Culturally Based Religious Moderation Communication in Bagansiapiapi for Interfaith Harmony

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Abstract

This study explores religious moderation communication in fostering interreligious harmony in Bagansiapiapi, Rokan Hilir, Riau. It focuses on three aspects: (1) community understanding of religious moderation, (2) communication practices that support interfaith harmony, and (3) supporting and inhibiting factors in promoting religious coexistence. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through field observation, interviews, and documentation involving religious leaders, community figures, local authorities, organizations, and multireligious communities. Findings reveal that religious moderation in Bagansiapiapi is deeply embedded in the local culture, with core values such as national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and acceptance of cultural diversity shaping daily interactions. Communication of religious moderation is practiced through inclusive and symbolic interactions based on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Symbolic Interactionism. Key enablers include inclusive cultural values, proactive community leadership, and empathy-driven communication. Challenges arise from the absence of permanent interfaith youth forums and limited institutional support. The novelty

of this research lies in three contributions: (1) the formulation of a Cultural-Accommodative Communication Model, where symbolic convergence fosters organic interfaith engagement; (2) positioning religious moderation as a community-based collective identity rather than a top-down directive; and (3) demonstrating how religious and national symbols function as active instruments of moderation communication. These findings provide valuable insights for developing sustainable religious harmony strategies in other multicultural settings.

1. Introduction

Religion serves as a fundamental element in human life, governing not only the relationship between individuals and the Divine but also shaping social behavior within communities. Universal religious values such as compassion, justice, peace, and tolerance are essential foundations for a harmonious society. In Indonesia's pluralistic context, religion acts both as a unifying force and as a potential source of conflict when not properly managed. A deep and accurate understanding of religious teachings is therefore crucial in building a peaceful and cohesive society. According to the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, particularly Article 29, paragraph 2, the state guarantees every citizen the freedom to embrace and practice their religion (Zalsabella P et al., 2023). This constitutional assurance provides the normative basis for the development of harmonious interreligious life. However, practical challenges continue to arise due to differing interpretations, political interests, and sociocultural dynamics that affect religious interactions.

Indonesia officially recognizes six religions: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, each carrying messages of goodness and peace. Despite this, interreligious relations can often be strained due to misunderstandings of religious doctrines or exclusivist attitudes from some followers. To address this, interfaith dialogue and religious literacy are necessary to emphasize the shared values found within these diverse faiths (Risnawati & Priyantoro, 2021). Social conflicts rooted in religion, while not widespread on a national scale, still evoke concern. Natalia, as cited in Risnawati's work, notes that religious conflicts are frequently the result of misinterpretations of teachings. When one group imposes its perspective on another religion, tensions become inevitable. This imposition of belief often fosters intolerance and may escalate into radicalism or violence, contradicting the core messages of any faith.

Such issues highlight the urgent need for moderate religious education and cross-faith understanding as a means of preserving national unity. In today's era of globalization and digital media, extremist religious narratives can spread rapidly and influence public opinion dangerously fast. Hence, it becomes essential for government institutions, religious leaders, and communities to collaboratively promote inclusive and open religious communication. One significant initiative in this regard is the concept of *religious moderation*, championed by Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs. Religious moderation refers to a balanced and just approach to practicing faith, emphasizing the avoidance of extremism and the promotion of tolerance. Vice President KH Ma'ruf Amin has stressed that religious moderation is key to fostering both local and global social harmony (Ridwan, 2016).

Importantly, religious moderation is not about blending different religions but about encouraging believers to practice their faith with wisdom and proportion. In a pluralistic society like Indonesia, where daily life involves constant interreligious contact, moderation serves as a middle ground between extreme religiosity and radical secularism. As a national strategy supported by scholars and religious leaders alike, this approach relies on dialogue, mutual respect, and appreciation of local cultural values. These values must be applied not only at the national level but also at the grassroots level to ensure communities across Indonesia feel their practical impact. Communication becomes a vital instrument in this process, shaping collective understanding and enabling religious moderation to be meaningfully understood and practiced by society at large.

