a logic of argument testing, as religious discussion becomes normalized as analytic work on historical, social, and symbolic contexts rather than as an arena for win–lose truth claims. Second, it forms religious moderation through repeated intellectual procedures—comparing, contextualizing, verifying sources, and suspending judgment—which internalize moderation as a cognitive competence rather than as memorized normative values. Third, it treats moments of epistemic discomfort (dissonance produced by exposure to alternative perspectives) as productive pedagogical turning points that move habitus from defensive to reflective orientations without triggering a crisis of faith. Fourth, the reflective habitus initially trained for interreligious relations expands transversally into cultural accommodation and the religion–nationalism nexus, demonstrating a capacity to navigate ambiguities in religious practice and tensions in public identity through argumentation and empathy. Overall, these findings conclude that religious moderation in Religious Studies operates as an institutionally produced reflective habitus—shaped by the field's history, curricular design, and repeated academic practices—that enables contextual and non-exclusionary management of difference rather than compliance with a moderation doctrine.

Managing Tension: Critical Religious Moderation between Religion, Culture, and Nationalism

These findings further show that Religious Studies does not operate through a logic of suppressing or eliminating conflict, but rather by building an intellectual–ethical capacity to manage tensions inherent in Indonesia's public life—especially at the intersections of religion and culture, religion and nationalism, and faith and citizenship. In contrast to normative approaches to moderation that often imagine harmony as a final goal and measure success through compliance with a fixed list of "correct" values (Hernawan, Riyani, & Busro, 2021; Mulyana, 2023; Hadi Pajarianto, Pribadi, & Sari, 2022), the data indicate that academic subjects are instead trained to accept that modern pluralism contains conflicts that sometimes cannot—and need not—be fully resolved. At this point, Berger's analysis helps clarify the logic of these findings: pluralism places truth claims in constant confrontation with other claims that are equally "legitimate" in social terms; the central challenge, therefore, does not lie in closing tensions, but in sustaining reflexivity and navigating ambiguity over time (Peter L. Berger, 2014). Accordingly, "critical religious moderation" appears not as consensus-making, but as managing tension—a skill for acting amid competing values without becoming trapped at either extreme.

The need for such a capacity becomes even more apparent when situated within the context of radicalization risks in higher education. Data from the National Intelligence Agency (2018) on student exposure to radicalism and findings from PPIM (2019) on radical and intolerant opinions function not merely as statistical background, but as indicators that universities constitute a serious field of contestation. External networks, social grievances, and socio-economic vulnerabilities can generate

frustrations that easily translate into identity politics and purificationist rhetoric. Within this landscape, Religious Studies operates as a training space that does not sterilize conflict, but transforms how conflict is understood: not as an identity war demanding winners, but as a socio-historical problem that requires mapping, argumentative testing, and careful reading of its public consequences.

At the level of lived experience, religion–nationalism tensions emerge as concrete dilemmas, particularly when nationalism appears not only as a national symbol, but also as a domain of policy, law, and public discursive competition. M.Az. (Personal Communication, 2023) explains that learning in Religious Studies helped him view nationalism not as a competitor to faith, but as a "shared ethical space" grounded in social justice, welfare, and solidarity (M.Az., Personal Communication, 2023). The key point, however, lies not in reaching a harmonious conclusion, but in how conflict is read: nationalism remains a field that continuously demands renegotiation when religious symbols, state regulations, or identity politics generate clashing loyalty claims. In such situations, the response does not take the form of extreme options—either sacralizing the state or delegitimizing it—but rather a reflective position that sustains national commitment while maintaining critical distance from the ways in which the state—or religious groups—fix normative meanings of what counts as "right." A similar pattern appears in M.Y.'s account (Undergraduate Students, UIN, June 21, 2023), who describes how classroom discussions on Pancasila, citizenship, and the role of religion in the public sphere often generate emotional tension; yet the academic space does not promote "quick harmony." Instead, it compels the mapping of opposing positions, the tracing of their historical–ideological roots, and the acceptance that some differences cannot be unified by a single normative formula (M.Y., Personal Communication, 2023). Here, critical religious moderation functions as the management of symbolic conflict: it postpones simplistic decisions, rejects "once-and-for-all" rhetoric, and chooses argumentative work that allows differences to persist without turning into violence.

Religion–culture tensions display a parallel logic. Rather than reconciling all parties, Religious Studies builds the capacity to argue and to endure ethically amid interpretive conflict. E.D.C. (Personal Communication, 2023) explains that an anthropological perspective that views religion as a symbolic system helps interpret cultural accommodation not as deviation, but as a historical–sociological fact intrinsic to religious life (Geertz, 1973). The findings do not stop at affirming cultural pluralism. More importantly, they highlight the capacity to manage purificationist resistance. S. (Personal Communication, 2023) emphasizes that Religious Studies trained him to respond to rejections of local traditions through argumentation—without reducing others merely to intolerance and without sacrificing a commitment to diversity (S., Personal Communication, 2023). In other words, critical religious moderation recognizes conflict as a normal feature of social dynamics while rejecting two shortcuts: demonizing opponents and abandoning principled commitments.

