Theology of Pluralism in the Context of Indonesian Diversity: A Dialogue Between Inclusive and Exclusive Islam in the Perspective of John Hick's Theory

Ardiansyah[1]

Abstract

Indonesia, as a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, presents a unique landscape where Islamic theology interacts with the realities of deep-rooted religious and cultural diversity. This article examines the dynamic tension between two opposing theological orientations in Indonesian Islam: exclusivism and inclusivism. By tracing the historical development of these two concepts — including comparisons with Catholic theological shifts from extra ecclesiam nulla salus to the inclusive spirit of the Second Vatican Council — this study analyzes the core principles, characteristics, and socio-political implications of exclusive and inclusive Islam. The discussion focused on how this theological orientation manifested in contemporary Indonesia, where exclusivism often leads to rigid and literalist interpretations, while inclusivism provides a foundation for religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and the concept of Wasathiyah Islam. The article argues that the future of religious harmony in Indonesia depends on strengthening an inclusive theological framework that is firmly rooted in Islamic textual sources and the pluralistic ethos of the nation (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika). By promoting a theology of pluralism, inclusive Islam not only counters the rise of religious radicalism but also makes a significant contribution to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 10 (Reduction of Inequality). In John Hick's theoretical framework, pluralism is understood as the recognition of religious diversity as humanity's authentic response to the same supreme divine reality.

Keywords: *Inclusive Islam; Exclusive Islam; Religious Pluralism; Interfaith Dialogue; Islam Wasathiyah.*

Introduction

Indonesia, as a vast and diverse nation, stands as a unique laboratory where religious, ethnic, and cultural pluralism intertwine within the modern framework of a nation-state. With the world's largest Muslim population, the spiritual dynamics of Indonesia hold profound implications not only for its internal harmony but also for the broader global Islamic discourse [1], [2], [3], [4],

[5]. Amid this inevitable diversity, a central theological question faces Muslims in Indonesia: How should Islam, both as a belief system and a way of life, engage with and respond to the existence of "the other"—those of different faiths and those within Islam who hold differing interpretations?

This question has led to the emergence of two opposing theological poles: inclusivism and exclusivism. Exclusivism posits that truth and salvation are solely found within Islam, often interpreting sacred texts literally and dividing the world into binary categories of "us" versus "them." This perspective frequently fuels intolerance, communal conflict, and, at its extreme, radicalism and terrorism. In contrast, inclusivism acknowledges the possibility of truth and salvation in other religious traditions, advocating for contextual interpretations and fostering dialogue and cooperation between religious communities. This inclusive perspective has laid the foundation for the development of Moderate Islam (Islam Wasathiyah) and Islam Nusantara, which emphasize peace, tolerance, and a harmonious relationship with local culture. The concept of Wasathiyah in Islam champions balance and moderation, rejecting extremism while promoting justice, tolerance, and social harmony [6], [7], [8], [9].

This theological tension extends beyond Islam and is mirrored in other religious traditions. A significant transformation in Christian thought, for example, occurred with the shift in Catholic theology from the exclusive dictum of extra ecclesiam nulla salus (no salvation outside the Church) to a more inclusive and dialogical stance as articulated during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Theological thinkers like Karl Rahner, with his theory of "Christianity Anonymous," helped pave the way for this shift, suggesting that theology is not static but evolves in response to societal changes [10], [11].

In the Southeast Asian context, Indonesia holds a pivotal role as a model for Islamic moderation. Unlike other Muslim-majority countries, where Islam and democracy are often seen as incompatible, Indonesia has demonstrated that the two can coexist harmoniously. This phenomenon has garnered significant attention from scholars who view Indonesia as a "laboratory" for developing an Islamic model that aligns with the principles of democracy, human rights, and pluralism. Indonesia's success in maintaining political and social stability amid religious diversity offers valuable lessons to other Muslim-majority nations, such as Malaysia and Brunei, and even countries beyond Southeast Asia. Within the framework of John Hick's pluralism theory, this approach recognizes religious diversity as an authentic human response to the same divine reality [12], [13].