Conceptually, religious moderation includes four core indicators: national commitment, rejection of violence, tolerance of differences, and accommodation of local culture (Azis & Samad, 2024). These pillars underscore that religious practice must align with Indonesia's national identity and social values. The first indicator, national commitment, reinforces that faith practices should not contradict the foundational principles of the Republic of Indonesia, which are rooted in Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika. The second indicator, anti-violence, advocates for the rejection of all forms of violence in religious expression, emphasizing that religion is intended as a blessing, not a source of conflict. The third is tolerance, which calls for mutual respect among religious communities without necessitating doctrinal agreement. Lastly, being accommodating to local culture means embracing indigenous traditions that do not contradict religious tenets, thereby promoting integration and social cohesion.

These four indicators provide a universal framework for religious moderation in Indonesia. However, to ensure meaningful implementation, such values must be examined in specific cultural and geographic contexts. One such context is Bagansiapiapi, a town whose unique demographic composition and cultural heritage offer fertile ground for studying interfaith communication. In this regard, Indonesia's culturally rich context makes the fourth indicator, respect for local culture, particularly relevant. Misguided religious extremism often rejects local traditions as heretical, thereby alienating communities from their historical wisdom. Religious moderation seeks to address this gap through an adaptive and humane approach, promoting religious messages that resonate with cultural familiarity.

Figure 1. Map of Bagansiapiapi City
Source: Bagansiapiapi City Population and Civil Registration Office

This is especially significant in regions like Bagansiapiapi, Rokan Hilir, and Riau, where diverse cultural legacies shape social interactions. Bagansiapiapi, a small town with deep multicultural roots, is home to ethnic Chinese, Malays, Bataks, Minangs, and Javanese. This diversity not only adds complexity to interreligious dynamics but also enriches the town's identity. Understanding how religious moderation is communicated and practiced in such a setting is critical for ensuring peaceful coexistence within Indonesia's broader multicultural framework. Bagansiapiapi's unique historical background as the second-largest fishing center in the world after Bergen, Norway, positioned it as a hub for intercultural interaction. Its economic prosperity attracted people of various faiths and ethnicities, fostering active, everyday engagements among communities. However, this same diversity also presents challenges

in managing potential cultural and religious tensions. To sustain harmony, effective cross-cultural communication is essential. Without it, differences in interests or values could escalate into social conflict or acts of intolerance (Hati et al., 2023).

Figure 2. Ing Hok Kiong Temple and the Bakar Tongkang tradition in Bagansiapiapi
Source: www.melayupedia.com

In the diverse and dynamic context of Bagansiapiapi, interfaith communication grounded in religious moderation plays a pivotal role in maintaining social harmony. Without effective communication, the principles of moderation risk remaining mere normative slogans, lacking practical application at the grassroots level. Religious leaders, local governments, community figures, and local media thus have a critical role in disseminating inclusive and respectful religious messages. However, the implementation of moderation values in this region faces significant challenges, particularly due to the dual impact of globalization and digital technology. While these developments provide broader access to religious knowledge and facilitate faster outreach, they also open the door to intolerant narratives and radical ideologies that can spread unchecked without strong religious and digital literacy (Azis & Samad, 2024). Furthermore, the absence of in-depth academic studies evaluating the effectiveness of interfaith communication strategies in localized contexts such as Bagansiapiapi leaves a gap in understanding how national programs are truly internalized at the grassroots level.

Bagansiapiapi made a positive effort to promote interfaith harmony through activities such as interfaith dialogues, joint community service events, and inclusive religious celebrations. These initiatives reflect a collective awareness of the importance of maintaining peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, a lack of systematic and institutionalized

frameworks, whether in local governance or educational curricula, limits the sustainable implementation of religious moderation. Moreover, the city's distinct cultural identity, shaped by religious and traditional values, demands a tailored communication approach. What works in other areas may not be effective here without first considering the local cultural nuances. Thus, a contextual, participatory, and culturally rooted communication strategy is necessary. Religious moderation must not be enforced solely through top-down policies but should also emerge from bottom-up engagement, with communities actively shaping and owning the narrative. As emphasized by Santoso et al. (2022), religious moderation should not dilute religious faith but rather foster an interpretation that avoids extremism while promoting social cohesion.

