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Lived theology and narrative identity: A phenomenological-hermeneutical study of religious moderation in the local churches of South Sulawesi, Indonesia

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National strategies to curb religious intolerance often struggle to engage the complex, lived realities of the communities they aim to regulate. This study analysed the disconnect between official state discourse and the actual practice of interfaith relations at the grassroots level. The research was situated within three Protestant denominations across the culturally distinct and historically pluralistic landscape of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. A phenomenological-hermeneutical framework was employed during the qualitative phase of a mixed-method study, utilising in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, field observations and document analysis grounded in Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory. The findings revealed that while state terminology remained alien to congregants, harmony was organically sustained through local cultural vernaculars such as *Siangga'* [mutual respect] and *Sipakatau* [to humanise humans]. These indigenous values, rather than bureaucratic compliance, provided the resilience needed to navigate historical trauma. It was concluded that authentic moderation was a narrative achievement of the community rather than a product of policy, requiring a theological shift that prioritises indigenous wisdom over prescriptive definitions.

Contribution: This article contributes to public theology by proposing a 'Lived Theology of Moderation' that challenges state-centric approaches. It demonstrates how indigenous cultural forms function as legitimate theological frameworks for interreligious peace, offering a resilient ecclesiological model for navigating the tension between national ideology and local identity.

Keywords: religious moderation; lived theology; narrative identity; contextual theology; phenomenology; local wisdom; grassroots ecclesiology.

Introduction

The Chasm between national discourse and local realities

In recent decades, Indonesia, a nation constitutionally founded on the principle of *Pancasila*, which enshrines belief in one God amidst diversity, has faced a well-documented surge in religious conservatism, intolerance and acts of violent extremism (Mietzner & Muhtadi 2018:479; Van Bruinessen 2013:16). In response, the Indonesian government has institutionalised and vigorously promoted a national policy of *Moderasi Beragama* [religious moderation] (Kementerian Agama RI 2019). This state-led initiative is officially defined as a perspective, attitude and practice of religion that avoids extremes by upholding human dignity and the public good, based on principles of justice, balance and constitutional compliance (Saifuddin 2019:12). While critics often view moderation as a set of restrictive rules, Saifuddin clarifies that the core essence of religious moderation is 'to protect human dignity' (Saifuddin 2022:57). Furthermore, moderation is essentially a 'reconceptualisation of religious values that have long developed in Indonesia' rather than a new imposition (Saprillah 2021:16). The programme aims to counter radicalism by fostering four key indicators: national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence and accommodation of local culture (Afwadzi & Miski 2021:203).

While laudable in its intent, the *Moderasi Beragama* programme has been subject to scholarly critique for its top-down implementation, its perceived Muslim-centric bias and its limited efficacy at the grassroots level. This bias manifests explicitly in official discourse where the generic civic goal of moderation is frequently conflated with the specific Islamic theological framework of *Wasathiyah* [the middle path], utilising Arabic-derived principles like *tawassuth* [taking the middle

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way] and *tasamuh* [tolerance] as the universal matrix for all religious communities (Putra et al. 2021:592; Menchik 2014:593). Consequently, for non-Muslim minorities, the state's terminology often remains alien and unfamiliar (Hasyim 2021:2–3; see Hefner 2000:128–138, Hoon 2017: 476–477).

This disconnect is particularly salient in regions with unique and deeply embedded histories of interfaith relations, such as South Sulawesi. The province presents a complex tapestry of religious encounters, from the historical Islamisation of the Bugis-Makassar kingdoms to the establishment of resilient Christian communities in the highland and coastal areas, marked by periods of both conflict and profound syncretism (Pelras 1996:129; Bigalke 2005:112).

This study posits a critical gap between the state's programmatic, conceptual discourse on moderation and the 'lived theology' of local communities in South Sulawesi. Generic national policies often fail to account for the rich vernaculars of harmony embedded in local wisdom and the distinct historical trajectories that shape interfaith dynamics on the ground (Hamid et al. 2020:3). The lived reality of coexistence in the Torajan highlands, the Luwu kingdom's ancestral lands or the urban melting pot of Makassar is shaped less by recent government circulars and more by centuries of negotiation, kinship and shared experience. This gap is not merely semantic but ontological. While the state approaches moderation as a prescriptive category – a set of indicators to be measured and enforced – local communities experience it as a descriptive reality – a fragile, daily negotiation of existence. Top-down policies often render invisible the rich, pre-existing vernaculars of harmony, such as the Torajan *Siangga'* or the Bugis *Sipakatau*. Consequently, the state's programme risks becoming an alienating imposition rather than an empowering affirmation. To bridge this chasm, this study shifts the locus of theological inquiry from the text of government policy to the 'lived text' of the community narrative.

