The tough slog of a moderate religious state: Highly educated Muslims and the problem of intolerance in Indonesia

This study aims to analyse the perspectives of Muslim students on pluralism and freedom of religion, as well as the worship place establishments, holy book assessments and practices of other religions. This study uses a cohort-based quantitative method through data collection, interviews and documentation, which involves 1300 respondents from 13 state Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. In order to collect information from the respondents, this research uses an online questionnaire. It also conducts online interviews to directly confirm the information obtained from the questionnaire. This research discovers that Muslim students are tolerant in accepting plurality and religious diversity, yet intolerant in the holy book assessment, place of worship establishments and practices of other religions.

Contribution: This study contributes towards developing a persuasive concept concerning religious moderation, commenced by analysing socio-theological perspectives of highly educated society.

Keywords: religious moderation; plurality; intolerance; persecution; religious actions.

Introduction

A number of Muslim students from state Islamic colleges in Indonesia were reported to be involved in some intolerant actions against minority groups (Muryana 2017) even though the colleges where they study declare themselves as the advocates of religious moderation. Some of the students even became the instigators of the persecution against academic and religious activities of minority groups.

In this light, this research attempts to answer the following question: Is the intolerant acts and persecution against minority groups conducted by Muslim students related to their religious perspectives? Human perspectives heavily influence their action whether in creating or solving a problem (Gross 2017), while religious perspectives are not mere mental and cognitive constructions but also a decision-making process of a planned action (Buzdar, Ali & Tariq 2015).

The relationship between religion and highly educated society has been studied by various scholars. Dawsey (1999:87) traced the root of religion for higher education in the United States of America, which is linked with: (1) religious marginalisation in American higher education, (2) Protestant doctrines adhered to by universities, (3) scientific-based learning, which replaces the classic model and (4) the re-emergence of religion in American higher education. Meanwhile, Golan and Fehl (2020) conducted research that focused on an ultra-orthodox student community, which integrates modernity through academic knowledge gain.

Simut (2019:141–155) conducted a study, which starts with the question of whether and how theology and religious teachings in higher education institutions are able to give a positive contribution towards the development of humanity. Simut (2019:141–155) assessed the constructive role of theology and religion when the subjects are taught in an open and critical manner of education. Simut (2019:141–155) argued that there is a correlation between theology and a wide spectrum of aspects (such as pluralism, hermeneutics, globalisation and public participation) with the purpose of identifying economic and constructive methods in which theology and religion can contribute towards the development of society. Simut (2019:141–155) focused on the West’s contribution in educational reformation in order to identify the advisability of arguments supporting tertiary theology and religious education. He ends it with a critical evaluation from a perspective dominated by the West. Simut’s (2019:141–155) focus on the analysis of the practical application of theology and religion in various local contexts is based on...
the implementation of an updated university curriculum, which has an aim of developing society’s economy in general.

Brown (2013) completed a study on university chaplaincy, which he claims to gain little-to-no attention in discussions about roles of religion in secular universities. His research seeks to build a contextual theology based on the understanding about the roles of religion in a secular university environment. Brown (2013) used a discourse analysis by correlating the latest policy documents and reports from the government, higher education sector and the church, with the basic understanding of university management about the roles of religion in a secular higher education. Brown’s findings (2013) revealed that although there are a few mentions of chaplaincy outside of the church’s document, a secular university is a complex fusion between secularity and plurality themes with religion in university, which the managerial process increasingly understands simply and superficially. Through historical narration and contemporary analysis, Brown (2013) builds a typology for contemporary responses regarding spirituality.

Meanwhile, Khandai, Bajpai and Agarwal (2014:521–534) researched the influence of religion towards consumptive behaviours in society. Khandai argued that religion influences almost every aspect of human society; hence, it deeply shapes the social perception, worldview and behaviour.