Despite national efforts to promote religious moderation, its practical implementation in culturally diverse and semi-urban communities like Bagansiapiapi remains underexplored. While various national programs emphasize interfaith dialogue and tolerance, little is known about how these values are understood, communicated, and practiced at the grassroots level. Bagansiapiapi's unique socio-religious composition, where ethnic Chinese, Malays, Bataks, Minangs, and Javanese live near each other, presents both opportunities and challenges for interfaith harmony. The central problem lies in the absence of a systematic understanding of how communication strategies shape religious moderation in such settings. This knowledge gap is particularly significant given that most prior studies have focused on urban areas with different socio-cultural dynamics. Without context-specific insights, the principles of religious moderation risk being perceived as top-down rhetoric rather than lived realities.

To analyze how religious moderation is communicated and enacted in Bagansiapiapi, this study adopts Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Symbolic Interactionism as its theoretical lenses. CAT provides a framework for understanding how individuals adjust their communication styles to manage social distance across religious and cultural lines, an essential aspect in a town marked by diversity like Bagansiapiapi. Through convergence or divergence in speech, tone, and behavior, CAT helps explain how mutual understanding or miscommunication occurs between religious groups. Meanwhile, Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes how shared meanings and social norms are constructed through everyday interaction, shedding light on how local communities interpret and internalize the abstract concept of religious moderation. By combining these two theories, the study aims to

reveal both the pragmatic and symbolic dimensions of interfaith communication at the grassroots level.

Based on this background, the present research seeks to explore the communication strategies that promote religious moderation in fostering interfaith harmony in Bagansiapiapi, Rokan Hilir, Riau. The overarching research question is: *How is religious moderation communicated to support interfaith harmony in Bagansiapiapi?* This study further breaks down the main inquiry into three specific research questions: (1) How do local communities understand the concept of religious moderation? (2) How is interfaith communication practiced to promote harmony in Bagansiapiapi? and (3) What are the supporting and inhibiting factors in realizing peaceful coexistence among religious groups in the region? Through these questions, the research aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the discourse on religious communication in multicultural societies.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using an ethnographic method, which is aimed at understanding the communication of religious moderation within the natural and socio-cultural context of a multiethnic society. Ethnography allows researchers to explore the meanings, values, and practices embedded in everyday interactions, especially those involving interfaith dynamics. As Arikunto (2019) explains, a research method provides systematic steps for formulating ideas and interpreting complex social phenomena. This design enables the researcher to produce rich, narrative descriptions of social activities as they unfold in their real-life settings (Creswell, 2014). The selected research site, Bagansiapiapi, Rokan Hilir Regency, Riau Province, is a pluralistic city inhabited by diverse ethnic and religious communities, including Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Confucians, who have long practiced peaceful coexistence. This makes Bagansiapiapi a representative locus for investigating how religious moderation is communicated, practiced, and sustained within a culturally diverse environment.

2.1 Data Sources

The data in this study were obtained through a field research-based qualitative approach using an anthropological model that focuses on people and their culture. The data unit under investigation includes observation results, information from informants, and analysis of the community as the primary subject of study. The data are categorized into two types: primary and secondary data. Primary data were gathered directly through interviews with community leaders and stakeholders in Bagansiapiapi, such as the head of the MUI, religious leaders from Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism, village officials, Malay

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cultural leaders, as well as representatives from the local government and youth organizations. This data is considered vital because it reflects real conditions in the field, although collecting it requires significant time and effort. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from various sources such as books, archives, official documents, magazines, social media, and documentation relevant to religious moderation and interfaith harmony. Both data types were analyzed academically to ensure that the validity and depth of information were aligned with the research focus. This approach allows the researcher to understand the practice of religious moderation communication within the social and cultural context of the multiethnic society in Bagansiapiapi.

2.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques are crucial in research as they form the basis for obtaining information relevant to the study's objectives. In the research titled "Religious Moderation Communication in Building Interfaith Harmony in Bagansiapiapi, Rokan Hilir, Riau," three main techniques were used: observation, interviews, and documentation studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Observation was carried out systematically from the beginning to the end of the research to examine social interactions, moderation practices, and the dynamics of interfaith relationships. This observation aimed to understand the social context and the chronology of communication within the multiethnic society of Bagansiapiapi. Additionally, structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth information from key informants, such as religious leaders, community figures, and government officials familiar with the local situation. The questions were systematically prepared to ensure the relevance of the data to the research focus. The next technique was a documentation study, involving the examination of various documents such as local government policies, books, archives, academic articles, field notes, and interview recordings. This approach helped strengthen empirical data with valid written sources. By combining these three techniques, the researcher could obtain a comprehensive picture of the implementation of religious moderation communication in fostering harmony in the study area (Strauss & Corbin, 1988).

