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Religious Moderation in the Land of Syari'a: Christian Women's Resistance in Acehese Education Institutions

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Abstrak

Aceh, sebagai wilayah dengan mayoritas Muslim paling absolut dan penerapan hukum syariah formal di Indonesia, menghadirkan konteks unik bagi kajian moderasi beragama. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi strategi resistensi perempuan Kristen di lembaga pendidikan Aceh sebagai lensa alternatif untuk memahami dinamika moderasi beragama. Dengan menggunakan teori public transcript dan hidden transcript dari James C. Scott serta didukung oleh perspektif fungsionalisme, penelitian ini menyoroti resistensi fungsional perempuan Kristen dalam memperjuangkan identitas keagamaan dan hak pendidikan agama mereka. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi di Langsa dan Banda Aceh, studi ini menemukan dua bentuk resistensi: resistensi tersembunyi yang terwujud dalam praktik penyesuaian identitas pada masa penegakan Syariat, dan resistensi terbuka melalui penegasan identitas dan tuntutan hak atas pendidikan agama. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa perempuan, sebagai agen sosial, memainkan peran penting dalam mendorong moderasi beragama. Studi ini merekomendasikan agar pemerintah, khususnya Kementerian Agama, memberikan pengakuan dan pemberdayaan formal kepada perempuan sebagai aktor kunci dalam penguatan moderasi beragama di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: *Moderasi Beragama, Perempuan Kristen, Resistensi, Lembaga Pendidikan, Aceh*

Abstract

Aceh, as the region with the most absolute Muslim majority and the formal implementation of Islamic law in Indonesia, provides a unique context for studies on religious moderation. This study aims to explore the resistance strategies of Christian women in Aceh's educational institutions as an alternative lens to understand the dynamics of religious moderation. Framing the discussion within James C. Scott's theory of public and hidden transcripts and supported by functionalist perspectives, this research highlights the functional resistance of Christian women in asserting their religious identity

and their right to religious education. Utilizing a qualitative method with data gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation in Langsa and Banda Aceh, this study finds two forms of resistance: hidden resistance manifested in the veiling practices during the Sharia enforcement period and public resistance through open identity assertion and demands for religious education rights. These findings demonstrate that women, as social agents, play a crucial role in advancing religious moderation. The study recommends that governmental bodies, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs, formally recognize and empower women as key actors in promoting religious moderation across Indonesia.

Keywords: *Religious Moderation, Christian Women, Resistance, Educational Institutions, Aceh*

INTRODUCTION

Aceh, as an Indonesian region implementing Islamic law and possessing an almost absolute Muslim majority, represents a uniquely complex locus for the study of religious moderation. While religious moderation is commonly explored through the lens of Muslim-majority communities who try to accommodate minorities, preliminary data intriguingly reveal that the Christian minority, specifically the women, in Aceh have become active agents of moderation. Their struggles to assert religious identity and educational rights suggest a form of "functional resistance" that demands deeper investigation. This study specifically focuses on two significant educational centers, Langsa City and Banda Aceh, where minority Christian women's resistance against homogenizing pressures offers vital insights into religious coexistence under a Shari'a legal framework. Employing James C. Scott's "public transcript" and "hidden transcript" theories, combined with functionalism, the research highlights how these women's social actions contribute meaningfully to the broader project of religious moderation within a restrictive environment.

Religious moderation is traditionally framed as a mechanism for managing multicultural societies, yet Aceh's socio-religious landscape complicates this narrative. Despite national ideals advocating pluralism, Aceh's public educational institutions often present significant obstacles for Christian minorities, particularly women, in expressing religious identity and accessing faith-based education. Persistent challenges—such as conformity pressures manifested in dress codes and restrictions on religious instruction—underscore the friction between Aceh's rigid local norms and Indonesia's broader multicultural aspirations. However, incremental progress is observable: minority Christian women increasingly claim public spaces without religious assimilation, such as attending universities without the hijab. These developments signify that religious moderation in

Aceh, though distinctive, remains a dynamic and evolving phenomenon that warrants nuanced academic attention.