Another dimension that deepens these findings concerns how "tension" is managed not only through classroom discourse, but also through cross-sector institutional work, preventing religious moderation from degenerating into an administrative slogan. At UIN Sunan Kalijaga, for example, the Religious Studies program participated in training for Madrasah Aliyah teachers (2021) that featured interfaith speakers (such as Christian pastors and Jewish rabbis). Through this engagement, religious moderation functioned as interreligious communication and as an exercise in understanding difference through its representatives, rather than as the homogenization of interpretation. Such practices matter not as harmony campaigns, but as social infrastructure that strengthens the capacity to face conflict, because they expand dialogical networks and teach participants to negotiate real differences rather than simplified ones (SAA, 2024).

In the context of CRCS/ICRS, managing tension appears through the production of public knowledge and responses to policy and legal issues—where religious moderation encounters the hard terrain of citizenship. For instance, CRCS (2025) discussions on freedom of religion or belief in the 2023 Criminal Code, involving academics, law enforcement officials, civil society actors, and vulnerable communities, show that moderation does not function as a "calming device." Instead, it operates as an analytical tool for identifying potential problems, risks of criminalization, and human rights dilemmas within the constitutional order. Here, critical religious moderation serves as a procedural bridge

between faith and citizenship: it does not eliminate normative conflict, but builds cross-sector communication channels so that tensions can be managed in just and accountable ways. Even when religious moderation appears in official state discourse—such as Ministry of Religious Affairs programs monitored and summarized in reports on religious issues—CRCS's academic work demonstrates that moderation can itself become an object of critical inquiry: observed, tested for its implications, and analyzed in relation to policy politics (CRCS, 2022).

Table 2. Mechanisms of Managing Tension in Critical Religious Moderation

Sphere of Tension (Node)	Triggers/Issues Identified in the Data	Reasoning Patterns of Academic Subjects
Religion–Nationalism	Religious symbols in public space; state policies/regulations; competition in identity-politics discourse	Avoids extreme poles (sacralizing the state vs delegitimizing the state); maps opposing positions; traces historical–ideological roots; accepts that some conflicts have no single resolution
Faith–Citizenship	Dual loyalty demands (faith and citizenship); human rights/freedom of religion issues; risks of criminalization	Rejects simplistic solutions; weighs public consequences (human rights, justice, constitutional order); builds cross-sector communication channels
Religion–Culture	Purification vs cultural accommodation; claims of religious "authenticity"; resistance to local traditions	Avoids demonizing opponents; does not sacrifice commitments to diversity; reads conflict as social normality; sustains context-based argumentation
Campus as a Field of Contestation (Risk Background)	Exposure to radicalization; off-campus networks; social grievances; socio-economic vulnerabilities translating into identity politics and purificationist language	Understands conflict as a socio-historical problem (not an identity war); tests arguments and reads their public consequences
Interfaith Dialogical Infrastructure (Offline Practices)	Need for real dialogical networks so differences are not oversimplified; social resistance to pluralism	Encounters difference directly through representatives; learns meaning negotiation in real situations rather than sterile discourse
Official State Moderation as an Object of Critique	Moderation framed as a stability agenda/normative consensus; risks of depoliticization and interpretive standardization	Maintains critical distance without being anti-state; tests policy implications; analyzes the relationship between moderation and policy politics

Accordingly, these findings affirm that critical religious moderation enables religious subjects to live amid religion–culture–nationalism tensions without eliminating conflict or submitting to imposed normative consensus. Religious Studies does not produce compliance with official moderation narratives; it cultivates the capacity to sustain a "loyal critical distance"—neither anti-state nor accepting moderation as a tool of depoliticization, interpretive homogenization, or fragile stability. In Indonesia's plural context, which remains vulnerable to radicalization and identity politics, this capacity to manage tension emerges as an ethical prerequisite for coexistence, because it transforms conflict from a threat into an object of intellectual work and shifts identity battles into accountable civic negotiation (Peter L. Berger, 2014; Herb & Kaplan, 2008; Rieffer, 2003; Soper & Fetzer, 2018).