2.3 Data Analysis Technique

According to Creswell (2014), in qualitative research, data analysis is the researcher's effort to understand and give meaning to data, whether in text or visual form, conducted comprehensively. Therefore, researchers must prepare the data properly so that it can be analyzed, understood, presented, and interpreted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data analysis technique used in this study is qualitative and began during the pre-

research stage, continued throughout the fieldwork, and concluded after data collection. The goal of this data analysis process is to search for and systematically organize data obtained from interviews, field notes, and documentation studies. The data were then categorized, broken down into units, synthesized, and arranged into specific patterns. This allows the researcher to highlight the most important information and ultimately draw conclusions that are easily understood by both the researcher and readers. Michael Huberman, as cited in Kurniawan, stated that qualitative data analysis is conducted interactively and continuously until it reaches saturation, where the data is considered complete and conclusive (Miles et al., 2014). This analysis involves three main components:

a. Data Reduction: In this phase, the researchers selected, focused, and simplified the raw data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the data were rich and extensive, including narratives from religious leaders, local officials, community members, and interfaith activists in Bagansiapiapi. The reduction process involved identifying recurring themes relevant to religious moderation and interfaith communication. Codes such as "inclusive messaging," "cross-cultural interaction," "local religious practices," and "digital media influence" were generated. Irrelevant or redundant information was excluded to maintain analytical clarity. This phase helped refine the data into manageable categories that aligned with the research questions.

b. Data Display: In this phase, the organized data were presented in descriptive narrative form, mainly through selected excerpts from interview transcripts and observation notes. The researchers compiled relevant quotes and interaction patterns that highlighted key themes such as inclusive religious discourse, intergroup cooperation, and mutual respect. These displays served to illustrate how religious moderation was communicated in daily practices within the community of Bagansiapiapi. For instance, interview excerpts from religious leaders and residents were used to show how tolerance and mutual understanding are expressed in community interactions. This narrative presentation allowed the researchers to identify emerging patterns and relationships in the data without the use of visual diagrams or charts. It provided a rich, contextual understanding that was grounded in the voices and lived experiences of the participants.

c. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: In the final stage, the researchers concluded by synthesizing patterns and categories that emerged from the data. The conclusions addressed how religious moderation is understood, communicated, and sustained in Bagansiapiapi. For

example, it was concluded that locally rooted practices such as joint community rituals and culturally inclusive events played a significant role in maintaining harmony. These conclusions were then verified through triangulation, member checking, and re-examination of the data to ensure credibility and accuracy. Feedback from participants was incorporated to validate the interpretations, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings. This phase confirmed that religious moderation in Bagansiapiapi is not merely theoretical but is actively shaped through contextual communication practices.