Stevenson (2012) wrote a dissertation on actual experiences of religious students, a topic which is often neglected in many debates concerning fundamentalism in college and university roles in improving the cohesion of its communities. The design of her dissertation is to develop conceptual and theoretical understandings on the social and academic experiences of religious students in British secular higher education. Using a narrative inquiry approach, she interviewed 15 students from Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh backgrounds on their social and academic experiences during their first year in college post-1992. She analyses the data from the respondents based on the approaches of religion, class, sex and race, along with Bourdieu’s ideas. Stevenson’s research provides novel insights into the relational nature of religion, methods of interaction among habitus and reflectivity manifested by religious students in their daily lives. This research also addresses the necessity to put religion into an acknowledged social category in order to conceptualise other people’s religions exclusively.

Jiang (2021:32–47) conducted a study at a predominantly white university in the United States of America towards international students on racism, xenophobia and ostracism. This ethnographic study examines how Chinese students negotiate a predominantly white Midwestern University in the era of re-emerging racism and Trump’s revival of American nationalism. This study reveals the persistence of whiteness ideology and cultural-based exclusion, which are not only racist towards foreign students but also engage with them in order to perpetuate white supremacy. This study also uses the approach of transnational construction, which highlights China’s ideology on anti-Blackness and Han ethnocentrism as the powerful reason, which pushes Chinese students to isolate themselves from black and Asian-American communities.

Sarapli (2021) wrote a book that portrays the contemporary condition of Turkey under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). The party forces religion to be the essential element of Turkish national identity. The higher education system, which should have functioned as a channel to promote changes, does not provide any significant contribution to give alternative perspectives. Using a historical background, this book analyses and interprets policies concerning education and decision-making in relation to political ideology.

Agang (2016:70–82) wrote a study entitled, ‘Christian Higher Education: The Gospel in the Context of Terrorism and Persecution.’ This study starts with a thesis which argues that education is the centre of civilisation, growth, development, security, stability and sustainability of any society, hence the priority of all societies. Christian Higher Education, according to Agang (2016:70–82), fulfills this need to prioritise based on the moral vision and perspective of God. Agang (2016:70–82) asserted that the chief purpose of education is to embed moral values, ethics and knowledge that guarantee the security and stability of society and to increase beneficial skills and probabilities for human progress. Agang’s focal analysis lays on the problem of Christian higher education in the contexts of insecurity and instability.

The studies mentioned here connect religion and the higher education system as a socio-education phenomenon (Padilla, Acosta & Perozo 2016:88–100), in which religion and higher education form a social phenomenon within a particular education society. In general, those studies only explore the social dynamics of religious students within their educational environments. They do not correlate the social behaviours of students with their religious perspectives in a more comprehensive spectrum, which implicate actions claimed to be based on religion, such as persecution towards minority groups.

This study fulfills the research gap left from the studies mentioned here, which is the analysis of Muslim students’ perspectives on plurality, religious differences, religious practice diversity and holy books, which factually affect their participations in a number of religious intolerance cases. This study contributes towards developing a persuasive concept concerning religious moderation, commenced by analysing socio-theological perspectives of highly educated society. It demonstrably outlines their perspectives apropos of the elements of religious moderation in order to assist the mitigation of socio-theological catastrophe caused by sacro-egoism (Knox 2016) in public spaces.
Research questions
The following three questions steer the discourse in this study:

- What are Muslim students’ perspectives on plurality and religious differences?
- What are Muslim students’ perspectives on the establishment of worship places of other religions?
- What are Muslim students’ perspectives on the holy books and religious practices of other religions?

Methods
Design
The study is an observational–analytical study that uses a cohort design as a particular study case in the form of sociological interpretation (Woźniak, Kossakowski & Nosal 2020:511–524) through direct observation and interaction. This study does not limit the analysis to one theoretical perspective or methodological tradition, but combines two different yet related approaches. The design of this study can be labelled as a critical sociological investigation (Arun 2018; Kuzubas 2020; Bani Gemis & Winaya 2020:247–256; Scherbina 2016:97–107) through employing a combined method of integrated qualitative and quantitative techniques (Caruth 2013:85–102; Galliott & Graham 2016:567–585; Lisle et al. 2017:406–442). The quantitative web-based survey result of this study is used as the point of departure for a more comprehensive elaboration using majorly qualitative data. Although online surveys have limitations and should not be entirely considered as representative (Hunter 2012; Schouten, Peytchev & Wagner 2018; Upadhya & Lipkovich 2020), this survey reflects the authentic state of respondents’ preferences.