Although previous scholarship has engaged extensively with religious moderation and minority rights, significant gaps remain. Studies by Ni'am (2015), Nasir & Rijal (2021), and Parhan et al (2022) predominantly concentrate on mainstreaming religious moderation through Islamic institutions, neglecting the minority-majority dynamic. Similarly, research by Ansor & Amri (2020) on Christian minorities in Aceh provides valuable sociological insights but stops short of situating these struggles within the discourse of religious moderation. This article addresses these gaps by examining how the resistance efforts of Christian women constitute functional contributions to religious moderation. Thus, this study seeks to bridge the conceptual divide between minority resistance and religious moderation discourse in Indonesia, with particular attention to localized manifestations in Aceh.

Theoretically, this study draws upon James C. Scott's framework of "hidden transcripts" and "public transcripts," which elucidates the ways subordinate groups express dissent, either covertly or overtly, against dominant structures. Furthermore, it integrates functionalism theory to analyze how these acts of resistance serve broader social purposes, specifically the promotion of religious coexistence. The use of Scott's theoretical lens is particularly pertinent given Aceh's hierarchical religious context, where overt and covert forms of resistance dynamically interact. Functionalism underscores how even minor acts of defiance contribute to maintaining societal equilibrium by allowing space for minority identity assertion amidst systemic pressure. This dual-theoretical approach ensures a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the role of Christian women's resistance in fostering religious moderation in Acehnese educational institutions.

This research aims to achieve two major objectives. First, it seeks to explore how Christian women in Acehnese educational institutions engage in resistance to assert their religious identities, particularly through phases of hidden and public resistance. Second, it aims to analyze how these resistance efforts contribute to the broader project of religious moderation in Aceh. By focusing on these objectives, the study responds to the paucity of research connecting minority resistance with religious moderation initiatives in Shari'a-based contexts. Ultimately, the study aspires to illuminate how localized, grassroots efforts among marginalized communities can meaningfully reshape the contours of religious tolerance and coexistence in settings otherwise dominated by rigid orthodoxy.

The core argument proposed is that Christian women's resistance in Acehese educational institutions represents a critical, though underrecognized, driver of religious moderation. Through qualitative research involving interviews, observations, and documentation, the study identifies two key dimensions of resistance: (1) the assertion of religious identity in public educational spaces, and (2) the struggle to obtain religious education aligned with personal faith. Supporting data, including personal narratives from figures like Eva Ratu Gea and Dista Br. Tambunan, illustrate how these women navigate structural limitations while embodying functional social roles that promote inclusivity and tolerance. Such findings reveal that religious moderation is not solely top-down but can emerge organically from minority-led initiatives within contested public spheres.

The significance of this study extends beyond Aceh's local context. It challenges the universalist assumptions often embedded in religious moderation discourse by highlighting how local cultural and political conditions shape the possibilities and limits of pluralism. In doing so, it argues for a more contextually sensitive understanding of religious moderation, one that appreciates both majority accommodations and minority resistances. For policymakers, religious educators, and scholars, this study offers critical insights into the agency of minority women as active agents of moderation, emphasizing the need for inclusive, gender-sensitive, and locally grounded approaches to promoting interfaith coexistence across Indonesia and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

The unit of analysis in this study focuses on the resistance of Christian women in educational institutions in Aceh as an expression of religious moderation. Examining the experiences of minority groups in a region governed by Islamic law provides a critical lens for understanding the dynamics of religious diversity in Indonesia. Religious minorities often face challenges in accessing their basic rights, particularly in education (Ansor, 2014; Ansor & Amri, 2020). Therefore, selecting the phenomenon of Christian women's resistance addresses an important gap in the scholarly discussion about religious moderation from the minority's perspective. This study highlights that the contestation between dominant cultural-religious values and minority rights in education has broader implications for national pluralism. The focus on Christian women is especially relevant, considering their double minority status—both religious and gender-based—which uniquely positions them to reveal the subtle mechanisms of marginalization and agency.