2.4 Data Validation Techniques

To ensure data accuracy in the study "Religious Moderation Communication in Building Interfaith Harmony in Bagansiapiapi, Rokan Hilir, Riau," validation strategies commonly applied in qualitative research were used, emphasizing credibility and transferability. One of the efforts made by the researcher was prolonged engagement with the research subjects to ensure that the obtained data truly reflected the actual conditions in the field. Additionally, extended observation time was applied to thoroughly and deeply capture the social context under study, without expanding the scope of the research. Triangulation was the primary method used to test data validity, encompassing source, technique, and time triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by verifying information from various key figures such as religious leaders, community figures, and representatives of multiethnic and multireligious communities, which were then compared and categorized to gain an objective understanding. Technique triangulation involved comparing data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation to identify consistency among the methods. Time triangulation was implemented by interviewing informants at different times to test the consistency of the information provided. All results were then re-validated through member checks to ensure the information obtained was accurate and reliable (Creswell, 2014).
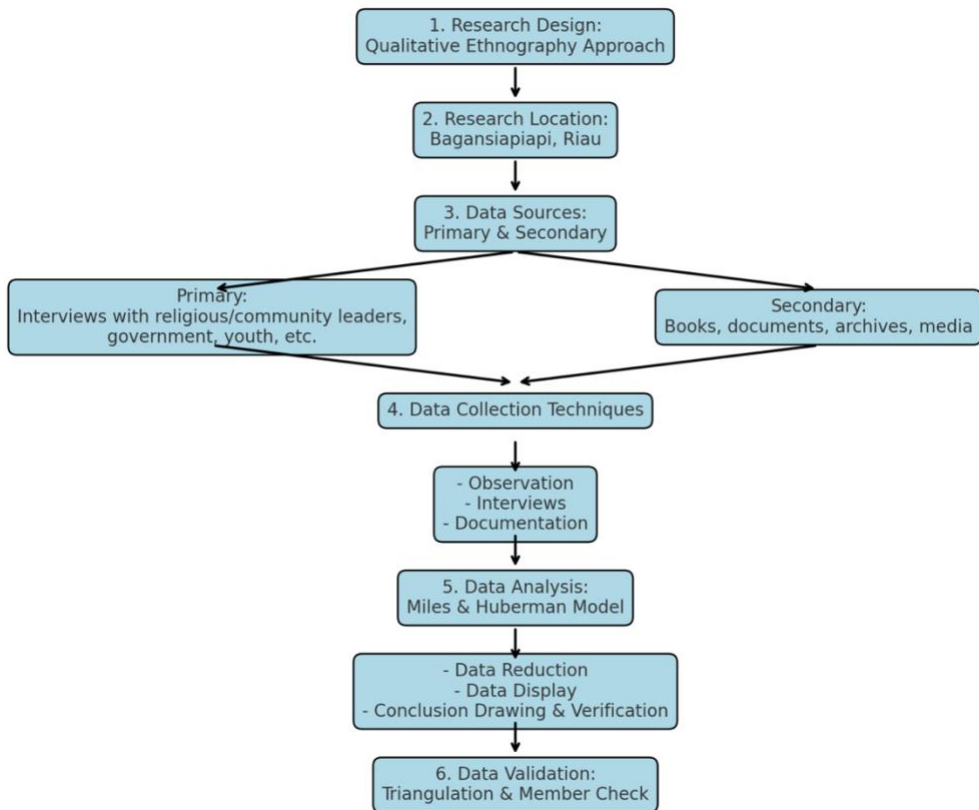
Figure 3. Research Method Flowchart: Religious Moderation Communication

3. Results

3.1 Community Understanding of Religious Moderation in Bagansiapiapi

The findings reveal that religious moderation is deeply embedded in the lived experiences of Bagansiapiapi residents. During interviews, multiple participants consistently expressed a natural and mutual commitment to tolerance. For instance, Ustadz Junaidi, a local Islamic religious leader, stated:

> *"Di sini kami tidak pernah mempermasalahkan agama orang lain. Kalau ada perayaan Cap Go Meh atau Bakar Tongkang, kami ikut bantu jaga, bantu bersih-bersih. Itu sudah biasa dari dulu."*
>
> ("Here, we never make an issue out of others' religions. If there's a Cap Go Meh or Bakar Tongkang celebration, we help with security, help clean up. It has always been like that.")

Similarly, Kang Siu Kie, a Confucian elder, shared:

> *"Waktu Idul Fitri, saya sering kirim kue ke rumah tetangga Muslim. Kami juga diundang makan bersama. Ini bukan soal agama, ini soal rasa saling menghargai."*
>
> ("During Eid, I often send cakes to my Muslim neighbors. We are also invited to eat together. This is not about religion; it's about mutual respect.")

Observations confirmed the community's active involvement in one another's religious events. For example, during the Bakar Tongkang festival, several Muslim youths were seen assisting in logistical preparations. In turn, Chinese community members were involved in communal Eid celebrations by preparing food and helping with event arrangements.

In one documented village meeting, a local youth leader commented:

> *"Kami ini hidup bersama dari kecil, jadi tidak aneh kalau saling bantu. Moderasi itu bukan program buat kami, itu hidup sehari-hari."*
>
> ("We've grown up together, so helping each other isn't unusual. Moderation isn't a program for us it's daily life.")