The qualitative data are supported by the result of a quantitative online survey conducted towards students of state Islamic higher education institutions on Java and Kalimantan. This study conducted the online survey for 10 months, from February to November 2020. The locations of this survey are 13 state Islamic higher education institutions on Java and Kalimantan, namely UIN Bandung, UIN Jakarta, UIN Jogjakarta, UIN Semarang, UIN Surabaya, UIN Malang, UIN Banten, IAIN Cirebon, IAIN Pekalongan, IAIN Salatiga, UIN Antasari, IAIN Samarinda and IAIN Palangkaraya. The reason behind determining these 13 institutions as the research objects is because all of them include religious moderation as a strategic issue in their institutional governance, missions and educational process.

The quantitative data only allow some superficial insights (Merriam & Grenier 2019; Scheurman 2018; Toepoel 2017; Vehovar & Manfreda 2017); hence, this study also conducted direct interactions with respondents in the form of online interviews via social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram and e-mail. In addition, this study avails itself of various qualitative data collected during field works and various secondary resources, such as journal articles, reports and books. This variation of data mining allows a more profound interpretation.

Population and sample
The total number of population in this study is 217000 students, which is further categorised into two, viz. students from study programmes concerning Islamic studies and students from general study programmes. The final sample number of 1300 questionnaires is based on a stratified sampling from a database of 1400 questionnaires. The surveyed respondents were randomly and proportionally selected to represent 13 state Islamic higher education institutions. Respondent profile has two categories, namely sex and field of study. Meanwhile, there are two categories of colleges: State Islamic University (UIN) and State Islamic School (IAIN).

The determination of sample number used the application called Calculator Sample Size, in order to obtain a margin error of 3% and confidence level around 97%.

Instrument
The data collection instrument used was an online questionnaire via an application named Open Access Digital Research (OPADR), an online survey application designed by the Library Center of UIN Bandung. The survey category is a closed questionnaire, in which the questionnaire already provides answer choices for the respondents. The total number of questions in the questionnaire is 13. The questionnaire was distributed through WhatsApp and Telegram groups and e-mails of the respondents and coordinated by a number of volunteers from among lecturers, librarians and students.

Technique of data collection
The data collection of this survey used an electronic questionnaire where the data are collected through giving a series of written questions to the respondents to be answered in the form of online polling.

There are three reasons in determining online polling as the data collection technique. Firstly, the circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic only allow the data collection to be conducted online. Secondly, online polling is more convenient apropos of reaching the target respondents. Thirdly, online polling electronically reads the response percentage from the respondents instantly. As for confirmation and further inquiry are conducted through direct interviews via e-mail, phone, WhatsApp call and Telegram.

Technique of data analysis
This study uses descriptive statistics to illustrate the fundamental characteristics of its data. The received questionnaires are sorted by college, region, sex and field of study. The answer data collected from it are tabulated to obtain the percentage according to every question in order to
make description and conclusion. In the tabulation process, this study did not use a linear statistical analysis, but a descriptive statistical technique. Descriptive statistics allow researchers to measure and illustrate the fundamental characteristic of a data set. Consequently, descriptive statistics function was used as the pointer for data analysis that enable researchers to manage, simplify and summarise data. This study used a cross tabulation or two-way tabulation. It shows proportion units with different values for each of the two variables or proportion cells that represent the nature of respondents concerning religious perspectives.

Results and discussion

Plurality and religious differences

For this theme, the question asked to the respondents is, in your opinion is plurality the will of God? A total of 715 respondents agreed that plurality is the will of God, while 325 respondents disagreed and the other 260 respondents abstained by showing their unsureness (see Figure 1).

The chart in Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of various respondent answers. Fifty-five percent of the respondents perceive plurality as part of law of nature, which naturally occurs by the will of God and is not a product of personal design or influence from institutional social power. It demonstrates that the majority of the respondents accept plurality as an inevitable and constant social reality. Nature will always comprise a macrocosm of religions, ethnicities, genders and races (Birch 2018:85–102; Goossaert 2014; Hanson 2016). Based on further inquiries towards respondents, they defy a perspective that Cohen and Numbers refer as denomination: a tradition of singularity in religion (Cohen & Numbers 2013).