Consequently, analyzing this unit allows the study to uncover new insights into how religious moderation can be advanced through the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical design to explore and interpret the realities of Christian women's resistance in Acehese educational institutions. A qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate for capturing the depth of human experiences, social interactions, and contextual factors surrounding the issue (Moleong, 1990). The qualitative descriptive model enables a rich portrayal of phenomena as they occur naturally without manipulation, thus preserving the authenticity of the informants' narratives. Furthermore, the analytical component of the design ensures that empirical data collected through fieldwork is systematically processed to reveal underlying patterns and meanings. This design is crucial because it allows the study to trace the trajectory of resistance, both hidden and apparent, as Christian women navigate systemic educational barriers. In practice, the study progresses through stages of direct engagement with informants, meticulous field observations, and detailed document analysis, adhering to high standards of qualitative rigor and trustworthiness.

The primary sources of information for this study consist of in-depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis concerning Christian women's experiences in Langsa City and Banda Aceh. Informants were selected purposively to ensure that participants possess firsthand knowledge of resistance practices within educational settings (Sugiyono, 2009). In addition to interviews with Eva Ratu Gea, an alumna of a state university in Banda Aceh, and Mrs. Dista Br. Tambunan, an elementary school teacher in Langsa, observed that notes and institutional documents were analyzed to triangulate the findings. The combination of different sources strengthens the credibility of the research by providing multiple perspectives on the phenomena studied. Furthermore, sourcing data from diverse mediums—verbal testimonies, social behaviors, and formal documentation—enables a holistic understanding of the intricate socio-cultural processes at play. By systematically integrating these sources, the study captures a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of Christian women's resistance as a pathway toward religious moderation.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and documentation analysis, which are suitable techniques for qualitative inquiry (Miles & Huberman, 2010). Interviews allowed participants to narrate their

experiences freely, offering insights into personal and collective acts of resistance. Observations were made in educational settings to capture non-verbal expressions of identity assertion and social interactions indicative of hidden or open resistance. Relevant documents, such as school policies, meeting records, and national education regulations, were also examined to contextualize and validate interview data. This triangulated method ensures the depth, validity, and reliability of the data, as recommended in qualitative research standards. The stages of data collection involved initial rapport-building with informants, recording narratives, systematic note-taking during observations, and the careful gathering of documents. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were rigorously observed throughout the data collection process to uphold academic integrity and protect participant rights.

Data analysis employed a three-stage qualitative interpretive approach: restatement, description, and interpretation, as proposed by (Miles & Huberman, 2010). In the restatement phase, interview transcripts, observational notes, and document contents were systematically coded and categorized to identify relevant patterns and themes. The description stage involved organizing these themes into coherent narratives that reveal the forms and dynamics of resistance. Interpretation was the final stage, wherein the researcher analyzed how Christian women's acts of resistance contribute to the broader project of religious moderation in Aceh. The interpretive analysis also explored underlying ideologies, social structures, and cultural tensions embedded within the resistance practices. The use of interpretive methodology is crucial because it moves beyond surface-level data to uncover deep-seated meanings and socio-political implications. Through iterative coding and reflective analysis, this study provides a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of the resilience and agency exhibited by Christian women in advancing religious moderation within a predominantly Islamic educational environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women and the Affirmation of Christian Identity

Recognition of everyone's identity is necessary to distinguish social groups in society. In several incidents, a situation is encountered where a group of people exists but is considered non-existent. Akhmad Siddiq, in his writings "Madurese Christian: In Search of Christian Identity within Muslim Society," notes that the assumption that Madurese

people are 100 percent Muslim while non-Muslims are not Madurese has unknowingly lost the identity of a group of Madurese who are Christians who have lived in Sumber Pakem, East Java. The cause of this loss of identity is due to the lack of interaction between the Muslim majority group and the Christian minority in Madura on the one hand and the distrust of the Christian minority group in Madura to assert their identity in the public sphere on the other hand (Siddiq, 2019). Perhaps the consideration of sociological risks is why the Christian minority in Madura does not dare to assert their identity, but this situation is not good to be maintained.