Therefore, this research moves beyond a simple policy evaluation to uncover a distinct, parallel epistemology of moderation. Based on the identified gap between policy and practice, this study addresses two core questions: (1) *How is religious moderation understood, interpreted and internalised from the perspective of lived experience?* and (2) *through what narrative mechanisms are these values transmitted and negotiated in specific socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts?* By exploring these questions, this study aims to map an alternative, grassroots 'theology of moderation' that exists within and sometimes independently of the state's official programme, offering a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of interfaith life in Indonesia.

Theoretical framework: A phenomenological-narrative approach to lived theology

To adequately investigate the chasm between prescriptive discourse and lived reality, this study adopts a theoretical framework grounded in phenomenological-hermeneutical philosophy. This approach was deliberately chosen to privilege the participants' own experiences and interpretations as primary data, treating their stories not merely as anecdotal evidence but as sites of theological construction (Schreiter 1985:22).

Phenomenology of lived experience

This approach aligns with Husserl's delineation of the *Lebenswelt* [lifeworld] as the pre-scientific ground of meaning, the 'forgotten meaning-fundament' upon which all theoretical constructions – including state policies – are inevitably built. Consequently, religious moderation is investigated not as an abstract concept to be defined but as a phenomenon to be described, returning to the 'things themselves' of the community's daily negotiation. The investigation thus brackets the 'objective' indicators of the state to access the intersubjective validity of the Lebenswelt (Husserl 1970:108–109). This entails the methodological practice of εποχή [*epoche*] or the bracketing of the researcher's preconceived theories, theological judgements and normative assumptions in order to describe the essential structure of the *lived experience* of interfaith relations as it presents itself (Horner 2018:154; Van Manen 1990:36).

Expanding on this, the study incorporates Martin Heidegger's conception of factical life experience and *Dasein* as 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1962:78). This reframes lived experience not as a purely internal, psychological state but as a fundamental mode of existence, an embodied and situated engagement within a shared social and cultural world (Crowe 2008:3). Consequently, religious moderation is investigated not as an abstract concept to be defined, but as a phenomenon to be described: *How does it feel* to be a Christian in a majority-Muslim city? *What is the texture* of a shared community work project between a church and a mosque? This approach allows for an encounter with the phenomenon in its unadulterated, pre-theoretical richness.

Narrative construction of identity

While phenomenology provides access to the raw data of experience, the hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricoeur offers the tools to interpret how this experience is rendered meaningful through narrative (Ricoeur 1991:73; 1992:113–114). Ricoeur's earlier elaboration of how narrative refigures temporal experience provides the philosophical grounding for this hermeneutical turn (Ricoeur 1988:241–249). This study employs Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity as its primary analytical lens, focusing on several key concepts:

- **Emplotment [*Mise en intrigue*]:** This is the cognitive and creative act by which individuals configure disparate life events, actions and sufferings into a coherent plot. Through emplotment, a mere sequence of incidents is transformed into a meaningful story. As Ricoeur (1992: 141–142, 147) argues, the narrative constructs the identity of the character, which can be understood as the 'who' of

the action, thereby mediating between the descriptive traits of the agent and the ethical constancy of the self. This study analyses how respondents 'emplot' their encounters with religious others – transforming memories of conflict or harmony into stories that shape their understanding of themselves and their world.

- ***Idem*-and *Ipse*-identity:** Ricoeur (1992) posits a dialectic within personal identity where *idem* [sameness] and *ipse* [selfhood] overlap in the concept of character but diverge in the act of promising. It is in the 'keeping of the word' that *ipse*-identity reveals a form of permanence in time that is irreducible to the immutable traits of *idem* (Ricoeur 1992:118, 123). This distinction allows for an analysis of how an individual's stable *idem*-identity (e.g. 'I am a member of GKSS') is challenged, affirmed or transformed into a new *ipse*-identity (e.g. 'I am someone who builds bridges with my Muslim neighbours') through the narrative of their interfaith encounters.

To fully grasp the theological weight of these narrative shifts, it is necessary to integrate Johann Baptist Metz's concept of *memoria passionis* or 'dangerous memory' with Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Metz argues that the church's identity is grounded in the memory of suffering – specifically the suffering of Christ and the victims of history – which acts as a subversive force against the apathy of the status quo. Metz (1980:89) defines this 'dangerous memory' as a mode of remembrance that 'breaks through the magic of the prevailing consciousness' and resists the evolutionary logic of history that silences the victims.