Twenty-five percent of the respondents reject the idea of plurality as the will of God even when it manifests as a social reality. In the perspective of these respondents, plurality is an illegal social entity. They regard religious plurality as having relation with human intervention for certain evil purposes. They form a pattern of homogeneity and radicalism (Burley 2020:311–331).

On the other hand, 20% of the respondents provide an unsure answer between plurality as the will of God or the opposite. These respondents choose a neutral position that creates an assumption that they are between supporters of homogeneity and supporters of plurality. Unfortunately, this study has not succeeded in estimating the silent data, which could demonstrate whether the neutral group accept or reject plurality. Information gathered from further inquiries towards 63 neutral respondents reveal that their reason of neutrality is the fear of being wrong, which may implicate the validity of their faith. They assess that the subject question is sensitive to their belief.

Religious diversity

When the respondents are specifically asked apropos of religious uniformity, the majority asserts that humanity does not have to be uniformed in terms of faith (see Figure 2). Humans have a free space to choose and hold different beliefs from one another. The majority affirms that religious uniformity is not necessary.

Figure 2 charts the perspective of respondents who leans towards moderation in terms of religious diversity. The respondents do not compel humanity to have a uniform faith and allow the freedom to be different. During the confirmation process, several respondents stem their perspective from a teaching in the 18th chapter of their holy book, Al-Kahf verse 29, whereas several others refer to the code of human rights (Jefferies 2000:885; Polyenopoulou 2018; Schmidt & Falk 2020; Sterkens & Ziebertz 2018).

Colleagues with different faith

The survey result reveals that the majority of the respondents has colleagues from different religions. A total of 353 respondents admit to have formed friendship with people.
with different faith, whereas 144 respondents state that they do not have friends with different faith and the rest 10 respondents abstain (see Figure 3).

Based on the given data distribution, interactions between respondents and people from different religions are common. It leads to a presumption that those interactions may influence their perspectives towards various aspects. The contiguity with people with different faith induces a complex effect within themselves (Hermisson, Gochyyev & Wilson 2019:371–387; Sanchez & Gilbert 2016:313–333). Another set of data proves this notion where it reveals respondents’ perception towards people from different religions. A total of 1105 respondents perceive them positively, while 65 respondents see them negatively, and 30 respondents choose to abstain (see Figure 4).

The percentage in Figure 4 demonstrates that the potential of religious tolerance is high among students at state Islamic higher education institutions on Java and Kalimantan. The majority perceives people from different religions positively. On the other hand, the potential of radicalism and anti-diversity among the students is around 5%. Although the number doesn’t exceed 6%, but these students have the potential to influence other students by using the knowledge learned from the higher education system they undergo. Radicalism emerging from highly educated society is more dangerous (Gearon 2017) than that emerging from other communities because it interconnects with argumentations of their action (Matias 2020:250–262).

The rightness of other religions

In the concern of evaluating the rightness of other religions, the majority of the respondents perceive that other religions are wrong. The number amounts to 527 respondents (see Figure 5). The majority corroborates their belief on the basis of verse 19 in the third chapter of Quran, chapter Ali Imran, which reads that the only religion acknowledged by God is Islam. The reason of formulating their reasoning based on a Quran verse is because the holy book has a powerful influence in shaping their perception towards other religions. On the other hand, 357 respondents perceive that other religions are right. The majority of them who claim so reason that other religions stem from the same God. The number of respondents who abstain in this topic is relatively high, viz. 416 students. Based on the confirmation process and further inquiries, these respondents argue that the question concerns the realm of aqida (Islamic creed); hence, they answer the question with caution. They believe that they are spared from making a mistake apropos of the religious creed by choosing not to give any assessment towards other religions.