In the context of Muslim-Christian relations, an assertion of social identity is generally associated with women's groups. Of course, it will be difficult to distinguish between Muslim men and Christians in the male group. However, for women, because the headscarf is a symbol that is identified with Muslim women, the identification of Muslim-Christian women is not difficult, especially in societies where the rules for controlling their bodies are stringent. The phenomenon of controlling the body through the agenda of formalizing shari'a, as is the case in Aceh, is a separate segmentation of the manifestation of strengthening Islamic conservatism in Indonesia (Qodir et al., 2022; Sebastian & Nubowo, 2019). That means the strength of Islamic culture in Indonesia is not solely determined by moderate Islamic groups, as the mainstream. Aceh, for example, is a Muslim-majority area that is locally differentiated because it does not receive strong influence from mainstream Islam, such as NU and Muhammadiyah.

Even though Aceh is a Sharia area, the attitude of the Christian minority in Muslim-Christian relations there is not like that of the Madurese Christians, as stated above. The Acehnese Christian minority group has gone through a long phase in the context of asserting identity. Again, women are positioned as the instrument facilitating the Identification process between Muslim and Christian groups in Aceh. In this part of the article, the female figure becomes the actor highlighted in the struggle to affirm Christian identity in Aceh, especially in an atmosphere of upholding the formalization of Shari'a, which necessitates strict body discipline for women (Foucault, 1995).

Miss Dista Br. Tambunan, for example, is a 55 year-old teacher from North Sumatra at SD Negeri Alur Pinang Langsa Timur. Her long tenure in Langsa made her blend in more with the local population. She is fluent in the Aceh language, and her appearance is that of a stereotypical Muslim woman. If you exchange an Islamic greeting with her, she will answer the same greeting as if she was a local. You would not be able to

tell that she is actually Christian, since she dons a headscarf when she teaches. The simple house where she lives, located on the school complex shows her acclimation to Aceh society. In her own words, she says: "Batak people (referring to herself), when we arrive in Aceh we have to be able to become Acehnese ourselves (D. Tambunan, Interview, July 26, 2022).

Her habit of wearing the headscarf may be one way she can adapt to the local population. In the interview, she said: "Since I set foot in Langsa, I have been wearing the headscarf. Especially during the bad times in Aceh (such as the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka/GAM era), raids were everywhere, and I never removed my headscarf. Because I'm used to it, even though now in Langsa it's free for Christians not to wear the headscarf, it's hard for me to let go. That is precisely what I'm afraid of, if this headscarf is removed, people will look strange to me. Especially my students at school. I'm afraid no one will recognize me anymore" (D. Tambunan, Interview, July 26, 2022).

Like Bu Dista, Eva Ratu Gea did the same thing in Banda Aceh. She said in an interview, "When the city of Banda Aceh was full of with hijab raids, I always wore the headscarf everywhere. But when public spaces began to be inclusive for people who were not wearing the headscarf, I immediately returned to my original identity as a Christian woman who does not wearing the hijab. I do this to show my alignment with the importance of affirming the identity of each social group. Behaving like a Muslimah is a hypocrisy that Christian women should not do in Aceh. Moreover, this action is detrimental to themselves as Christians and Muslims because they cannot distinguish between Muslim women and Christian women" (E. R. Gea, Interview, June 16, 2022).

Suppose we link the statements of the two female respondents above with James C. Scott's resistance theory (Scott, 2000). In that case, it can be concluded that the resistance pattern of Christian women in Aceh in asserting identity is divided into two phases, first, the hidden transcript resistance phase that occurs during the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and several years after. The phenomenon of "Salib di Balik Jilbab" (The Cross Beneath the headscarf) in Ansor's research (Ansor, 2013), or other terms he uses, the term "Seperti Beragama Lain" (Like Another Religion) or Ansor (2016) is a concrete example of how the Christian minority still maintains its Christian identity hidden even in public areas where they wear headscarves. Second, the phase of public transcript occurred in the contemporary Aceh era, namely in the last ten years. Especially

in the last five years, several cases that occurred during raids demonstrated the courage of the Christian minority in asserting their Christian identity openly.