In the context of South Sulawesi, the historical trauma of the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) rebellion serves as such a memory. If left unaddressed, this memory reinforces a rigid *idem*-identity defined by victimisation and defensiveness. However, when the community engages in the narrative work of forgiveness and Sipakatau, they are effectively redeeming this memory. They refuse to let the past suffering dictate a future of hostility. Thus, the transition from *idem* [static identity] to *ipse* [promissory identity] is not just a psychological adjustment but a theological act of resisting the 'cycle of resentment' by keeping the memory of suffering dangerous to the structures of division, rather than dangerous to the neighbour (Ricoeur 1992).

Synthesis: Lived narratives as theological sources

The synthesis of these two philosophical streams creates a powerful framework for a practical and contextual theology. Phenomenology allows us to access the lived experience of religious moderation, while narrative hermeneutics provides the tools to understand how that experience is interpreted and integrated into a meaningful identity that guides future action. This positions the study to treat the lived narratives of ordinary Christians in South Sulawesi as primary theological sources – as 'lived theology'. It is in their stories of negotiating difference, practicing hospitality and wrestling with fear that a theology of moderation, indigenous to its context, can be discerned (Bevans 2002:70).

Research methods and design

A multi-modal qualitative inquiry

This study uses a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018: 63–70). This article reports exclusively on the qualitative phase, detailing the ethical framework and analytical standards applied to the initial data.

Sampling and loci

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants across four distinct loci in South Sulawesi, yielding a total of 80 primary data points constituting Dataset B: 40 individual in-depth interviews distributed across four clusters and four FGDs, each comprising 10–17 participants, one per locus. Data for this study (Dataset B, n = 80) were collected exclusively to explore external interfaith relations and state policy. It remains distinct from the authors' other research on internal congregational character formation (Dataset A), which utilised a separate participant pool. These loci were chosen to represent the diverse socio-religious contexts of the province's main Protestant denominations:

- **Toraja Church [*Gereja Toraja*, GT] in Makale and Rantepao:** Representing a predominantly Christian, ethno-culturally homogenous region with deep-rooted traditions (data coded as Makale-GT and Rantepao-GT).
- **Luwu Indonesian Protestant Church [*Gereja Protestan di Indonesia Luwu*, GPIL] in Palopo:** Representing a historically pluralistic area with a legacy of both kingdom-era coexistence and post-independence religious tensions (data coded as Palopo-GPIL).
- **Christian Church of South Sulawesi [*Gereja Kristen Sulawesi Selatan*, GKSS] in Makassar:** Representing an urban, multicultural and majority-Muslim metropolis where Christians navigate life as a minority (data coded as Makassar-GKSS).

Respondents from each locus were selected to ensure a polyphonic representation of perspectives, including synod-level leadership (BPS or MPS), regional council members (BPSW or MPK), local pastors (KMJ), lay leaders [*penatua*], activists from women's and youth organisations (PWKI, PPGT), government officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs [*Kemenag*] and traditional cultural leaders [*tokoh adat*]. Interview respondents and FGD contributors are cited using role descriptor (e.g., Elder, Pastor, Youth Fellowship Leader) with data collection method, locus and year, in accordance with standard phenomenological research ethics.

Data collection

A multi-modal data collection strategy was implemented to facilitate triangulation, comparing what is said, what is written and what is done:

- **In-depth phenomenological interviews:** Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted, guided by a question bank designed to elicit rich narratives of lived experience, personal meaning-making and specific interfaith encounters. The interview protocol followed the phenomenological approach of allowing experience to speak on its own terms (La Kahija 2021:45–50).
- **FGDs:** Four FGDs, one in each locus, explored communal understandings, shared narratives and group dynamics. The comprehensive, multistage analysis of these discussions forms a key dataset for this study.
- **Document analysis:** Official church documents were systematically analysed, including constitutional texts [*Tata Dasar*], catechetical materials, strategic plans [*Renstra*] and synod reports, to understand the formal theological and programmatic stance of each denomination.
- **Participant observation:** Field observations of worship services and community events in the GKSS and GT loci provided data on the enacted, non-discursive and atmospheric aspects of church life, such as liturgical practices and post-service social interactions.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis framework as outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke 2006:77–101). This involved a six-phase process: (1) data consolidation and preparation; (2) foundational thematic coding; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing and refining themes; (5) defining and naming themes into a full analytical narrative; and (6) producing the final report. This systematic process ensures a clear and auditable trail from the raw data to the final interpretive findings. Concrete instances in which focus group discussion and participant observation data either confirmed, extended or critically complicated individual interview narratives are documented at the relevant analytical junctures in the Findings and Discussion sections.