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The given data distribution confirms the findings of other scholars who proclaim that when an individual accepts a particular religion or belief system, consequently he will only accept the rightness of his own religion and reject others (Hofmeister 2012; Schrijvers 2016; Szatkowski 2018). The data also affirm that the consequence of embracing a belief means to be resolute about it and not give any space to accept the rightness of other beliefs. Through confirmations with several respondents who perceive other religions as wrong, a perspective comes to surface that the
validity of the creed and the purity of tawhid, or the sole true God as the core of the creed, are interconnected with the rejection of other religions.

The distribution of respondents’ institutions
Table 1 shows that the respondents’ institutions are divided into two forms of higher education institutions, namely universities and high schools. The respondents on the island of Java mostly come from universities, while the number of respondents from high schools is less.

Sample distribution based on sex and field of study
Table 2 shows that the respondents are divided into two, namely male and female. No third gender was involved in this survey. These two categories of respondents have their own characteristics, which affect their perspective on religion. Men are more likely to be moderate than women. The scientific background of the respondents were divided into two, those who with scientific backgrounds and those with religious backgrounds. These two backgrounds also have an influence on their religious perspectives.

Assessment towards the practices of other religions
The answer categories for the topic of assessment on the practices of other religions splits into three: believing, unbelieving and abstain. The answer with the highest frequency from respondents is that they do not believe in the practices of other religions. The percentage shows that 53.1% of the respondents claim that the practices of other religions are wrong after having been asked. Only 13.9% of the respondents answer that the practices are right, while the number of people who abstain amounts to 33% (see Table 3).

Table 3 reveals significant information regarding how high the number of respondents who abstain is. After confirming with the respondents, there are two different reasons behind their response. Firstly, 46% of the abstained respondents claim that they never learn the teachings of other religions. Secondly, 54% respondents asserted that they have no desire to involve themselves in the assessment apropos of other religions; hence, they chose to stay neutral. Meanwhile, when the respondents from unbelieving cluster were confirmed, they reason that the teaching in their religion obligates them to regard other religions as wrong.

The findings validate that intolerance is still thriving in society. Few members of society attempt to understand other religions in terms of their teachings; hence, they lack the instrument necessary to assess other religions objectively. The right or wrong assessment towards other religions does not stem from objective knowledge but assumptions and stereotypes (Strübind, Joachim & Henning 2019:6–8; Pavlopec 2020). As a component of religious awareness, stereotypes play significant roles in shaping relationships between humans and the world surrounding them. Religious stereotypes influence an individual’s awareness to be a part of a religious community yet also force him or her to perceive other religions subjectively (Sigalow & Fox 2014:416–431; Temmerman 2020). In the evolution of society, religious stereotypes may emerge, develop and disappear. Stereotypes do not materialise from personal experiences but from the process of socialisation shaped by the individual’s external factors. Often times the formation of a religious stereotype occurs without the knowledge of the individual, so it receives acceptance as a continuous standard dominating his own awareness. The information contained within stereotypes must be understood as features from a particular event, phenomenon or figure related to an individual experience (Bopêteko & Boreiko 2016).

Attitude towards worship place establishments of other religions
The next data demonstrate that 56% of the respondents agree with the establishment of other religions’ places of worship in their neighborhood, while 41% of the respondents disagree and 13% abstain (see Figure 6).
Figure 6 reveals that the bar of respondents who disagree with the establishment of other religions’ places of worship looms near that of respondents who agree, with only 2% difference. Hence, it is difficult for the data to confirm the majority’s perspective because the percentage between those who agree and disagree is on the threshold of margin error. Therefore, the tendency of respondents who abstain to agree or disagree cannot be estimated with certainty. The data provide an indication that the potential of intolerance concerning the establishment of other religions’ worship places is still tremendous. The percentage of respondents who disagree is relatively high; therefore, it has the potential to influence the opinions or behaviours of other individuals and to form an intolerant culture, as predicted by several scholars of inter-religious relations (Arifianto 2017:241–264; Chaniﬁah & Mustapa 2016:413–422; McCoy 2013:275–316). In the past several years, Indonesia is experiencing an increase of majoritarianism, a revival of hardline Muslim groups (among them are highly educated individuals) that exert tremendous efforts to force conservative values in public life. In many cases, their agenda achieve relatively great success, such as in obstructing the establishments of worship places of minorities, dismissing religious studies, seminars, discussions, etc. This condition incites a growing fear for the future of human rights, especially the rights of minority groups. The existence of pluralism, which is guaranteed by constitution, is endangered (Lindsey & Pausacker 2016).