This can be witnessed in several public spaces, such as of schools and universities in Aceh. At the University of Ocean (UNSAM), the author observed that Christian female students who were who did not wear wearing headscarves were able to move freely passing by. Their expressions were normal. Even though their appearance differs from that of Muslim students who incidentally wear the hijab, they don't feel ashamed or insecure about themselves. Not infrequently, the author also finds them walking to campus together with female students in headscarves, telling stories while occasionally joking around. The courage of minorities to carry out open resistance in asserting this identity is an advance in the progress of tolerance in the land of Shari'a, Aceh. This simultaneously emphasizes that the future of religious tolerance or moderation in Indonesia cannot only be realized by affirming the wisdom of the majority group but also requires resistance from minority groups, both in the form of hidden transcripts and public transcripts. In a society with an absolute majority like Aceh, the absence of resistance will open space for the domination of a wider superordinate group, thereby disrupting the existence of subordinate groups. This model can also be applied in other areas in Indonesia where the majority of adherents of certain religions are absolute, such as North Tapanuli Regency, where the majority are Christians Christians. The struggle for the right to study religion alone.

When referring to the three theories of religious education, as stated by Seymour (1997) and Rukiyanto et al (2024) namely in the well (learning one's religion), at the well (learning other religions), and beyond the well (cooperation between religious adherents in the context of upholding justice, peace, and social harmonization), the problematic of religious education in Indonesia according to M. Agus Nuryatno is because it is dominated by the first model, namely in the healthy (Nuryatno, 2011). In fact, in a plural society like Indonesia, according to him, the proper implementation of religious education is beyond the well: an education that leads to the meeting of universal inter-religious values that is produced to fight common enemies, namely corruption, poverty, ignorance, discrimination, and other crimes. However, it is different from Aceh, especially among the Christian minority, who find it challenging to get their religious education (in the well). Few have to volunteer to study other people's religions (at the well) without learning their religion (in the well).

Parents are the most disappointed figure in accepting this fact. Parents are willing to let their children go to school, of course, with the belief that they will not only be taught general sciences but also receive religious education at their respective schools. Through religious education, they believe that their children will become human beings who are strong in faith and have noble character. However, when the opposite reality occurs, where their children receive religious education that is not in line with their religion, it raises strong concerns for parents about religious conversions among their children. This situation seems unfair, especially after it was emphasized in the 2003 National Education System Law Article 12 concerning the obligation to receive religious education according to each religion's teachings and taught by teachers of the same religion.

However, Raihani (2016) in his writing entitled *Minority Right to Attend Religious Education in Indonesia* also states that there is a possibility of a discrepancy between the ideals contained in the law and the reality that occurs in the public sphere of education in Indonesia. In general, this ideal is practiced in many areas of Indonesia, but in certain areas, certain groups' rights to religious education are often neglected. Ruhaini's study of four cases highlighting religious education in schools for minorities shows the vulnerability of micro and macro minorities to discrimination by the majority group. Three of the four cases studied experienced disturbances, especially regarding learning facilities at school. Some groups among the minorities in the school are powerless to carry out resistance and struggle for rights. However, one case shows the opposite situation, where the majority group is subordinated (Raihani, 2016).

The study that the author conducted in Aceh, where the research locus focused on three cities, namely Langsa, Lokaumawe, and Banda Aceh, showed that religious education for minorities was not adequately provided in the three public universities and schools in the three cities. Christian minority groups in the three cities are faced with two choices: to study religion from the pastor at their respective churches or to attend Islamic religious education like other Muslims. Of course, there is no better choice between the two options. However, studying with a priest and getting religious value from him is at least not as bad as the first choice. Historically, the second option emerged recently following the struggle for the rights of minority groups. Charles Taylor said this situation requires what is called political recognition of the rights of groups that are powerless, which is caused by misrecognition or non-recognition of this group so that there is the potential for oppression, subordination, and discrimination against them (Taylor, 2021).

If Ansor (2014) in his writing *Being Women in the Land of Shari'a: Politics of the Female Body, Piety and Resistance in Langsa, Aceh*, using hidden transcript theory James Scott found hidden transcripts of women against efforts to control the body in Langsa, Aceh, this paper finds that there is a public transcript from, borrowing Scott's explanation, namely between subordinate class groups to superordinate class groups (Scott, 1987, 2000) regarding the implementation of religious education following their respective religions. Even more interesting is that this resistance was driven by a Christian woman from North Sumatra named Eva Ratu Gea. Among the Christian students who attended a state university in Banda Aceh, Eva Ratu Gea was the only person who dared to take the unpopular route to protest, demanding the right to religious education openly. Eva Ratu Gea as a Christian student at a state university in Banda Aceh, told how she fought for minority rights on the campus.