Trustworthiness

The study's design rigorously adheres to the trustworthiness framework of Lincoln and Guba (1985:290). Credibility was established through the triangulation of methods (interviews, FGDs, documents and observation) and sources (clergy, laity, government, etc.). The detailed methodological description ensures dependability and confirmability.

A crucial ethical and methodological consideration was the 'insider' status of the research team, which includes pastors and theologians active in the communities under study. To manage this, the protocol of phenomenological εποχή [*epoche*] was strictly enforced. This was not merely a procedural step to reduce bias but a profound theological and ethical posture. It represented an intentional act of humility, a temporary suspension of clerical authority to adopt a stance of 'strategic naïveté', prioritising learning *from* the community rather than instructing it. All researchers were required to write 'bracketing memos' before each interview to consciously identify and set aside their assumptions, ensuring a radical openness to the participants' lived realities. This practice of *epoche*, therefore, was itself a form of lived moderation, enacting the very openness the study sought to understand and ensuring the confirmability of the findings. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities have been anonymised in all reports.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Theological Philosophy Seminary in Eastern Indonesia in Makassar Research Ethics Committee (No. B.3/3283/XII/2025).

Results

Thematic analysis of lived moderation

The comprehensive analysis of data from all four loci reveals a complex, multilayered understanding of religious moderation. The findings are presented here in four overarching themes that synthesise the key discoveries of the research.

The Vernaculars of harmony: From '*Moderasi*' to '*Toleransi*', *Siangga*' and *Sipakatau*

A primary finding across all research sites is the significant semantic and conceptual gap between the state's official discourse and local understandings of interfaith harmony. The term *Moderasi Beragama* was consistently reported as unfamiliar, abstract and a 'top-down' concept that has not 'become part of the congregation'.

One senior church leader noted that while the values are lived, the term itself is not used because 'if we talk about moderation in the congregation, they don't understand' (Synod-Level Leader, Interview, Makassar-GKSS 2025). This discursive gap is filled by enacted praxis; triangulation via FGD reveals that these vernaculars are primarily understood as embodied actions rather than abstract concepts. For example, focus group participants at the Makassar-GKSS locus highlighted their decades-long practice of *living together* with Muslim pedicab drivers utilising church facilities (Elder, FGD, Makassar-GKSS 2025), while participants at the Makale-GT locus cited their proactive inclusion of Muslim neighbours in a church-run health clinic (Pastor, FGD, Makale-GT 2025). Both focus groups independently verified that indigenous equilibrium operates below the threshold of state-sponsored bureaucratic terminology, relying instead on localised, material hospitality.

In place of this state-sponsored terminology, participants across the different cultural contexts employ a rich and deeply embedded vernacular of harmony. In the Toraja context (GT Makale and Rantepao), the ethic of coexistence is expressed through terms like *Siangga'* [mutual respect], *Sitarate* [empathy or *tenggang rasa*] and *Kasianggaran*. As one elder explained, these values are rooted in the cultural institution of the *Tongkonan* [ancestral house], where kinship

transcends religious affiliation. In the Bugis-Makassar cultural spheres of Palopo (GPIL) and Makassar (GKSS), the dominant ethical framework is the philosophy of *Sipakatau, Sipakainge Sipakalebbi* – a tripartite value system meaning to treat others as human, to mutually remind and to mutually honour (Nur et al. 2023:166–170). This philosophy, as one GKSS leader and cultural expert noted, is the foundation for social interaction and is actively practiced in daily life, such as in diaconal projects that serve the wider community regardless of faith.

This diversity of vernaculars (see Table 1) demonstrates that moderation is not a monolithic concept but is contextually articulated through distinct cultural idioms. Any effective strategy for promoting harmony must therefore engage with these pre-existing, culturally resonant frameworks rather than imposing a generic national vocabulary.

Narrating the self in a plural world: Emplotment of interfaith encounters

Applying Ricoeur's framework reveals how individuals construct their identity through the narrative process of *emplotment*, weaving experiences of interfaith encounter into meaningful life stories. These narratives illustrate a dynamic interplay between a stable *idem*-identity and a responsive, evolving *ipse*-identity.