These raw accounts illustrate how religious moderation in Bagansiapiapi is not a top-down imposition but rather a grassroots, embodied practice. The local understanding of moderation stems from ongoing interfaith interactions built on trust, shared experiences, and mutual responsibility.

3.2 The Concept of Religious Moderation Communication in Fostering Interreligious Harmony

Field data from Bagansiapiapi demonstrate that religious moderation is communicated through consistent and symbolic actions rather than merely formal rhetoric. According to Ustadz Junaidi, a local Islamic cleric:

> *"Kami tidak perlu banyak bicara soal toleransi, karena sudah terbiasa hidup bersama. Kalau ada acara besar seperti Bakar Tongkang, kami bantu. Kalau Idul Fitri, mereka datang silaturahmi. Itu komunikasi terbaik."*
>
> ("We don't need to talk much about tolerance, because we're used to living together. During big events like Bakar Tongkang, we help. During Eid, they come for a visit. That's the best form of communication.")

Similarly, Maria Sinaga, a Christian community figure, explained:

> *"Kalau ada konflik kecil, kami tidak langsung lapor ke aparat. Biasanya tokoh-tokoh agama duduk bersama, saling dengar, dan cari jalan tengah. Kami terbuka bicara, tanpa merasa lebih tinggi."*
>
> ("If there's a small conflict, we don't go straight to the authorities. Usually, religious leaders sit together, listen to each other, and find a middle ground. We talk openly, without feeling superior.")

Observations during local events further support these claims. At the Chinese New Year celebration, Muslim and Christian youths were seen organizing street decorations and logistics, while during the Maulid Nabi event, Confucian and Christian elders attended and gave speeches of peace.

One local official from the Department of Social Affairs noted:

> *"Kami selalu pastikan semua agama terwakili dalam forum musyawarah desa. Bahkan dalam program bantuan, kami tidak membeda-bedakan agama. Prinsipnya: semua warga adalah saudara."*

> ("We always make sure all religions are represented in village discussions. Even in aid programs, we never discriminate based on religion. Our principle is: all citizens are family.")

The FKUB coordinator, Firdaus, also emphasized the importance of proactive engagement:

> *"Kami tidak tunggu konflik baru bergerak. Justru rutin bikin dialog, undang semua tokoh agama, dan bahas apa yang bisa dikerjakan bersama."*

> ("We don't wait for conflict to act. We routinely organize dialogues, invite all religious figures, and discuss what can be done together.")

These quotes highlight that communication for religious moderation in Bagansiapiapi is lived through real, continuous engagement. Respect, empathy, and cooperation define both interpersonal and institutional interactions. Symbols, like cross-participation in religious festivals, carry meaning beyond words they serve as powerful non-verbal affirmations of mutual acceptance.

3.3 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Realizing Interreligious Harmony in Bagansiapiapi

One of the main supporting factors in creating interreligious harmony in Bagansiapiapi is its inclusive and collaborative local culture. Samsul Bahari, Head of the Department of Culture, stated:

> "*The people here have long been used to cooperation and deliberation. Even in religious events, people from different faiths often get involved, because our culture teaches politeness and mutual assistance*."

In addition to culture, the role of religious leaders is also proven to be crucial. Ustadz Junaidi explained:

> *"We religious leaders here share the same commitment. If there's a sensitive issue, we immediately sit down together to prevent the community from being provoked."*

In agreement, Kang Siu Kie, a local Confucian figure, said:

> "I always teach young people to join other religious activities, at least by attending and showing respect. We live in the same place, so we must support one another."

