







Church planting strategies in the context of religious moderation in multicultural societies



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Religious moderation is an important element for the church in facing the challenges of Indonesia's multicultural society. As a strategy, religious moderation emphasises tolerance and interfaith dialogue, allowing the church to carry out an inclusive evangelistic mission without sacrificing its doctrinal identity. This approach is relevant in the era of globalisation, where differences are often a source of conflict. With the integration of local values, the use of technology and interfaith dialogue, the church can be an agent of harmony widely accepted by society. Based on the mission theology of Orlando E. Costas and Kosuke Koyama, this study proposes a contextual and transformative mission model that emphasises Christ's love. Constructive qualitative analysis develops theological concepts relevant to religious moderation in a pluralistic society. The study results indicate that the religious moderation approach effectively reduces conflict and strengthens the church's role as a facilitator of dialogue and social transformation. This study offers strategic guidance for the church in carrying out a peaceful, relevant and contextual evangelistic mission amidst cultural and religious diversity.

Contribution: This study bridges mission theology with multiculturalism and digital technology studies, providing a strategic perspective for the church in conducting contextual missions. This study also contributes to the discourse of inter-religious peace through inter-religious dialogue and inclusive social approaches.

Keywords: religious moderation; church planting; multiculturalism; mission theology; inter-religious dialogue; digital technology.

Introduction

In a complex multicultural society like Indonesia, religious moderation becomes crucial, especially for churches trying to pioneer and develop congregations in areas with high cultural and religious diversity. Religious moderation that prioritises tolerance, respect and balance in practicing religion in a pluralistic society becomes a challenge and dilemma for the church in pioneering new churches. The church faces a dilemma between carrying out a firm evangelistic mission and respecting local norms closely held by the surrounding community. In fact, according to the Indonesia People Network (IPN), there are still 131 tribes out of 781 tribes in Indonesia that have never been served, and no churches, either personally or in buildings, have been established. This phenomenon is even more prominent when the church operates in areas sensitive to religion and culture, such as in Bali and Nias, where a contextual approach is important to maintain the sustainability and acceptance of the church in the community.

Church planting missions that focus on converting other religions are often seen as a legacy of colonial culture, which has complex implications in the context of modern multicultural societies. The conversion approach, which aims to change the beliefs of individuals or other communities, is often interpreted as a form of penetration insensitive to existing cultural and religious diversity. In addition, 'proselytisation', or efforts to attract members from other church denominations, adds to tensions within the Christian community, exacerbating differences and potential conflicts between churches. These missionary attitudes create resistance in church planting efforts because they are considered to disrupt social harmony and lack respect for the religious identities that have long been embedded in local communities. Anggi Maringan Hasiholan proposed that the church should promote a friendly and beautiful church through Pentecostal hospitality and a theopoetic approach (Hasiholan 2024). This study finds that excessive emphasis on conversion may hinder the church's long-term sustainability in multicultural societies. Instead of prioritising numerical growth, churches should adopt a mission model that actively contributes to social justice, economic development and community empowerment as an integral part of its witness. Thus, conversion

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and proselytisation are not only external challenges originating from interfaith communities but also trigger internal friction among the churches, giving rise to conflicts that hinder peaceful and sustainable pioneering efforts.

Church pioneering within the framework of religious moderation requires an inclusive and adaptive approach, considering that multicultural societies tend to be responsive to religious activities that emphasise tolerance. In a study by Anjaya and Arifianto, the church must demonstrate an attitude as a peacemaker who spreads religious teachings and actively builds harmonious relationships with other religious communities (Anjaya & Arifianto 2021). As a peacemaker, the church is expected to resolve social problems, including economic, health and educational problems, without prioritising differences in belief.

This religious moderation is often seen as an obstacle for the church in carrying out its mandate of evangelism comprehensively. A moderate approach can be interpreted as self-restraint in conveying the Gospel firmly, especially as the church is expected not to disturb the interfaith harmony in the region. This causes the church to adjust its strategy, often through a cultural approach that seeks to respect local traditions. For example, research in Bali found that the church had to integrate a cultural approach in evangelism to be more acceptable to the strong Hindu community. Although this strategy avoided friction, some have criticised that this moderation weakened the church's missionary power (Surpi 2012).