"Ketika itu saya gerah melihat umat Kristen kok harus belajar agama Islam di kampus. Tidak ada satupun diantara teman-teman Kristen yang berani untuk protes. Saya tau, batin mereka juga merasakan yang sama dengan saya. Tetapi karena mereka minoritas di kampung orang, mereka lebih memilih sikap diam. Namun saya tidak mau seperti mereka. Saya memberanikan diri untuk melakukan protes di kampus. Ia melayangkan surat protes dan melakukan komunikasi interpersonal dengan berbagai pemangku jabatan di kampus, termasuk para dosen. Ternyata setelah saya komunikasikan dengan beberapa dosen, diantara mereka ada juga yang memberikan support (dukungan). Berkat itu pula, meskipun kami belum mendapatkan pendidikan agama sesuai agama masing-masing dan diajarkan oleh guru yang seagama, setidaknya kami tidak lagi diwajibkan untuk belajar agama Islam. Belajar ke pendeta di gereja merupakan salah satu pilihan alternatif ketika itu. Bahkan saya juga pernah melakukan protes terhadap pemberlakuan kewajiban kemampuan baca alquran kepada non muslim yang dilakukan oleh pihak UP3I di kampus tersebut. Dalam proses perjuangan ini, saya mengalami rintangan yang sangat berat. Saya tidak peduli dengan berbagai resiko yang akan saya terima. Syukurnya, apa yang saya perjuangkan berhasil, meskipun belum maksimal" (E. R. Gea, personal communication, June 16, 2022).

In James C. Scott's theory of resistance, what Eva fought for can be categorized as public transcript (Scott, 2000). This can be seen from the attitude of Eva Ratu Gea, who carried out systemic and formalistic resistance, involved other people, especially officeholders, was oriented towards change, and was of national and public interest. The movement may only be carried out individually. Still, many parties can feel the implications, not only the Muslim minority in Aceh but also Muslim authorities who align with the spirit of the National Education System Law Number 20 of 2003. Why? Because

there are not a few Muslim groups who want the full fulfillment of the rights of Christian minorities in Muslim-majority areas.

In the context of state policy, the recent agenda of revitalizing religious moderation is relevant to the act of resistance championed by Eva Ratu Gea above. On the political aspect, Alvian & Ardhani (2023) considers the use of moderation discourse by the ruling regime (President Joko Widodo) to weaken the influence of Islamists who are political rivals, so that challenges can be neutralized and their political strength increased. However, religious moderation in this discussion is understood as a religious attitude that maintains a balance between practicing one's religion (exclusive) with respect for different religious practices and beliefs (inclusive). This attitude is a middle way that prevents falling into excessive reactions and attitudes such as extremism, fanaticism, and revolutionism in the practice of religious teachings. In other words, the religious moderation referred to in this case is a solution in responding to the two extreme poles of religion: between ultraconservative or right-wing on the one hand, and liberal on the extreme left-wing on the other side (Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementrian Agama RI, 2021: 18).

Because religious moderation in the Islamic context is also seen as a pure concept that shows the substance of Islamic teachings, such as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (grace to all of nature), then Muslim-majority areas like Aceh, for example, are the most comfortable home for non-Muslims. The theological evidence of Islamic tolerance towards other religions that is undeniable is the narrative *lakum dinukum waliyadin* (for you your religion and me my religion) in the Koran (Sura al-kafirun) which, according to Quraish Shihab, emphasizes the prohibition on attempts to compromise between religions and not to disturb fellow believers (Shihab, 2004). Not to mention the historical facts at the time of the Prophet when he visited Medina. He found the community there in a plural form (Muslims, non-Muslims, and Jews) (Mubarakfuri, 2002). But the Prophet built a peace agreement with them during his leadership. Even the communities built at that time were community built at that time was very tolerant and cooperative with each other (Al-Usairy, 2003).