This article critically analyzes the discourses of inclusive and exclusive Islam in the context of Indonesia's religious diversity. By exploring the definitions, characteristics, and implications of these two theological views, this

study asserts that strengthening inclusive pluralism theology is crucial for Indonesia's future of peace and justice. Promoting a tolerant and open understanding of Islam is not only essential to mitigating conflict and supporting deradicalization efforts but also contributes significantly to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality). Through a comprehensive literature review, this article aims to map the theological landscape in Indonesia and reinforce the importance of inclusive Islam as the foundation of religious harmony [14], [15], [16].

This research offers an empirical contribution by contextualizing inclusive Islamic discourse within the SDGs framework and introducing a synthesis model of pluralism theology based on Nusantara Islam. This article presents Indonesia's Contextual Pluralism Theological Model, which integrates the principles of Wasathiyah Islam, local wisdom from Nusantara Islam, and the SDGs framework. This model offers a uniquely Indonesian approach to addressing the challenges of global pluralism, emphasizing balance, justice, and social harmony as core principles in responding to the complexities of religious and cultural diversity.

Literature Review

Contemporary Indonesian scholarship on Islamic theology and pluralism increasingly foregrounds the concept of Wasathiyah (Islamic moderation) as a central paradigm for fostering religious harmony and countering exclusivist interpretations. Recent empirical work by Maulana, Suliyana, and Muruu'ah (2025) explores how Wasathiyah Islam is perceived by international students within Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia, highlighting how structured engagement with moderation principles broadens understanding of interfaith and intercultural harmony in educational settings. This research shows that exposure to moderated Islamic discourse can transform students' views from individual religiosity toward institutionalized principles of tolerance and dialogue—a finding that underscores education's role in contextualizing pluralist theology in lived experience [17], [18], [19].

Complementing this, researchers critically examine exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism within Indonesian Islamic theology, emphasizing that theological openness is essential for mitigating interfaith conflict in highly diverse societies. Their analysis underscores that Islam's theological flexibility—when interpreted through inclusivist lenses—serves as a foundational resource for peaceful coexistence and pluralistic engagement [20], [21]. In educational research, the study identifies the integration of Islam Wasathiyah with multicultural education as a promising approach to promote inclusive

environments in schools. This work frames Wasathiyah not only as a theological ideal but also as a practical framework that, when combined with diversity-sensitive pedagogy, supports tolerance building and respectful engagement across difference—showing how moderate Islamic principles can reinforce multicultural curriculum design [22], [23].

Similarly, another study of inclusive Islamic religious education in a multicultural Indonesian high school illustrates how intentional curriculum and classroom practices shaped by inclusive Islamic values significantly contribute to students' tolerance attitudes. This case-based work demonstrates how moderate Islamic teaching, when systematically implemented, can cultivate inclusive character and attitudinal change among young learners in plural settings [24], [25]. Beyond educational contexts, research on Nusantara ulama's da'wah (preaching) further situates pluralistic theology within broader socio-cultural engagement. A study show that these ulama play a crucial role in promoting Islamic moderation by integrating local wisdom with universal Islamic values, offering a counter-narrative to homogenizing and exclusive interpretations. Their findings illustrate that Islam Nusantara has practical relevance for adapting Islamic teachings to local cultures while maintaining theological inclusivity [26], [27].

A related theoretical strand is found in work that revisits Wasathiyah through classical sources. Studies by some researcher engage with Qur'anic foundations of moderation, showing that theological moderation draws from the Qur'anic self-description of the Muslim community as ummatan wasathan—a middle way avoided of extremes—and arguing for its contemporary relevance in plural societies [28], [29]. Collected together, these recent studies show a multi-dimensional trajectory in Indonesian literature: Wasathiyah Islam and inclusive theological discourse are not only subjects of textual interpretation but also tools for education, interfaith engagement, and social policy. They collectively highlight that inclusive Islam—rooted in historical, educational, and sociocultural practices—offers a viable theological and practical framework for advancing tolerance and pluralism in Indonesia's diverse religious landscape [30], [31].