Multicultural education and interfaith dialogue approaches have also been identified as important components in moderate church planting. Interfaith dialogue and multicultural education enable churches to foster a deeper understanding of other religious traditions and reduce prejudice. Through this process of dialogue, churches have the opportunity to strengthen tolerance among their congregations while reducing the potential for conflict with other communities. A study by Pasaribu et al. showed that church planting that prioritises dialogue and good relations with leaders of other faiths can minimise resistance to the presence of the church (Pasaribu et al. 2023).

The use of technology to support religious moderation is also a significant aspect. In the digital era, information technology is an effective tool for spreading inclusive and peaceful messages to the broader community, locally and nationally. By utilising social media platforms, churches can rally support for religious moderation while reaching a wider audience without having to come into direct contact with people of different beliefs. This allows the church to continue carrying out its mission subtly and non-confrontationally, which is relevant in moderation.

As part of the church's pioneering strategy within the framework of religious moderation, interfaith collaboration is also a significant focus. The Catholic Church, for example, has demonstrated its involvement in religious moderation

efforts through social services such as health and education that are open to the entire community regardless of religious differences. This practice strengthens the church's image as an inclusive institution and contributes to a more harmonious and tolerant society. Through this collaborative effort, the church can demonstrate its commitment to religious moderation as part of its service to the community.

Although many studies have highlighted the importance of considering the mindset and attitude of the spirit of religious moderation in church planting in multicultural societies, previous studies focus on inclusive approaches, cultural adaptation and technology to maintain harmonious relationships between religious communities. Previous research on religious moderation and evangelism strategies in the context of multicultural societies suggests various adaptive approaches relevant to the church. Research by Yorivo et al. highlights the Apostle Paul's perspective on evangelism missions that emphasise moderation and inclusivity, where Christ's love is the basis for tolerance and acceptance of diversity, an approach that can be applied in modern evangelism strategies (Yorivo et al. 2024). Meanwhile, a study by Pardianto and Abd A'la regarding the development of religious moderation in the era of information technology 4.0 shows that technology can be an effective tool for spreading the values of moderation and inter-religious dialogue in society. However, it also poses challenges in the form of religious polarisation rapidly spreading in digital media (Pardianto & Abd A'la 2023). This research is strengthened by a broader reflection on adapting evangelism methods through modern technology and an inclusive approach that suppresses conflict and supports ethics in Christianisation, as highlighted in research on evangelism in the digital age. Together, these studies form the foundation for a moderate, adaptive and technology-based evangelism strategy in a diverse, multicultural society, with religious moderation as a key element in maintaining harmony and sustainability of evangelism missions in the modern era.

Of the two studies above, no study has explored how churches can formulate a pioneering strategy that respects the principle of religious moderation and maintains the power of evangelism without sacrificing the church's doctrinal identity. In other words, churches have no comprehensive strategic guide or alignment in navigating between a strong evangelistic commitment and the demands of religious moderation in a pluralistic social context. This study aims to develop a church planting strategy that can maintain the essence of the evangelistic mission while integrating the values of religious moderation in a multicultural society. The researcher argues that church planting in the era of religious moderation must prioritise hospitality and openness to others.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a constructive theology method that focuses on text analysis and interpretation of church doctrine and practice in the context of religious moderation in a multicultural society. The constructive theology approach was chosen to allow

researchers to develop new theological concepts based on the reality of Indonesia's pluralistic society without relying on field data collection such as participant observation or interviews (Adiprasetya 2023). Instead, this study utilises theological literature, church documents and previous study findings as primary data sources, which are then analysed to identify theological strategies that can be applied in moderate and inclusive church planting (Wyman 2017:23). The data in this study were obtained through an in-depth analysis of theological texts and writings of experts related to mission theology, religious moderation and church planting in multicultural societies. Intersectional analysis was applied to understand how religious, cultural and social elements interact in the doctrine and practice of church mission and how the principle of moderation can be integrated into a contextual and constructive theology of church planting.