Firstly, one powerful example is the narrative of IM, a women's activist in Makale. Her story begins with a formative childhood wound in Jepara, where she overheard friends lamenting, 'She is a good child, it's a pity she is Christian' (Women's Organisation Activist, Interview, Makale-GT 2025). This event established an *idem*-identity as a vulnerable, 'othered' Christian. However, she does not emplot this as a story of victimhood. Instead, this memory becomes the catalyst for her life's work, culminating in the founding of the KBT, an interfaith women's association. The plot of her life transforms the initial suffering into a redemptive mission. Through this narrative act, her *ipse*-identity is forged: she is no longer defined by the wound of being othered but by her commitment to being a bridge-builder.

However, triangulating these individual narratives with communal FGD data reveals profound complexities in how this identity is transmitted. During the FGD in Palopo, a stark generational dissonance emerged regarding the emplotment of intolerance. While older church leaders narrated a plot of decline – blaming external urban influences for radicalising youth (Pastor, FGD, Palopo-GPIL 2025) – youth representatives forcefully rebutted this, emplotting themselves as inherently open because of digital interconnectivity and explicitly identifying the older generation as the primary source of latent prejudice (Youth Member, FGD, Palopo-GPIL 2025). This internal contestation demonstrates that narrative identity is not uniformly inherited but is actively negotiated across generational divides.

Secondly, there is the case of PR, a military officer of the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI) [Indonesian National Armed Forces] and church elder in Makassar. He narrates a conflict involving an attempt by an external group to shut down a Christian worship service at a local mall. Here, his dual identities are central to the plot. His *idem*-identity as an officer of the state provides him with the authority and legitimacy to intervene and defend the principle of equal rights for all citizens. Simultaneously, his *ipse*-identity as a Christian elder, committed to his community, provides the moral and spiritual impetus for his actions. The narrative he constructs is one where state duty and religious conviction converge, allowing him to navigate the conflict effectively and secure a positive outcome for his community.

Thirdly, a narrative pattern prevalent among respondents from GPIL in Palopo engages the historical trauma of the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) rebellion. Applying Ricoeur's (1992:147) framework of *emplotment*, we observe a powerful narrative act that resolves the discordance between a traumatic past and a pluralist present. The collective *idem*-identity of the community includes the historical memory of persecution. However, respondents actively refuse to emplot this history as a genealogy of resentment. Instead, they employ the cultural master-narrative of '*Wija To Luwu*' [descendants of the Luwu people] to reconfigure the plot.

This re-narration is not merely a cognitive exercise but is rooted in organic social processes that have occurred over decades. Recent scholarship on the DI/TII survivors in the region indicates that reconciliation was often not the result of formal peace treaties but rather emerged through the restoration of familial bonds [*Tongkonan* and *Wija To Luwu*] and the theological reframing of 'divine forgiveness'. The refusal to inherit the grudge is supported by a 'theology of remembering' that acknowledges the pain of the past while prioritising the kinship of the present.

By confessing the *perpetrator's account* within the safety of the cultural family unit, the toxic memory of the rebellion

TABLE 1: Local terminology and cultural roots of religious moderation.

Locus (Denomination)	Local terminology	Definition or translation	Representative quote	Cultural or theological root
Toraja Church (GT)	*Siangga', Sitarate*	Mutual respect, empathy, shared feeling	'We have *Siangga', sitarate* … we don't interfere in their religion'. (Church Regional Council Officer, Interview, Makale-GT 2025)	*Aluk Todolo* [ancestral ways], *Tongkonan* kinship philosophy
GPIL (Luwu)	*Sipakatau*, *Pada Pada Ki Wija To Luwu*	To humanise others, we are all descendants of the People of Luwu	'Here the philosophy is *Sipakatau* … we are all family of Luwu, even if our religion and ethnicity are different'. (Cultural Leader, Interview, Palopo-GPIL 2025)	*Kedatuan Luwu* [Luwu Kingdom] history, Bugis philosophy
GKSS (Makassar)	*Sipakatau, Sipakalebbi, Sipakainge*	To humanise, to honour, to remind	'Our cultural wisdom like *Sipakatau* … that is our foundation for building moderation'. (Cultural Expert, Interview, Makassar-GKSS 2025)	Bugis-Makassar philosophy, Islamic-cultural synthesis

is neutralised, allowing the community to live in a state of what Galtung (1969:168) terms 'negative peace' (the absence of direct violence) that gradually transforms into 'positive peace' (the presence of social cohesion and just relationships) through the mechanism of *Sipakatau*. This usage follows the Galtungian typology, wherein negative peace describes the post-conflict absence of hostilities while acknowledging that in the Palopo context, this peace remains fragile and requires ongoing narrative work to prevent regression.