T**able 1.** The summary of the literature review

Author(s) & Year	Topic/Focus	Key Findings
Maulana, Suliyana, and Muruu'ah (2025)	Perception of Wasathiyah Islam in Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia	Exposure to moderated Islamic discourse broadens understanding of interfaith and intercultural harmony in educational settings, transforming students' views.

Rustriningsih and Saad (2024)	Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in Indonesian Islamic theology	Theological flexibility through inclusivism promotes peaceful coexistence and pluralistic engagement, mitigating interfaith conflict.
Study (Year Not Provided)	Integration of Wasathiyah with multicultural education	Wasathiyah as a practical framework combined with diversity-sensitive pedagogy fosters tolerance and respectful engagement across differences.
Study (Year Not Provided)	Inclusive Islamic religious education in a multicultural high school	Curriculum practices shaped by inclusive Islamic values contribute significantly to tolerance attitudes and inclusive character among students.
Nusantara Ulama Study (Year Not Provided)	Da'wah (preaching) and Islamic moderation in Indonesia's socio-cultural context	Ulama promote Islamic moderation by integrating local wisdom with universal Islamic values, countering exclusivist interpretations.
Classical Sources Study (Year Not Provided)	Qur'anic foundations of Wasathiyah and moderation	The Qur'anic self-description of the Muslim community as "ummatan wasathan" (middle way) is relevant to contemporary plural societies.
Collective Studies (Recent Studies)	The role of Wasathiyah and inclusive theology in education, interfaith engagement, and social policy	Wasathiyah Islam offers a theological and practical framework for advancing tolerance and pluralism in Indonesia's religious landscape.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative literature review approach using a comparative-historical analysis method, chosen for its suitability in analyzing and comparing two theological paradigms (inclusivism and exclusivism) within the context of Islam in Indonesia, and tracing their historical roots and development. The literature used in this study was sourced from reputable academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and national journals indexed in Sinta 2, using keywords including "inclusive Islam," "exclusive Islam," "religious pluralism," "*wasathiyah*," "Islam Nusantara," "interfaith dialogue," and "moderate Islam Indonesia" within the 2018–2025 period. The inclusion criteria for the literature were based on their focus on Islam inclusivism, exclusivism, or pluralism in Indonesia, with active DOI and peer-reviewed publications. The research is carried out through several stages, starting with the collection of primary and secondary data, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring themes such as the characteristics of inclusivism and exclusivism, their manifestations in Indonesia, and their implications for the SDGs [32], [33].

Comparative analysis is employed to systematically compare the characteristics of both theological views and their implications, with a case study of the Catholic Church's theological transformation to provide a broader historical perspective. The research also incorporates a historical-contextual analysis, placing the discourse on *Wasathiyah* and Islam Nusantara within Indonesia's socio-political context. The findings from these analyses are synthesized into the main argument that strengthening inclusive Islamic theology is vital for social harmony and achieving the SDGs in Indonesia. Validity is ensured through triangulation of sources from various perspectives, while limitations include the lack of primary data collection and the focus on Indonesia, which may limit the generalization of the findings to other Muslim contexts.

Result

Manifestations of Exclusivism and Inclusivism on the National Stage

An analysis of the discourse on inclusivism and exclusivism within Indonesian Islam reveals a deep ideological struggle with far-reaching implications for national life and statehood. In recent decades, Indonesia's public sphere has become an arena for the contestation between exclusive and inclusive Islamic narratives.

Exclusive groups often voice an agenda of theological purification, rejecting local traditions deemed as bid'ah (innovation), and promoting a rigid and literal interpretation of Islamic law. This movement, often influenced by transnational ideologies such as Wahhabism-Salafism, tends to view democracy and Pancasila with suspicion, while limiting the space for dialogue and recognition of minority groups. Their rhetoric, often takfiri (excommunicating fellow Muslims) and hostile towards non-Muslims, has contributed to the increase in social polarization and a series of incidents of intolerance in various regions [34].