Integration of local and contextual values in mission theology

The literature on mission and church planting analysed from the perspective of Orlando E. Costas and Kosuke Koyama offers a unique contextual view in understanding the church's call to preach the Gospel. Costas emphasises the importance of a contextual approach to evangelisation that includes a social justice dimension, where the church's mission should be rooted from 'below' and focused on human suffering (Costas 1989:27). According to Costas, the Gospel is not only good news for sinners but also for victims of sin, a view that emphasises social transformation as the goal of mission (Costas 1989:xiii). This includes social action that addresses the root causes of human suffering, not just acts of social service. In this context, Costas emphasises that the mission must bring liberation and genuine reconciliation with its centre on the cross, inviting people to experience new life in the Holy Spirit (Costas 1982).

Meanwhile, Kosuke Koyama focuses on the local dimension in his mission approach through incarnational theology adapted to local culture (Moe 2017:30). In 'Water Buffalo Theology', Koyama argues that evangelism in Asia must use language and symbols that are understood by local people, such as the buffalo metaphor, which is relevant in agrarian societies (Koyama 1974:22). With this approach, Koyama shows that to carry out compelling mission, evangelists must be deeply involved in the lives of local people, placing themselves in 'dirty spaces' such as kitchens that reflect the indigenous culture of the people.

From the perspective of this theology of mission, it is clear that Costas and Koyama share the same view that Christian mission must be contextual and separate from colonial patterns. His study contributes to mission theology by demonstrating how Costas' emphasis on justice and Koyama's focus on incarnational ministry can be synthesised into a holistic approach. This balance ensures that church planting efforts adapt to local cultures and work toward transformative engagement with communities. Costas emphasises the need for the church to side with the oppressed as a manifestation of

Christ's solidarity. At the same time, Koyama reminds us of the importance of 'neighbourology' – a theology that respects local culture and opens up interfaith dialogue. For Koyama, the mission is about conveying the Gospel and respecting the cultural symbols of the local community. Here, Koyama's approach emphasises cultural respect and neighbourly relations rather than radical social action, as emphasised by Costas. In addition, Koyama introduces the concept of 'theologia crucis', or theology of the cross, which focuses on suffering together with Christ. He emphasises that the church must have a 'crucified mind' to participate in the suffering of Christ and acts of solidarity with the marginalised. This aligns with Costas' view that the cross is the centre of the message of liberation and reconciliation. However, Koyama emphasises the aspect of personal sacrifice and humility in participating in the suffering of Christ, not just acts of courageous social transformation.

Both figures above offer perspectives that enrich the understanding of transformative and contextual missions, highlighting the aspects of liberation, solidarity and incarnation in church ministry. However, Costas' approach is directed more at structural transformation through social action, while Koyama prefers an incarnational approach that respects local cultural relations. This difference shows the debate in mission theology: between a focus on social action that challenges structures and respect for culture and personal relations in church mission.

Integrating local values in the theology of mission and church planting is an innovative approach that enriches the church's role as an agent of change in a multicultural society. Costas emphasises that the church's mission must be responsive to the social and cultural context in which it is located, especially by paying special attention to those who are marginalised and oppressed. In his view, the church does not merely convey the Gospel through verbal doctrine but also acts as an agent of fundamental social transformation by prioritising the values of social justice and solidarity (Hadianto 2018). Therefore, religious conversion is not the church's primary goal; rather, involvement in the locus where the church is located is the most important. This is where the church must dare to 'let go' of mission and church planting. This colonial legacy is closely linked to religious conversion and proselytisation of other church streams.

Costas's thinking is relevant to the reality that the church often faces a society with a strong cultural identity. For him, the Gospel cannot be separated from the socio-cultural dimension in which it is preached. Costas criticises the approach to evangelisation, which only focuses on the verbal aspect without paying attention to the context. According to him, the church should not be a 'market product' that displays a 'plastic Jesus' without deep meaning for the local community (Book 2007). In Costas' mission theology, contextual evangelism requires the church to be genuinely present amid society, understand local experiences and adapt ministry strategies that respect local values.

