



Muhammadiyah and Islamic Moderation: Purification, Progress, and the Inherent Middle Path

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Abstract: This article examines Muhammadiyah as a key model of Islamic moderation in Indonesia, arguing that its moderating character is an inherent feature of its theology, history, and organizational practice rather than a tactical political stance. Founded in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan, Muhammadiyah responded to perceived Muslim stagnation through a dual commitment to purification and progress, expressed through education, healthcare, and social welfare. Its approach to purification emphasizes personal responsibility and *ijtihad*, enabling contextual adaptation and preventing rigid dogmatism. Simultaneously, its extensive social programs reflect a vision of *Islam berkemajuan* or progressive Islam that links faith with modern development. Politically, Muhammadiyah maintains institutional non-partisanship, reinforcing unity and positioning the movement as a stabilizing civil force. The article concludes that Muhammadiyah exemplifies a civil form of moderation, offering an important model for contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Islamic Moderation; Muhammadiyah; progress; purification; progressive Islam

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Introduction

The discourse on Islamic moderation has become increasingly significant in the contemporary study of religion and politics, especially in the context of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. Among its Islamic organizations, Muhammadiyah occupies a distinct position as both a reformist movement and a social force advocating modernization within an Islamic framework. Established in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta, Muhammadiyah sought to address what it perceived as the intellectual and moral stagnation of the Muslim community. Through its commitment to education, social welfare, and religious reform, it has played a central role in shaping Indonesia's civil Islam.¹

This paper attempts to provide a conceptual and historical exploration of how Muhammadiyah embodies moderation—not as a temporary political stance or pragmatic adjustment, but as an inherent and structural characteristic of its religious and social mission. The paper focuses on Muhammadiyah's dual commitment to purification and progress, its approach to politics and rationality, and the ways in which its practices exemplify moderation in both theology and social engagement.

Defining Islamic Moderation

The concept of Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*) is complex and multifaceted. It can be understood through both narrow and broader definitions. The narrow definition situates moderation within the domain of Islamic politics. In this framework, moderation refers to the process through which radical groups become more pragmatic when entering the formal political system. Ideological rigidity gives way to electoral viability, as the focus shifts toward votes, organizational survival, and gradual reform rather than revolutionary transformation. The pursuit of a *shariah*-based state by force is renounced, and political actors begin to work within existing constitutional frameworks.²

¹ Hyung-Jun Kim, "Praxis and Religious Authority in Islam: The Case of Ahmad Dahlan, Founder of Muhammadiyah," *Studia Islamika* 17, no. 1 (2010): 69–92.

² Ajam Kalonov, *Political Islam and Democracy in Central Asia: The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023); Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Introduction: The Spirit of Wasatiyyah Democracy," in *Muslim Secular Democracy: Voices from Within*, ed. Lily Zubaidah Rahim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Jillian Schwedler, "Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis," *World Politics* 63, no. 2 (2011): 347–76; Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, "The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt's Wasat Party," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 205–28.

In contrast, the broader definition of Islamic moderation transcends the political sphere, framing it as a philosophical and ethical opposition to radicalism, fundamentalism, and militant ideologies. This perspective encompasses not only political behavior but also intellectual attitudes and social engagement. Moderation here implies a balanced mode of thinking that harmonizes faith and rationality, revelation and reason, tradition and progress. Within this broader framework, Muhammadiyah's identity as a modernist Islamic movement represents a paradigmatic case of moderation in practice.

The Dual Nature of Muhammadiyah: Paradox and Balance

Muhammadiyah's character has often been described as paradoxical or “Janus-faced,” reflecting a tension between puritanical rigor and liberal openness. As noted by scholars such as Boy,³ Shihab,⁴ and Nakamura,⁵ Muhammadiyah simultaneously embodies doctrinaire exclusivism and pragmatic tolerance. On one hand, it espouses a puritanical vision of Islam, rejecting *tahayul* (superstition), *bid'ah* (innovation), and *khurafat* (heresy), while also opposing certain cultural practices perceived as incompatible with Islamic monotheism. On the other hand, it promotes liberal and progressive values, such as education, healthcare, anti-violence initiatives, and *dakwah kultural* (cultural proselytization).

This duality is not contradictory but dialectical—it reflects the dynamic interplay between *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *tajdid* (renewal). According to Amin Abdullah,⁶ *ijtihad* and *tajdid*—or “purification and dynamization”—can be distinguished but not separated. Similarly, Arifin⁷ emphasized that purification, rational inquiry,

³ Pradana Boy, *Fatwa in Indonesia: An Analysis of Dominant Legal Ideas and Mode of Thought of Fatwa-Making Agencies and Their Implications in the Post-New Order Period* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

⁴ Alwi Shihab, “The Muhammadiyah Movement and Its Controversy with Christian Mission in Indonesia” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1995).