The classic reason for the absence of Christian religious teachers in Aceh cannot be used as a basis for not implementing religious education according to students' religion. Especially if it is based on the reasons for undermining the faith of Muslims and the missionary agenda, these concerns seem excessive and not in line with Islamic teachings. At least three reasons require the Government to provide religious teachers for minorities

in majority areas such as Aceh. First, implementing religious education according to students' religion is a mandate of the law, which must be carried out without exception. Second, one of the manifestations of religious moderation in educational institutions in Indonesia is the provision of to provide religious education according to their religion for all religious groups. While the third, Islam, isas the majority religion in Indonesia, it opens up space for accommodation for minority rights. Based on these three things, the central government opened a special route for appointing non-Muslim religious teacher civil servants in Aceh, or conversely, the appointment of Islamic religious teacher civil servants in non- Muslim majority areas without waiting for submissions from the regions.

Women as Moderation Agents

Conceptually, religious moderation is not fully understood by the people of Indonesia. However, efforts to mainstream it have been felt in recent years, especially directly commanded by the Ministry of Religion. Muhammad Nasir and Muhammad Khairul Rijal mentioned that there was an agenda for mainstreaming religious moderation in several universities in Indonesia. One of the things that the two of them highlighted the most was the substance of the curriculum, which is eclectic in nature by emphasizing the values of religious moderation, such as tolerance, national commitment, accommodating to local culture, and non-violence (Nasir & Rijal, 2021).

These four values are also the main values in the concept of religious moderation, which the Ministry of Religion resonates with. At least these four values serve as indicators and parameters in measuring the practice of religious moderation in various places and regions. The first is a national commitment, for example, to see what forms of loyalty a community has toward national consensus. Second, how to measure tolerance through attitudes of openness, inclusiveness, voluntarism, and acceptance of differences. This tolerance is a very important value to emphasize because Indonesia is multicultural and promotes democratic values. The derivative of this tolerance will be seen in how the nation's citizens accept other people who are different because of differences in ethnicity, religion, race, and customs. The third is how to see forms of accommodation towards the local religious traditions of a society. In other words, something can be called moderate if it is friendly toward local religious traditions. Meanwhile, the fourth is how to minimize the attitude of religious extremism, which gives rise to radical actions such as the movement to change the socio-political order of the country instantly towards a religious state. Radicalism displayed can be verbal, physical, and mental (Tim Penyusun, 2019).

There is nothing more to debate about the concept of religious moderation. In Islam itself, religious moderation has a strong backing in Wasatiyah Islamic terminology. This term is very emphatically mentioned by Allah in the Qur'an Surah al-Baqarah verse 143: "Thus we make you ummatan wasatan." The meaning of ummatan wasatan in this verse is the middle line or religious balance, without any extreme religious understanding and practice. The agenda for revitalizing religious moderation or Wasatiyah Islam has the right momentum amidst the strong stigma spread by the West that Islam is synonymous with radicalism and extremism. In other words, the agenda of religious moderation in Islam wants to reaffirm that Islam is not as alleged. On the contrary, Islam is a religion that is peaceful, friendly, and rahmatan l'alamin (a mercy to all of nature) (Helmy et al., 2021; Zainuddin & Esha, 2016).

But the problem is not that simple. There are still many internal Muslims who do not fully understand it. Not even a few are antipathy. So, it is necessary to socialize deeper and wider with a simple narrative so that it is easy for the public to understand. Presumably, based on the results of the research above, using functionalism theory, the gene group that is more functional in the role of carrying out the agenda of religious moderation is women, both as a minority and majority group, in the portion of resistance and socialization. There are at least four reasons why women are more effective in carrying out their functions in the agenda of religious moderation.

First, the intensity of interpersonal communication for women is higher than for men. An evolutionary biologist from the University of Oxford named Robin Dunbar observed 30 men and women ranging from children to adults. His observations, presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Boston, Massachusetts, say that hanging out at cafes has serious implications for male friendship reactions. In contrast to women who maintain the intensity of communication or the frequency of communication among themselves (el Ishaq, 2021). That means that the intensity of communication of religious moderation, both in the form of resistance and socialization, will be more effective if left to women rather than men. Second, women's voices are louder than men's in demanding or voicing their rights. Even in contemporary political dynamics in Indonesia, especially the last two elections, it shows that *"the power of emak-emak"* is a political force that is very calculated and reckoned with. Third, women have exoticism that men don't have. Evidently, in today's social media era, influencers are dominated by women. Because the work of religious moderation is an effort to influence

the public, women are the frontline agents. Not only female influencers from religious figures, but female influencers in general need to be packaged so that interesting content regarding religious moderation is provided. Meanwhile, fourthly, because women have so far been positioned as a "soft social group", the risk of resistance to various resistance movements carried out by women will be very small. So, placing women as agents of religious moderation will minimize the risk of resistance.