As a cultural leader [*Tokoh Adat*] explained:

> 'If we want to remember the old wounds [*from DI/TII*], it is indeed painful. But we are all *Wija To Luwu*. Religions may differ, but Luwu blood is one. That is what makes us not inherit the grudge.' (Cultural Leader, Interview, GPIL-Palopo 2025)

Here, the shared cultural ancestry functions as the narrative bridge, allowing the community to construct an *ipse*-identity not as 'survivors of Islamic violence' but as 'custodians of a unified Luwu family'.

The engines of coexistence: Cultural institutions and theological imperatives

The research findings consistently point to two primary 'engines' that drive harmonious relations at the grassroots level: deeply embedded cultural institutions and foundational theological imperatives. The most prominent cultural engine, particularly in the Toraja context, is the *Tongkonan*. Far more than an architectural object, the *Tongkonan* functions as a 'system of family institutions' and a 'symbol of a very broad kinship bond' that transcends religious divides (Saudi & Muallim 2025:81).

Far more than an architectural object, the Tongkonan functions as a 'cultural landscape' that entangles genealogy, ritual and agrarian practice into a unified system of kinship (Manguju 2022:162; Rombe et al. 2022:105). Within this system, the Tongkonan serves as the spatial anchor for Rambu Solo' rituals, compelling extended families to gather and negotiate their status and solidarity. As numerous respondents from GT Makale and Rantepao explained, within a single *Tongkonan* family, it is common to have members who are Protestant, Catholic and Muslim. Because kinship is paramount, all are obligated to participate in family rituals, especially the extensive funeral ceremonies known as *Rambu Solo'*. These ceremonies become practical sites of moderation, where accommodation is standard practice.

For example, Muslim family members are often provided with a separate buffalo, slaughtered according to halal practice by an imam, ensuring they can fully participate in the communal feasting without compromising their religious principles. This was powerfully corroborated during focus group discussions, where elders recounted a Muslim relative entrusted to distribute both buffalo and pork during a ritual, maintaining his religious boundaries through a negotiated practice of washing his hands with soil afterwards (Cultural Leader, FGD, Rantepao-GT 2025). Furthermore, field observations documented this cultural engine operating beyond ritual contexts; the church structurally shares its spatial footprint and facilities with a neighbouring state elementary school, organically accommodating non-Christian teachers and validating the Tongkonan logic of kinship-based mutual obligation (Field Observation, Rantepao-GT, 2025).

In the Luwu and Makassar contexts, where the *Tongkonan* is not the central organising principle, a similar function is served by the broader Bugis-Makassar cultural ethos of *Sipakatau* and the historical legacy of the Kedatuan Luwu, which traditionally provided protection for religious minorities (Cultural Leader, Interview, Palopo-GPIL 2025).

Theologically, this cultural predisposition towards harmony is reinforced by the fundamental Christian imperative of *kasih* [love]. This was the most frequently cited theological basis for moderation across all denominations. This is not an abstract principle but is codified in official church documents. For instance, the *Tata Dasar* [Constitution] of GPIL explicitly calls for a 'dialogical relationship with other religions in the context of shared responsibility for truth, justice, peace, the integrity of creation, and equality' (GPIL, Church Constitution 2024:art.56). Similarly, the constitution of Toraja Church calls the church 'to realise the signs of the Kingdom of God through the service of love and justice to all people without regard to … religion' (Gereja Toraja 2016:art.12). This theological mandate is put into practice through concrete diaconal actions, such as GKSS's community development projects (e.g. clean water, agriculture), which are intentionally located in and serve majority-Muslim communities (Senior Lay Church Leader, Interview, Makassar-GKSS 2025).

The shadow of the 'Outside': Navigating anxiety and asymmetrical burdens

Despite the robust local mechanisms for harmony, a palpable sense of anxiety and fragility pervades the narratives. This anxiety is consistently framed through a spatial and social binary: a peaceful and trustworthy 'inside' (the local community, the family, Toraja) versus a threatening and unpredictable 'outside' (national politics, extremist groups from Java or elsewhere, provocative social media content) (Lay Leader, FGD, Rantepao-GT 2025).