On the other hand, Koyama argues that the church should use symbols familiar to the people, such as the buffalo, to explain the concept of faith so that the Gospel can be received more relevantly and meaningfully. This approach allows the church to become an integral part of people's daily lives, where the Gospel is present in language and symbols close to their daily lives (Alvarez 2020). Koyama's approach to local symbols creates a foundation for the church to interact with the community without creating cultural tension. These symbols allow the Gospel to be accepted as part of the local identity rather than as a foreign entity that forces assimilation (Moe 2017). In this way, the church not only preaches the Gospel but also upholds and respects local culture, thereby creating a harmonious relationship between Christian faith and culture.

This theological approach to mission, which emphasises the importance of contextualisation, is in line with the concept of *Missio Dei*, which emerged at the Willingen conference in 1952. Within the framework of *Missio Dei*, the mission is seen as the church's task and as an attribute of God that guides the church to become an agent of divine presence in the world (Lakawa 2022). This broadens the church's understanding of mission, from mere religious activity to direct engagement with the culture and social conditions in which the church is located. In this framework, the church is expected to play a more significant role in seeking social justice and peace in the community.

A theology of mission that focuses on the Kingdom of God has great relevance, given the very strong cultural and religious plurality. The church in Indonesia is faced with the challenge of carrying out its mission in a way that not only respects local values but also promotes the community's welfare holistically. This approach allows the church to play a more significant role as a facilitator of cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue that enriches peace and social harmony. However, this integrative approach is not without challenges. The church must wisely choose cultural elements that can be adapted into the liturgy and teachings without compromising the core of Christian theology. Wati Longchar, in her study of contextual theology in Northeast India, reminds us that the church needs to free itself from the tendency of theological colonialism that often only replicates unjust power structures. The church is expected to be truly present in the 'margins' or among the oppressed to function as an agent of transformation (Longchar 2018).

Costas asserts that the church must evangelise with a spirit of 'contextual solidarity', which means being directly present amid marginalised communities and speaking from their perspective. This contextual theology, he says, is not merely a superficial adaptation of theology but rather a 'transformative proclamation of the good news', in which the church is concerned not only with spiritual salvation but also with the social welfare of the community. The church needs to offer liberating good news not only to sinners but also to victims of injustice.

Integrating local values and enriching the church's spirituality creates a space for interfaith dialogue. This allows the church

to become an agent of peace in a pluralistic community where the values of the Gospel are understood in a spirit of openness and cooperation. A church that respects local culture has great potential to become an agent of reconciliation amidst social and cultural tensions. This study finds that church planting efforts in multicultural societies should not be framed merely as pragmatic strategies or empirical initiatives but must be examined through a constructive theological perspective, particularly within Joas Adiprasetya's theological reflections. Instead of treating religious moderation as the primary paradigm – as it is an extensively discussed theme – this study explores a more profound theological inquiry into how churches can embody divine hospitality in ways that transcend institutional expansion and social adaptation. Drawing from Adiprasetya's constructive theology, this study argues that the church should not merely function as a mediator of tolerance but as an embodiment of divine relationality, reflecting God's self-giving presence in the world (Adiprasetya & Sasongko 2019). This conceptual approach shifts the discourse from religious accommodation to a more foundational theological reimagination of ecclesial identity in pluralistic settings. Furthermore, rather than focusing on practical church planting strategies, this study engages with the philosophical dimensions of ecclesiology, interrogating the interplay between divine mission and the church's role as a space of radical openness and transformation in contemporary societies. Through this theological-philosophical reflection, the study contributes to an ongoing dialogue on how Christian communities can articulate their identity in ways that remain both theologically faithful and intellectually generative.