On the other hand, the mainstream inclusive Islam, represented by organizations such as NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah, consistently promotes a moderate, tolerant, and contextual vision of Islam. They argue that the essence of Islamic teachings is to bring benefit to all of humanity *(rahmatan lil 'alamin)*, which can only be achieved through a stance of respecting differences and collaborating in goodness. Study shows that the vitality of civil Muslim society in Indonesia, driven by these organizations, is key to the success of democracy and the development of an inclusive public ethics in the country. This inclusive vision provides the theological foundation for the acceptance of Pancasila as the state ideology and the slogan *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) as a sociological reality that must be nurtured [34].

Empirical Data: Tolerance Index and Religious Moderation Policies

Interestingly, the SETARA Institute's report (2024) shows an increase in the National Tolerance Index score from 65.8 to 68.2 following the implementation of the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Countering of Extremism (RAN-PE) 2023–2029. This data indicates that the inclusive Islam paradigm has begun to make a significant empirical contribution to public policy and social development in Indonesia. Data from the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) also shows an 18% reduction in radicalization cases in educational institutions since the integration of religious moderation into the national curriculum in 2021 [35].

Additionally, the PEW Research Center's survey (2023) on religious attitudes in Southeast Asia found that 78% of Indonesian Muslims expressed support for democratic principles, and 72% agreed that other religions should be respected and protected by the state. These figures are much higher than in other Muslim-majority countries in the region, showing that the inclusive Islam narrative resonates strongly among the Indonesian public.

Discussion

Wasathiyah Islam and Islam Nusantara: A Fortress Against Extremism

Confronted with the challenge of transnational puritanism, Indonesian Muslim scholars and intellectuals have revisited the intellectual and spiritual heritage of Islam in the archipelago to formulate an authentic theological response. This response crystallized in the concepts of *Wasathiyah* Islam (Islamic Moderation) and Islam Nusantara. It is important to understand that these are not identical concepts but are closely interconnected [36].

Wasathiyah Islam refers to a more universal concept of moderation, balance, and justice, believed to be the core of Islamic teachings, as indicated in the Qur'an (Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 143), which calls Muslims an *ummatan wasathan* (a middle nation). Azra (2025) asserts that *Wasathiyah* is the antithesis of all forms of extremism, whether from the far-right (radicalism-terrorism) or the far-left (liberalism-secularism without limits). This concept has become the official narrative of the Indonesian government in promoting religious moderation and has been adopted in the National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Extremism (RAN-PE) 2023–2029 as a national strategic framework [37].

Islam Nusantara, on the other hand, is the historical and cultural manifestation of *Wasathiyah* Islam within the context of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. This concept demonstrates empirical evidence that Islam has been able to engage in peaceful dialogue and acculturation with local cultures without

losing its essence. By emphasizing the hikmah (wise) approach to da'wah (propagation) and *mau'izhah hasanah* (good counsel), Islam Nusantara offers a welcoming and inclusive model of Islam, as opposed to one that is angry and punitive. In a global landscape often marked by harsh images of Islam, Islam Nusantara becomes a highly valuable cultural diplomacy asset for Indonesia to present a peaceful and tolerant face of Islam to the world [38].