This was most clearly articulated in the FGD with a GT Congregation, a community that feels itself to be a 'Safe Haven at Home, [*but part of*] A Vulnerable Minority Abroad' (Women's Fellowship Member, FGD, Rantepao-GT 2025). Participants expressed deep frustration with what they perceive as an 'Unbalanced Equation' or an 'Asymmetrical Burden', where they are expected to be endlessly tolerant and accommodating in Toraja, while their co-religionists face persecution and discrimination elsewhere in Indonesia (Lay Leader, FGD, Rantepao-GT 2025). This tension was visceral during focus group discussions, where participants juxtaposed their local security against acute anxieties

regarding external discrimination, citing specific instances of Christian students forced to wear hijabs in Padang and church building permits denied in Bandung (Women's Fellowship Member, FGD, Rantepao-GT 2025). This collective discourse triangulates the psychological cultivation of a 'fortress mentality'; the community experiences an asymmetrical reality where they are structurally secure as a local majority, yet existentially vulnerable as a national minority, rendering their local equilibrium a heavily guarded sanctuary rather than a relaxed default state.

This anxiety is not merely a reaction to external news; it is an existential response to what is perceived as an asymmetrical burden. A youth leader in Rantepao articulated this frustration with piercing clarity:

> 'We struggle half-to-death here to guard the feelings of our Muslim brothers … But look at the news? Our brothers in Java just want to hold Christmas worship and get dispersed. Honestly, sometimes the feeling arises: what is the point of us being moderate if over there we are trampled on'? (Youth Fellowship Leader, FGD, Rantepao-GT 2025)

This sentiment reveals a 'fortress mentality', where local tolerance is fragile because the region is viewed as the 'last home' for Christian identity. Similarly, in Makassar, the 2021 Cathedral bombing transformed this anxiety into an intimate theological struggle. A GKSS elder described the 'heaviest inner struggle' as the effort to 'keep loving when logic tells you to be suspicious' of the very neighbours who usually smile at you (Church Elder, Interview, Makassar-GKSS 2025). Here, moderation is not a polite policy stance, but a gruelling spiritual discipline practiced in the shadow of trauma.

Discussion

Towards a contextual model of religious moderation

The findings of this study present significant implications for both ecclesiology and public policy. The clear disconnect between the state's programmatic discourse and the lived, vernacular realities of local communities suggests that the government's current top-down approach to promoting *Moderasi Beragama* is poorly equipped to engage with the pre-existing, culturally embedded 'theologies of moderation' at the grassroots level, rendering the programme largely invisible to the communities it aims to empower. It fails to recognise and engage with the pre-existing, culturally embedded 'theologies of moderation' that are already operative at the grassroots. The programme's inability to gain traction, as evidenced by the widespread unfamiliarity with the term itself, is a direct result of its failure to connect with this lived dimension (Hasyim 2021:8).

Furthermore, the state's conceptualisation of religious moderation frequently suffers from a 'security and deradicalisation' bias, where the primary objective is national stability rather than genuine social flourishing (Jati et al. 2024:186–187). This top-down epistemology treats moderation as a set of cognitive propositions to be disseminated through seminars and bureaucratic indicators, often ignoring the 'affective' and 'relational' dimensions of interreligious life. By prioritising the *formalism* of the policy – such as the establishment of 'Moderation Villages' [*Desa Moderasi*] based on government metrics – the state risks overlooking the agency of local actors who are already practicing moderation through indigenous mechanisms. The disconnect creates a 'semantic dissonance' where the state speaks the language of policy compliance, while the community speaks the language of kinship and survival, rendering the official programme largely unfamiliar to the very people it aims to empower.

For the churches of South Sulawesi, the findings present a profound ecclesiological challenge. The harmony they experience, while genuine, is largely a passive, 'organic' inheritance. While the values of coexistence are organically embedded in the culture, the intentional mobilisation of these values for interfaith resilience remains latent. The community possesses the 'software' of moderation [*Sipakatau*] but lacks the 'hardware' of institutional programming to activate it against modern radicalism (Pastor, FGD, Makale-GT, 2025). This gap between cultural inheritance and institutional mobilisation became explicitly clear through the participants' own self-diagnosis during the focus groups. Upon discussing the formal concept of moderation, church leaders experienced a collective recognition of their programmatic deficits. As one leader openly admitted, 'Apparently, all this time we have never thought to programme something that could make us sit together with our Muslim friends', immediately proposing future interfaith initiatives (Pastor, FGD, Makale-GT 2025). Similarly, a pastor in Palopo noted the discussion served as 'a motivation for us in the congregation' to institute specific bible studies on the topic (Pastor, FGD, Palopo-GPIL 2025). This 'FGD as Catalyst' phenomenon, where the research process itself sparked a desire for more intentional engagement, indicates a readiness to move from a reactive state of coexistence to a proactive, missional posture of bridge-building.