Religious moderation as the foundation for pioneering an inclusive church

Religious moderation is an important foundation in the church's efforts to build an inclusive community in a culturally and religiously diverse society. Religious moderation, which emphasises balance, tolerance and respect for universal humanity, significantly encourages the church to be more open and adaptive to existing diversity. Religious moderation not only supports harmonious relationships between individuals but also prevents the emergence of exclusivity, which can be a source of social conflict. In theology, religious moderation is firmly rooted in the universal value of Christ's love that transcends the boundaries of religious differences. This love is the foundation for the church to carry out its mission as an agent of positive social change. For example, in a pluralistic society, the church can proactively build unity through a moderate and open attitude to interfaith dialogue. As an agent that promotes common welfare, the church can significantly strengthen the sense of brotherhood between citizens.

The implementation of religious moderation in church communities can also be an effective means of reducing the potential for conflict. A moderate approach that does not

prioritise an exclusive attitude but rather an open attitude to understanding and working together with others can increase a sense of security and mutual trust in society (Santoso et al. 2022). Thus, the church can be a liaison in creating an atmosphere conducive to interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Religious moderation can be implemented in planting new churches by designing programmes that facilitate interfaith cooperation. For example, social programmes that involve various religious groups to help people experiencing poverty, raise funds for emergency needs or respond to natural disasters. These collaborative actions can increase social cohesion and make the church a centre of concern open to all elements of society, not just its congregation.

This moderate approach also allows the church to put forward a universal witness of Christ's love. An attitude of love that touches every individual without religious discrimination is a tangible manifestation of the Christian faith that loves others unconditionally. As a witness that puts forward humanity, the church can play a role as a moral force that bridges differences and promotes peace. Thus, the church not only functions as a place of worship but also as a place of inclusivity that anyone can access. This religious moderation approach strengthens the church's role in responding to social challenges in the globalisation era, where differences often cause friction. A church that prioritises inclusivity and tolerance will be more readily accepted and appreciated by the wider community. Religious moderation encourages the church to appear as a community that is relevant to the needs of the times, opens to dialogue and shows sensitivity to contemporary social issues.

Applying religious moderation allows the church to strengthen social cohesion, especially in a multicultural context. Religious moderation allows the church to celebrate differences and support cohesion without sacrificing its beliefs. Thus, religious moderation is a tool for achieving peace and living out Christ's love in a broader and more meaningful context.

Religious moderation approach strategy in church planting

Researchers have explained that religious moderation is an important foundation for the church facing challenges and dynamics in a multicultural society. This approach provides a strong foundation for the church to be present in society with values of tolerance, respect for other beliefs and balance in interfaith interactions. In pioneering efforts, the church is called to carry out a mission focusing on evangelism and building harmonious and respectful relationships with local communities. Thus, the church can show itself as an inclusive, embracing institution that prioritises interfaith dialogue and a willingness to learn from local traditions. In this strategy, theological literature plays an important role by emphasising the importance of a humble and inclusive attitude in the church's mission.

The religious moderation approach allows the church to maintain its doctrinal identity without conflicting with local values. The church can maintain the integrity of the faith while respecting the norms and beliefs of the local community. The results of this analysis indicate that churches that implement religious moderation have the potential to be more readily accepted in diverse environments and can also reduce resistance from interfaith communities. In this way, religious moderation is an adaptive strategy and a form of loving testimony that can be an example for society.

Interfaith dialogue is key to building trust and effective communication. Interfaith dialogue is not just a conversation but also a spiritual journey that invites the church to understand and appreciate the perspectives of other faiths as a form of universal love. This dialogue helps the church expand its theological horizons and build bridges that strengthen interfaith relationships. By creating open dialogue, the church can overcome prejudice, reduce negative stereotypes and even learn from local cultural wisdom (Chia 2022). Based on the study by Pasaribu et al., interfaith dialogue plays an important role in reducing resistance to the church's presence, thus making dialogue a strategic step that supports the sustainability of church planting in a pluralistic society (Pasaribu 2023).