**Perception of students on the holy books of other religions**

This subject of the survey has a difference between the respondents and their responses. The total number of respondents decreases to 1146 students, while the responses are stable in which every question is answered completely and every answer can be conﬁrmed. The conﬁrmation and further inquiries towards respondents on Java are selected randomly based on regional representations, viz. the western part of Java, the central and the eastern. On the other hand, the conﬁrmation with respondents on Kalimantan is conducted based on census as there are only three participating state Islamic higher education institutions.

The survey result provides two answer categories concerning the holy books of other religions, a certain answer and an uncertain answer. The certain answers are further divided into two clusters: the right cluster and the wrong cluster. The percentage of the right cluster amounts to 16%, while the wrong cluster is 43%. Meanwhile, the uncertain answer (abstain) amounts to 41% (see Figure 7).

After conﬁrmations and further inquiries by connecting the answer with Islamic teachings, which compel its followers to believe all the holy books revealed by God, there appear two arguments from the respondents. Firstly, the respondents who claim other holy books are correct stem their argument from verse 385 of the second chapter of the Quran, Al-Baqarah. Secondly, the respondents who claim them to be wrong argue against the purity of other holy books.

Based on the data obtained through confirma tions and further inquiries, it becomes apparent that 4 out of 185 respondents associate their assessments of other holy books with their political tendencies. This revelation corroborates the ﬁnding of several scholars of religious behaviours who associate religious conﬂicts with political interests. The assessments on the rightness of holy books are often manipulated by political elites in order to attain their main goal, that is to maintain their political standing (Maoz & Henderson 2020). They organise several doctrines in the holy books involving relations with other religions as complex as possible so the doctrines have relevance as political tactics (Arthur 2018), that is (among them) in order to build solidity (Tibi 2012).

Based on the result of data processing and analysis, this study possesses distinctive aspects compared with previous studies of the same ﬁeld. This study discovers that the whole constituents of religious moderation are not apparent in the religious perspectives of Muslim students. They are moderate only apropos of plurality and religious liberty and on the contrary are especially radical and intolerant towards the issues of worship place establishments, holy book assessments and practices of other religions. Despite their learning institutions incorporate religious moderation as their visions, yet it fails to make an impact towards the religious perspectives and attitudes of Muslim students. The students have some radical tendencies that hinder moderate behaviours to manifest as their religious reality. This ﬁnding also conﬁrms that knowledge does not inﬂuence and control the attitudes and behaviours of Muslim students. They tend to be controlled by doctrines and beliefs (Suntana & Tresnawaty 2020:149–174).

**Conclusion**

This study surveys the religious perspectives of Muslim students at 13 state Islamic higher education institutions. The result reveals that: (1) the Muslim students are tolerant in perceiving plurality and religious differences, (2) the majority of Muslim students is intolerant towards the establishment of worship places of other religions, (3) the Muslim students regard the practices and holy books of other religions as wrong. The unreserved acceptance of Muslim students towards plurality and religious liberty arises from knowledge evaluation, whereas intolerance towards places of worship
establishment, holy books and practices of other religions arises from faith evaluation. Aside from that, another conclusion comes into sight based on the answer types and models of the respondents in this study, namely the category of religious perspectives seems to be fundamentalist to the dominant religious orientation.

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Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors’ contributions
I.S. contributed to research conceptualisation, data processing, formal analysis and manuscript writing. B.T. contributed in formulating methods, investigation and the validation of research data.

Ethical considerations
Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the State Islamic University of Sunan Gunung Djati Research Ethics Committee (No. B-Un/05/Ak/VI/2022).

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Data availability
The interview data for this research is not publicly available because of the sensitivity of the research. The participants did not grant specific permission to deposit the data in a public repository.

Disclaimer
The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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