⁵ Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town, c.1910–2010* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).

⁶ Amin Abdullah, “Manhaj Tarjih dan Pengembangan Pemikiran KeIslaman.” In *Pengembangan Pemikiran KeIslaman Muhammadiyah: Purifikasi and Dinamisasi*, edited by Muhammad Azhar and Hamim Ilyas, 1–18. Yogyakarta: LPPI, 2000.

⁷ M. T. Arifin, *Muhammadiyah: Potret yang Berubah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 1990).

and social progress are interconnected elements of a single reformist vision. Muhammadiyah thus sustains what might be termed a constructive tension between religious orthodoxy and modernist adaptation. Its capacity to balance these forces has made it inherently moderate and resilient in the face of changing social and political contexts.

Diagnosing Muslim Backwardness: Rationality and Self-Critique

In its formative years, Muhammadiyah's reformist mission emerged as a self-critical response to what it perceived as Muslim backwardness. The early issues of *Suara Muhammadiyah*⁸ identified the root cause of decline as an internal malaise—a failure among Muslims to comprehend and respond to the transformations of the modern world. Rather than blaming external forces such as colonialism or Western influence, Muhammadiyah adopted an introspective stance: Muslims themselves were responsible for their stagnation due to intellectual lethargy and moral complacency.

As a remedy, Muhammadiyah proposed a dual strategy of purification and action, both grounded in *ijtihad* and rationality. Religious purification aimed to restore Islam to its original principles, free from superstition and syncretism, while social action (*amal*) sought to translate religious values into tangible contributions to education, welfare, and economic development. This combination of intellectual renewal and practical engagement represented an early form of Islamic modernism that was distinctively Indonesian—rational, reformist, and socially oriented rather than revolutionary.

Purification in Practice: Between Faith and Tolerance

The practical application of purification has been central to Muhammadiyah's identity. The *Matan Keyakinan dan Cita-Cita Hidup Muhammadiyah*⁹ declared the organization's commitment to fostering a pure Islamic faith, free from the influences of *kemusyrikan* (polytheism), *bid'ah*, and *khurafat*. Yet, Muhammadiyah's approach

⁸ Nazir, "Gandjil alias Aneh," *Soeara Moehammadijah* 7 (1925): 108.

⁹ Muhammadiyah, "Matan Keyakinan dan Cita-Cita Hidup Muhammadiyah: Keputusan Sidang Tanwir di Ponorogo," in *Muhammadiyah Jalan Lurus dalam Tajdid, Dakwah, Kaderisasi dan Pendidikan: Kritik dan Terapinya*, by Umar Hasyim (Surabaya: PT Bina Ilmu, 1969).

to purification is guided by *ijtihad* at the local level and avoids coercion. It emphasizes the intention behind actions rather than mere conformity to form.

Crucially, purification is understood as a personal responsibility, not an organizational imposition. This allows for a plurality of interpretations and practices, enabling local branches to adapt their reformist agenda to cultural contexts.¹⁰ The result is the coexistence of diverse approaches to traditional customs and religious practices, often manifested through reinterpretation and contextualization.¹¹ For instance, Muhammadiyah members might reinterpret local arts or rituals, such as *reog* performances in East Java, within an Islamic ethical framework rather than rejecting them outright. This capacity for contextual negotiation underscores Muhammadiyah's distinctive form of moderation—faithful to Islamic principles yet tolerant and adaptive in implementation.

Acting for Progress: Social Reform and Modernization

Complementing the principle of purification is Muhammadiyah's enduring commitment to progressive social action. The concept of *amal*—originally meaning pious deeds—was redefined to encompass all dimensions of life, from education and health to economics and social welfare. Muhammadiyah established an extensive network of schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations across Indonesia, aiming to empower the marginalized and promote human dignity.

These initiatives not only advanced education and healthcare but also nurtured a collective ethos of progress and modernity among Indonesian Muslims. By engaging directly in social development, Muhammadiyah fostered an organizational culture attuned to real-world dynamics and local needs. Its approach to social reform was cooperative rather than confrontational, working alongside rather than against governmental authorities. In doing so, Muhammadiyah positioned itself as a bridge between religious idealism and pragmatic governance—an embodiment of *Islam berkemajuan* (progressive Islam).¹²

¹⁰ Hyung-Jun Kim, "Purifying the Faith, Acting for Progress: Reinterpreting Muhammadiyah," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 62, no. 2 (2024): 241–76.

¹¹ Hyung-Jun Kim, *Reformist Muslims in a Yogyakarta Village: The Islamic Transformation of Contemporary Socio-Religious Life* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007).

¹² Kim, "Purifying the Faith, Acting for Progress: Reinterpreting Muhammadiyah."