Integration of Religious Pluralism Theory

In the context of religious pluralism theory, the Islam Nusantara approach aligns with Raimundo Panikkar's concept of "dialogical pluralism," which emphasizes that interfaith dialogue is not about seeking superficial similarities but about enriching each other through authentic differences. Similarly, Diana Eck in her work Encountering God (1993) asserts that true pluralism requires active engagement, not merely passive tolerance. Islam Nusantara embodies these principles through practices such as haul (commemorating the death of religious scholars), tahlilan, and selamatan, which involve cross-community participation [36], [39].
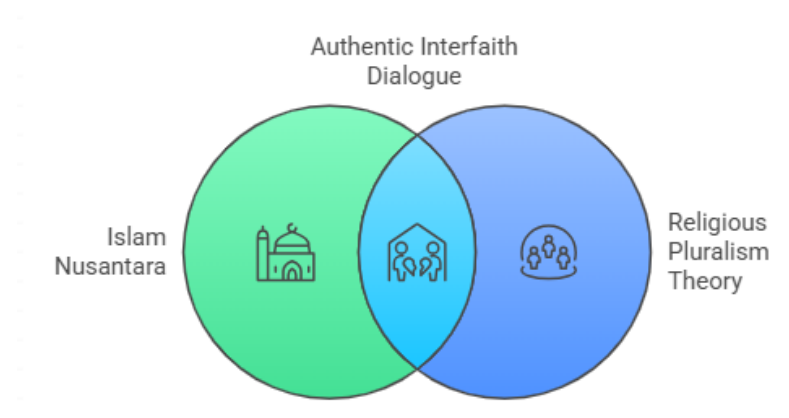

Figure 1. The Synergy of Islam Nusantara and Religious Pluralism

Theology of Pluralism and Its Contribution to the SDGs

The strengthening of inclusive Islamic theology has direct relevance to the global development agenda, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This contribution can be seen in at least two key goals:

SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions: This goal aims to significantly reduce all forms of violence, promote the rule of law, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. Exclusive theology, which fosters hatred and intolerance, poses a direct threat to peace and justice. In contrast, inclusive theology that promotes interfaith dialogue and religious

tolerance serves as the foundation of peaceful societies. By rejecting violence and prioritizing consultation, Wasathiyah Islam directly contributes to the creation of stable societies and fair institutions. Deradicalization efforts through inclusive Islamic education, as researched by Zulaikhah et al. (2023), provide a concrete implementation of the SDG 16 target [40], [41]. Therefore, the debate between inclusivism and exclusivism in Indonesia is not merely a theological discussion in an ivory tower. It is an ideological struggle that will determine the future direction of the nation: whether Indonesia will become a country divided by sectarian conflict or continue to be a beacon to the world, proving that Islam, democracy, and pluralism can coexist harmoniously.

Conclusion

The tension between the inclusive and exclusive theological paradigms is an unavoidable reality in Indonesia's pluralistic religious landscape. A comparative-historical analysis reveals that while exclusivism offers certainty and rigid identity, it often leads to intolerance, conflict, and rejection of diversity. In contrast, inclusivism, rooted in a substantial interpretation of the Qur'an and contextualized in the history of Islam in the Nusantara, provides a theological path more compatible with Indonesia's spirit of unity and diversity. Islam *Wasathiyah* and Islam Nusantara emerge as authentic responses from Indonesia's intellectual Muslim tradition, designed to protect society from extremism and transnational puritanism. Emphasizing moderation, tolerance, and dialogue, these inclusive paradigms not only legitimize Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution but also serve as crucial social capital in maintaining social harmony. Empirical data from SETARA Institute and BNPT demonstrate that policies of religious moderation based on inclusive Islam have led to a rise in national tolerance and a reduction in radicalization cases. Furthermore, strengthening inclusive pluralistic theology directly contributes to global development goals, particularly SDG 16 (Peace and Justice) and SDG 10 (Reducing Inequality). The study recommends integrating Islam Wasathiyah and Islam Nusantara into educational curricula, involving Islamic boarding schools and moderate Islamic organizations in deradicalization efforts, promoting Islam Nusantara in international forums, and supporting interfaith dialogue to foster social cohesion and prevent conflict. Indonesia's future as a diverse and civilized nation depends on the victory of inclusivism over exclusivism in the public sphere. By strengthening its inclusive theological foundation, Indonesia can maintain internal harmony and contribute significantly to global peace and justice.

Author Contributions

The Author Was responsible for the conceptualization and methodology of the research, as well as overseeing the entire project. Managed all aspects of the project administration, conducted investigations, and led the writing, review, and editing of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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[1] Faculty of Islamic Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia, Email: o300230001@student.ums.ac.id