Men have been associated as a social group that is brave, mighty, and a symbol of virility, while women are synonymous with gentleness so hard work is addressed only to men; it turns out this is no longer true in the present era. This is because, in terms of quantity, women have not only increased in entering male areas, but they can also compete with these men. Professions such as the military and police, construction workers, loading and unloading workers, pedicab drivers, motorcycle taxi drivers, and parking attendants are mostly filled by women. In the world of education, the number of women has also increased, including in Islamic educational institutions (Kull, 2012).

On the scale of Aceh, the role of women in socio-political life cannot be doubted. Since the pre-independence era, Acehnese women have been involved in fighting for the independence of this country. Cut Nyak Dien, for example, is an Acehnese warrior whose name is well-recorded in the history of heroism in the archipelago. Even in portraits of contemporary Aceh, women often adorn the socio-political public space. Banda Aceh itself was led by a female mayor named Illiza Sa'aduddin Djamal. City public spaces in Langsa and Banda Aceh show the participation of women in various professional activities, including parking attendants. This shows that Acehnese women are not figures of antiques mirrored in their respective homes. On the contrary, they often operate as engines of sociology and change. So what Eva Ratu Gea did as a representative of the Christian minority group inspired the spirit of progressive Acehnese women.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research reveal that in a region where Islamic law is implemented, such as Aceh, Christian women have emerged as functional actors in advocating for minority rights within educational institutions. Field research conducted in Langsa and Banda Aceh demonstrated that resistance manifested in two distinct phases: the hidden and public transcripts. During the period of strict religious policing, Christian women were compelled to conceal their identities by adopting Islamic dress codes. In contrast, the

contemporary public educational sphere in Aceh increasingly witnesses Christian women asserting their identity openly without the hijab. Furthermore, the struggle to claim the right to religious instruction according to their faith has intensified, as exemplified by Eva Ratu Gea's efforts at a state university in Banda Aceh. These forms of resistance highlight the strategic agency of Christian women in challenging dominant religious norms. Although based on limited informants, the findings effectively capture the broader pattern of minority assertion and contribute to a richer understanding of the dynamics of religious moderation in Acehnese educational settings.

This study contributes significantly to the discourse on religious moderation by shifting the analytical lens toward minority resistance as a constructive force. By revealing that religious moderation is not solely a top-down initiative but is also driven by the marginalized, particularly women, the study expands the conventional understanding of moderation practices. It challenges the universalist assumptions embedded in state-centered religious moderation programs and emphasizes cultural locality's influence in shaping such initiatives' outcomes. In the broader academic landscape, these findings fill an important gap in research on the interplay between minority rights, gender, and religious moderation in predominantly Islamic societies. Moreover, the study underscores the need for inclusive frameworks that recognize and empower minority voices as integral to achieving sustainable religious harmony. By highlighting women's pivotal role, it also contributes to feminist perspectives in religious studies, enriching the conceptualization of agency and resilience within minority communities.

Despite its important insights, this research is limited by its small sample size and the focus on only two urban centers, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of Christian women across Aceh. Consequently, future studies are needed that engage larger and more varied samples across rural and urban contexts to capture a fuller picture of religious moderation practices. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how resistance strategies evolve in response to shifting socio-political dynamics. Based on these findings, it is recommended that policymakers, especially within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, develop initiatives that empower women across all religious communities as facilitators of moderation efforts. Strengthening grassroots movements through gender-inclusive approaches would enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of religious moderation programs in Aceh and beyond. Ultimately, recognizing minority women as

key agents of religious harmony offers a transformative pathway toward a more inclusive and resilient multicultural society in Indonesia.

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