Therefore, four consistent patterns emerge from the full dataset and clarify the character of critical religious moderation shaped through Religious Studies. First, actors do not frame conflict as a social deviation that requires immediate suppression; they treat it as an inherent condition of pluralism that demands reflective management. Students and institutions do not pursue instant harmony; they develop the ability to map differences, postpone simplistic solutions, and accept normative ambiguity. Second, the data show a non-extreme reasoning tendency that rejects binary dichotomies (state sacralization vs state delegitimation; purification vs total relativism) and prefers a stance of "loyal critical distance" that sustains national commitment while opening ethical critique of both the state and religious groups. Third, actors manage tension through a combination of pedagogical practices and cross-sector institutional work—dialogical classrooms, interfaith training, and policy/legal forums— that convert identity conflicts into socio-historical problems open to public debate and accountability. Fourth, amid campus radicalization risks, Religious Studies functions as a training ground for critical citizenship that shifts the "win–lose" logic toward argumentative negotiation grounded in human rights, social justice, and national cohesion. Provisionally, these data conclude that the principal contribution of Religious Studies does not lie in producing compliance with normative moderation narratives, but in forming an intellectual–ethical capacity to manage religion–culture–nationalism tensions in a mature, accountable, and sustainable manner.

4.   Discussion

This study demonstrates that the principal contribution of Religious Studies to religious moderation in Indonesian higher education does not lie in transmitting normative values or internalizing state-led moderation agendas, but in forming epistemic and intellectual dispositions that enable academic subjects to manage pluralism reflectively. The three core findings—the production of epistemic humility, the formation of a reflexive habitus, and the management of religion–culture–nationalism tensions—indicate that religious moderation operates as capacity rather than compliance. Moderation does not emerge as an imposed value consensus; instead, it functions as the ability to live with ambiguity, suspend final claims, and negotiate difference without falling into absolutism or shallow relativism. Accordingly, these results shift the understanding of religious moderation from a normative category toward an intellectual–ethical disposition produced through scholarly practice.

From an explanatory perspective, these findings can be understood through the simultaneous operation of three epistemic mechanisms. First, through phenomenological and sociological practices that emphasize *epoché* (Smart, 1996), Religious Studies trains subjects to suspend normative judgment and read religion as a contextual, historical–social phenomenon. Second, through the repetition of academic practices—argument-based discussion, source verification, and cross-traditional reading—a reflexive habitus forms in Bourdieu's sense (1990; 1977), that is, a way of thinking that operates automatically without moral injunction. Third, under conditions of advanced pluralization (Peter L. Berger, 2014), where truth claims coexist competitively, Religious Studies provides cognitive tools to manage tension without artificially closing it. Together, these mechanisms explain why moderation emerging from Religious Studies remains critical, non-defensive, and resistant to ideological simplification.

Compared with prior research, these findings offer a significant conceptual contribution. Studies that frame religious moderation as a normative state policy typically assess program effectiveness, tolerant attitudes, or compliance with specific indicators (Muhsin et al., 2024; Nasir & Rijal, 2021). Research on academic community perceptions often remains descriptive, focusing on positive attitudes toward moderation (Baba, Zainal, & Subeitan, 2023b; Razak et al., 2025), while studies on educational design frequently reduce learning to value transmission (Ardiansyah et al., 2024; Handajani, 2024). This study differs by refusing to assume religious moderation as a normative endpoint; instead, it treats moderation as a phenomenon produced—and negotiated—within a specific scholarly field. By positioning Religious Studies as a locus of epistemic analysis, this article fills a gap in the literature that has largely overlooked the tension between the scientific tradition of Religious Studies and the state-centric project of religious moderation.

Interpretively, these findings carry important historical, social, and ideological implications. Historically, they reveal strong continuity with the early vision of Religious Studies in Indonesia—since Mukti Ali—which framed the study of religion as a means of critical coexistence rather than faith homogenization or normative alignment (M. Ali, 1990). This study extends that horizon by showing that critical coexistence does not primarily operate through shared value agreements, but through epistemic awareness systematically cultivated in scholarly practice. Field evidence on the formation of epistemic humility—the capacity to suspend absolute truth claims, recognize the limits of one's knowledge, and understand the internal logic of other traditions—aligns with international literature that identifies epistemic humility as a key virtue for engaging religious pluralism (Centa & Strahovnik, 2020; Kraft, 2006; Phillips, 2006). In interreligious dialogue, epistemic humility does not signal relativism; it functions as an ethical and intellectual prerequisite for epistemic justice and prejudice reduction (Forsthoefel, 2019; Orbih, 2024).

Socially, these findings explain why subjects trained in Religious Studies tend to manage symbolic conflict in public space more effectively: they read conflict as a historical and argumentative problem rather than as an identity threat demanding defensive reaction. This insight intersects with recent scholarship on critical religious moderation, which argues that effective moderation must move beyond normative tolerance to include intellectual humility, dialogical capacity, and reflective civic competence (Cholil, 2022). Unlike policy approaches that frame moderation primarily as an instrument of stability and extremism prevention (R. Bahri, Rofiqi, Kusaeri, & Rusydiyah, 2025; Muis, 2025), the data here show that conflict-management capacity grows when moderation operates as critical reasoning—mapping contexts, weighing public consequences, and suspending absolute claims—as also emphasized in studies on the interaction of religious moderation, religious freedom, and democratic citizenship (Cholil, 2022).