Crucially, this bridge-building is not foreign to the community's theology. Respondents do not view local vernaculars as separate from Christian doctrine. Rather, concepts like *Sipakatau* function as an indigenous hermeneutical lens through which the biblical command of *agape* is understood and practiced. As a GPIL pastor in Palopo articulated:

> '*Sipakatau* [*to humanise humans*] is not just custom. For me, that is how the Luwu people translate "Love your neighbour"; we cannot love the invisible God if we do not practice *Sipakatau* towards the visible neighbour.' (Congregational Pastor, Interview, GPIL-Palopo 2025)

This theological appropriation of *Sipakatau* represents a significant act of contextual inculturation. It moves beyond the superficial 'clothing' of Christian dogma in local dress and instead locates the ethical substance of the Gospel within the pre-existing moral universe of the Bugis-Toraja world. By equating the cultural imperative of 'humanising the human' with the biblical doctrine of the Imago Dei, local theologians are effectively de-colonising the concept of tolerance.

Tolerance is no longer a passive 'putting up with' the other (as often implied in secular discourse), but an active, ontological recognition of the other's dignity. This 'Sipakatau Theology' provides a robust defence against exclusivity because to deny the humanity of the neighbour is to violate both the custom [*adat*] and the divine command, creating a double-bind of moral accountability that is far stronger than state regulations.

This finding suggests that religious moderation in South Sulawesi flourishes where the church embraces a 'Lived Theology of *Sipakatau*', identifying the cultural practice of humanising the 'other' as the concrete manifestation of the Imago Dei. In this framework, the kitchen separation observed at a *Rambu Solo'* funeral – often dismissed as mere logistics – is reinterpreted as a Eucharistic act of inclusive hospitality (Field Observation, GT-Rantepao, 2025).

However, this missional impulse exists in tension with the churches' traditional understanding of their evangelistic mandate. This tension is evident in official church documents. While the *Tata Dasar GPIL*, for example, calls for a 'dialogical relationship' with other faiths, it also affirms the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) as a core calling (GPIL 2024:art.4). More pointedly, the document analysis uncovered catechetical materials that frame other religions in a confrontational manner, for instance, by advising against the use of the name 'Isa' for Jesus because the biblical name 'Yesus' is deemed superior (GPIL, Catechism Manual 2021:39). For an authentic and coherent theology of moderation to flourish, these internal theological contradictions must be addressed. The churches are called to a deeper hermeneutical task of reconciling their commitment to universal witness with their calling to be agents of peace and *kasih* in a pluralistic society (see Koyama 1999).

Conclusion

The prophetic voice of lived experience

Having described the lived experience of Sipakatau phenomenologically – bracketing our theological judgements – we now move to a theological reflection. We interpret these findings through the lens of Christian ethics to offer a prophetic critique of the cultural paradoxes observed. This study demonstrates that religious moderation in South Sulawesi is not a derivative of state policy but a complex, resilient 'lived theology' rooted in local wisdom, historical memory and pragmatic negotiation. The state's 'prescriptive epistemology' often fails to capture the 'narrative epistemology' of the grassroots.

Based on these findings, this study proposes a shift in both theological orientation and ecclesial practice: (1) *From Prescriptive to Narrative Epistemology*: Authentic moderation cannot be imposed; it must be cultivated by listening to the 'lived texts' of the community. Policy and theology must pivot from teaching definitions to facilitating the *emplotment* of interfaith encounters; and (2) *From 'Fortress' to 'Sipakatau' Ecclesiology*: The anxiety of the 'asymmetrical burden' often drives a defensive 'Fortress Ecclesiology', where the church guards its boundaries against a threatening outside. The lived theology of South Sulawesi offers an alternative model rooted in the shared ethos of the region. It envisions the church not as a fortress but as a spiritual *Tongkonan* [communal house] – a site of radical hospitality where the ethics of *Sipakatau* [humanising the other] transform the stranger into kin [*Siangga'*]. In this model, the church becomes the space where the 'other' is not an enemy to be tolerated, but a neighbour to be humanised. Ultimately, the prophetic voice of the church in a pluralistic society is found not in echoing state policy, but in its ability to emplot a counter-narrative of hope. While authentic moderation is a narrative achievement, it is not without cost. It is often a 'fragile peace' maintained through the suppression of trauma and a defensive 'fortress' posture. Thus, the theology of moderation is not just about harmony, but about the painful negotiation of survival.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Lidya K. Tandirerung: Conceptualisation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft. John C. Simon: Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Santi Yohanis: Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Edward D. Simamora: Data curation, Project administration, Resources, Software, Writing – review & editing. Rio R. Hermanus: Data curation, Project administration, Resources, Software, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Lidya K. Tandirerung, upon reasonable request.

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