In addition to interfaith dialogue, information technology is an important supporting factor in religious moderation. In this digital era, churches can use social media and digital platforms to reach a wider audience without taking a physical approach that risks causing conflict. Technology allows churches to convey messages of peace, tolerance and Christ's love more subtly and in a non-confrontational manner. The wise use of technology can help churches overcome differences through inclusive communication. Technology also allows for the creation of cross-cultural dialogue spaces that strengthen harmony and togetherness among diverse communities. However, this study finds that digital evangelism requires careful management to avoid exacerbating religious polarisation. The church must ensure that its online discourse fosters peace rather than division, making social media a tool for bridge-building rather than ideological battles.

Technology also has challenges that need to be anticipated, such as the risk of polarisation on social media. Polarisation can occur when content delivered on social media is not fully understood or when different interpretations cause conflict (Sidjabat 2019). Polarisation in the media needs to be taken seriously. Christians who are struggling to carry out their missions and plant new churches need to pay attention to their social media so as not to get caught up in religious, ethnic, cultural, group and other polarisations. Therefore, the church must be wise in using technology to promote moderation and universal love and spread messages that support harmony without triggering divisions. Social media must become a 'campaign' tool to spread the values of the Gospel and God's love.

Implementing religious moderation has been proven to positively impact public perception of the church. Churches that adopt a religious moderation approach tend to be more appreciated and accepted by multicultural societies. A public perception survey conducted by Yuni Pancarani found that interfaith communities are more open to the existence of churches that prioritise tolerance and balance in their religious missions (Pancarani 2024). The church is no longer seen as an institution that only focuses on evangelism but as an agent of harmony that supports the creation of peace and stability in society. This strengthens the view that religious moderation is not just an adaptive approach but also a calling for the church to play an active role in creating a peaceful and inclusive environment.

The application of religious moderation in church planting strategies has proven effective in strengthening the church's relationship with multicultural communities. By applying the principles of moderation, interfaith dialogue and technology, the church can present itself as an agent of harmony widely accepted by society. This study recommends that the church continue developing its ability to dialogue with interfaith communities and use technology wisely to spread a universal message of love. The church can strengthen its role as an agent of peace in a diverse society through a moderate approach.

Conclusion

This study highlights the need for a theological reorientation in church planting efforts, moving beyond strategic and empirical concerns towards a deeper constructive theological engagement. Applying Joas Adiprasetya's constructive theology offers a renewed ecclesiological vision, where the church is not merely an institution adapting to religious pluralism but a space embodying divine hospitality. This perspective allows the church to engage with pluralistic societies not through mere accommodation but through theological depth and relational presence, shaping a mission that is faithful to Christian identity and responsive to contemporary realities. The concept of Pentecostal hospitality and theopoetic mission emphasises that the church should not simply adapt to multicultural settings but actively participate in community life in welcoming, transformative and aesthetically impactful ways.

While religious moderation has long been regarded as a foundational principle for navigating Indonesia's multicultural society, this study suggests that church planting efforts require a more profound theological framework that transcends the balancing of tolerance and interfaith dialogue. Rather than seeing moderation as a limitation, the constructive theological approach positions the church as a dynamic agent of peace and social cohesion, not by reducing its doctrinal integrity but by deepening its theological presence in the world. By integrating local values and engaging in a theology of divine hospitality, the church can become an agent of reconciliation and transformation, addressing the complexities of mission in

contemporary society. In this way, the study contributes to broader theological discourse by offering an intellectually rigorous and ecclesologically transformative framework, ensuring that the church remains faithful to its mission while embracing the realities of a pluralistic world.

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Authors' contributions

N.U. carried out the conceptualisation, methodology and formal analysis. H.C. prepared the investigation, wrote the original draft and was responsible for the visualisation. P.M. was responsible for the project administration and software. A.H. carried out validation and data curation. I.S.S. was responsible for resources and writing – review and editing. J.S.P.R. supervised the project and was responsible for funding acquisition.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects, as approved by Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Bethel Indonesia Jakarta on 20 December 2024, No. 148/SE/Ka-STTBI/XII-2024.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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