Ideologically, these findings challenge the reduction of religious moderation to an agenda of harmonization and interpretive depoliticization, aligning with critiques that institutionalized moderation without reflexive depth risks meaning standardization and difference suppression. Accordingly, this study extends the literature by proposing critical religious moderation as a practice of reflective citizenship—an intellectual–ethical capacity to live amid symbolic conflict in a fair, argumentative, and accountable manner. This contribution complements existing research on moderation in education, state policy, and youth formation, while foregrounding a critical dimension that has received limited attention (R. Bahri et al., 2025).

Reflectively, the study underscores that Religious Studies–based moderation carries both functions and dysfunctions. Its function lies in forming subjects relatively resilient to simplistic radicalism, less susceptible to identity politics, and capable of dialoguing across faiths, cultures, and ideological positions through argumentation. However, critical religious moderation also entails potential dysfunctions: the public may misinterpret it as relativism due to expectations of clear normative boundaries, while the state may view it as impractical because it does not yield immediate harmony. Research shows that when moderation becomes primarily a normative state agenda or prescriptive value transmission, it often encounters problems of social acceptance and implementation (Cholil, 2022). Studies of moderation education in Indonesia and Malaysia further suggest that excessive focus on short-term stability and harmony tends to neglect the reflexive dimension required for long-term symbolic conflict (Muis, 2025). These findings indicate that without a supportive social and institutional ecosystem—including safe dialogical spaces and the cultivation of intellectual humility—critical religious moderation risks becoming an academic elitism disconnected from public needs (H Pajarianto, Pribadi, & Galugu, 2023).

In response to these dysfunctions, this study proposes an action plan oriented toward strengthening the social–institutional ecosystem rather than expanding normative programs alone. First, higher education policies on religious moderation should explicitly recognize and protect the epistemic autonomy of Religious Studies as a space for critical reflexivity, preventing its reduction to a tool of policy legitimation or prescriptive value transmission. Second, the design of moderation education should shift from declarative attitude assessment toward strengthening cognitive practices—

such as argumentation, claim verification, and ambiguity management—so that the resulting reflexive dispositions extend beyond academic elites and become replicable across disciplines and everyday social interactions. Third, collaboration among academic institutions, policymakers, and civil society should prioritize the fair and accountable management of symbolic conflict—through dialogical forums, policy consultation mechanisms, and public literacy—rather than producing short-term harmony slogans. Through this ecosystemic approach, religious moderation can function as a sustainable intellectual–ethical capacity while avoiding the two principal dysfunctions identified here: public suspicion of relativism and state demands for instant but socially and ideologically fragile stability.

5. Conclusion

This study offers a central insight: the most decisive contribution of Religious Studies to religious moderation in Indonesian higher education does not lie in strengthening normative consensus or transmitting declarative values of tolerance, but in forming epistemic and intellectual dispositions that enable academic subjects to live and act reflectively within a plural society. Through the production of epistemic humility, the formation of a reflexive habitus, and the management of religion–culture–nationalism tensions, Religious Studies shapes religious moderation as an intellectual–ethical capacity—the ability to suspend absolute claims, read conflict historically and argumentatively, and negotiate difference without falling into exclusivism or shallow relativism. In this sense, religious moderation does not operate as compliance with state normative agendas, but as a practical competence for coexisting within an inherently plural and often conflictual social reality.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this research enriches the field of religious moderation studies by advancing a significant conceptual shift: from moderation as a normative value or an instrument of social stability toward critical religious moderation as an intellectual disposition produced within a specific scholarly field. By positioning Religious Studies as a locus of epistemic analysis, this article addresses a gap in the literature that has tended to accept religious moderation as a settled policy category while rarely examining its epistemological tensions with the scientific tradition of Religious Studies. The empirically grounded concepts developed here—such as epistemic humility, reflexive habitus, and managing tension—contribute to a new analytical framework for understanding the relationship between higher education, religious pluralism, and democratic citizenship in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, its empirical scope is confined to two institutional contexts—Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga and Universitas Gadjah Mada—both of which possess strong and relatively established traditions in Religious Studies; therefore, the findings may not fully represent dynamics in other higher education institutions with different institutional and social configurations. Second, the study focuses primarily on epistemic and pedagogical dimensions and does not examine in depth how the reflexive dispositions formed within academia translate into social practice beyond the university, including public policy, digital media, or grassroots communities. Future research may address these limitations by conducting comparative studies across institutions, undertaking longitudinal analyses of alumni trajectories, or exploring the relationship between critical religious moderation and civic practice in broader public arenas. Such developments would allow a more comprehensive examination and refinement of religious moderation as an intellectual–ethical capacity.

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