Muhammadiyah and Politics: Principles of Non-Partisanship

Politically, Muhammadiyah has maintained a deliberate stance of institutional non-partisanship. Since its founding, the organization has agreed that it should not transform into a political party. While members are free to join any political group, Muhammadiyah itself remains a moral and social movement rather than a political one. This principle was tested during various historical periods, including its involvement in Masyumi and the 2004 presidential election, but the consensus remained intact.

This institutional separation between religion and politics serves multiple purposes. It preserves Muhammadiyah's unity by preventing internal divisions over party affiliation, maintains its focus on social welfare rather than power politics, and reinforces its cooperative stance toward state authorities. By emphasizing unity and avoiding confrontation, Muhammadiyah has functioned as a stabilizing force in Indonesian civil society, embodying moderation not only in theology but also in political engagement.

The Inherent Moderation of Muhammadiyah

It can be concluded that Muhammadiyah's moderation is not a tactical compromise or a temporary strategy for survival, but an intrinsic and structural feature of the movement. This inherent moderation arises from the interplay of several key elements:

1. **Purification of Faith and Action for Progress:** The simultaneous pursuit of doctrinal purity and worldly advancement balances spiritual integrity with practical relevance.
2. **Rationality and Personal Responsibility:** Instead of relying on external enforcement, Muhammadiyah emphasizes self-discipline, reason, and ethical autonomy.
3. **Contextual Sensitivity:** Its adaptability to local cultures through negotiation rather than confrontation minimizes cultural alienation.
4. **Pragmatic Outcomes over Abstract Ideals:** The organization prioritizes tangible improvements in education, welfare, and morality over utopian visions of an Islamic state.
5. **Political Plurality and Institutional Neutrality:** By maintaining freedom of political affiliation and avoiding partisanship, Muhammadiyah sustains inclusivity and cohesion among its members.

This multi-dimensional framework enables Muhammadiyah to avoid ideological rigidity and extremism while maintaining doctrinal consistency. Its moderation is thus both theological and structural—a product of its epistemology, ethics, and organizational culture.

Moderation as a Civilizational Ethic

Beyond its institutional boundaries, Muhammadiyah's model offers a civilizational paradigm for contemporary Muslim societies. In an era marked by polarization and religious radicalization, Muhammadiyah demonstrates how Islamic renewal (*tajdīd*) can coexist with pluralism and democratic values. Its rejection of both secularism and fundamentalism situates it within a middle path that harmonizes faith, reason, and social justice.

This civilizational moderation is particularly evident in Muhammadiyah's approach to education. By integrating religious instruction with modern sciences, Muhammadiyah schools cultivate students who are intellectually open, ethically grounded, and socially responsible. Similarly, its healthcare and welfare programs exemplify how Islamic ethics can be operationalized into institutions that serve the common good. Through these practices, Muhammadiyah extends the spirit of *ijtihād* beyond theological debate into the domain of applied ethics and social transformation.

Challenges and Contemporary Relevance

Despite its successes, Muhammadiyah continues to face challenges in sustaining moderation amid shifting political and religious landscapes. The rise of conservative populism and the digital amplification of sectarian discourses test its commitment to rationality and tolerance. Internally, generational changes and the expansion of its educational institutions create diverse interpretations of its reformist legacy.

Nevertheless, Muhammadiyah's inherent framework—anchored in purification, rationality, and social engagement—equips it to navigate these complexities. Its *dakwah kultural* approach allows it to engage with younger audiences through culturally relevant means, while its political neutrality safeguards it from co-optation. In many ways, Muhammadiyah represents an ongoing experiment in balancing faithful orthodoxy with modern pluralism, demonstrating that Islamic reform need not sacrifice tolerance or inclusivity.

Conclusion

Muhammadiyah's journey over more than a century reflects the enduring relevance of Islamic moderation as both an ethical ideal and a practical framework for social transformation. Through its synthesis of purification and progress, *ijtihad* and rationality, the organization has cultivated a model of Islam that is both authentic to its religious roots and responsive to the demands of modern society.

As is underscored, moderation within Muhammadiyah is not a product of compromise but an inherent orientation—a deep-seated balance between the sacred and the rational, the spiritual and the worldly. This moderation is manifest not only in its theological stances but also in its institutional design, social programs, and political posture. By fostering tolerance without abandoning conviction, Muhammadiyah exemplifies the *wasatiyyah* ideal: the middle path that upholds justice, reason, and compassion.

In an increasingly polarized world, the Muhammadiyah model offers valuable lessons for the global Muslim community. It illustrates that the strength of Islam lies not in rigidity or reaction, but in its capacity for continuous renewal through reasoned faith. Its moderation—rooted in purification and progress—remains a guiding light for the pursuit of a just, enlightened, and harmonious Muslim society.

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