Government institutions also show concrete support. Firdaus, the head of FKUB (Religious Harmony Forum), explained:

> *"FKUB regularly holds visits and interfaith dialogues. We don't wait for problems to arise; we work to prevent them from happening."*

Asuar from the National and Political Unity Agency (Kesbangpol) added:

> *"We strive to ensure that every policy includes elements of inclusivity. All religious groups have equal access to public services and social activities."*

Socio-economic stability is another contributing factor. Zaiful Alam Jayaputra from the Department of Social Affairs mentioned:

> *"Social assistance is given regardless of religion. This kind of fairness helps people feel safe and prevents them from being easily divided."*

In addition, peaceful religious narratives continue to be promoted by religious scholars. H. Suhaimi Hasyim, Chairperson of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) in Rokan Hilir, emphasized:

> *"Islam teaches mercy for all creation. We promote human brotherhood and national brotherhood so that people of all faiths feel accepted."*

However, several obstacles are still found on the ground. The biggest challenge is provocation through social media. Firdaus warned:

> *"Religious hoaxes spread very easily. Unfortunately, not everyone in our community has the ability to filter information."*

Asuar added:

> *"Young people are easy targets for online radicalism. They rarely join interfaith dialogues, so they lack perspectives from outside their own group."*

This concern was confirmed by Rina, a Christian religious teacher:

> *"Nowadays, kids spend more time in the virtual world. Sadly, they don't yet have spaces for direct dialogue with peers of different religions."*

Another challenge is the low level of moderate religious literacy. H. Suhaimi Hasyim explained:

> *"Some people still understand religion rigidly. Sermons must start to highlight local values and interfaith empathy."*

Differences in interreligious communication styles can also lead to misunderstandings. Kang Siu Kie noted:

> *"Sometimes our speaking styles differ it's not meant to offend, but it can be misunderstood. We need to keep talking about this to prevent distance from growing."*
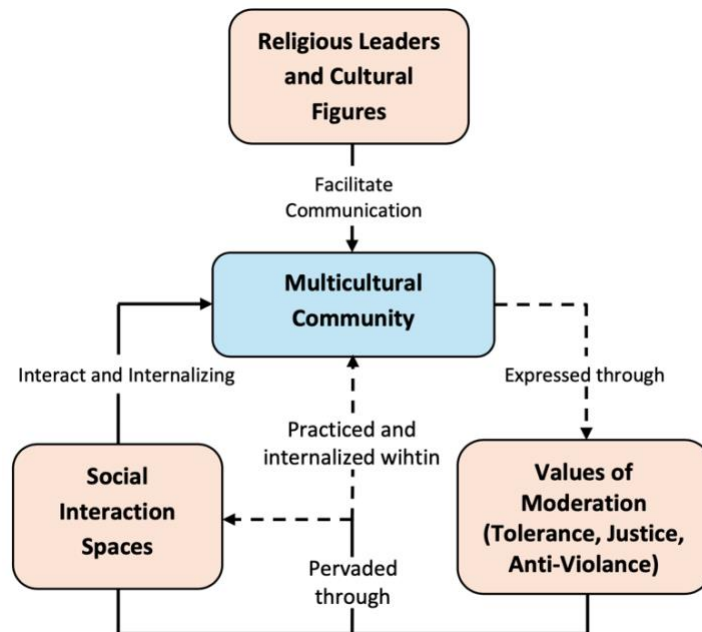
Figure 4. Interrelated Entities Supporting Religious Moderation in Bagansiapiapi

4. Discussion
4.1 Community Understanding of Religious Moderation in Bagansiapiapi

The findings of this study reveal that the people of Bagansiapiapi possess a deep and practical understanding of religious moderation. This understanding is rooted in their historical experience of living in a multicultural and multi-religious society, where interfaith interactions are not only accepted but nurtured through shared practices and mutual assistance. These practices include joint participation in religious events, such as Maulid Nabi, Christmas, Chinese New Year, and the Bakar Tongkang festival. This resonates with Idi and Priansyah's (2023) study, which emphasizes that religious moderation in Indonesia emerges from a collective awareness of the need to maintain harmony in a pluralistic society. In both cases, religious moderation is not limited to theoretical concepts but is practiced through daily social interactions. The values of national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and respect for local traditions are central to how moderation is internalized in Bagansiapiapi. These findings suggest that in communities where diversity is part of daily life, moderation becomes a lived and shared reality rather than an imposed doctrine.

This research also aligns with Hermawan and Matas' (2024) comparative study on religious moderation in Indonesia and Malaysia, which concludes that Indonesian efforts are often symbolic and less structured compared to Malaysia. However, the case of Bagansiapiapi challenges this notion by showing how local communities in rural areas can effectively internalize and practice religious moderation without heavy reliance on formal government intervention. Community members demonstrate a genuine commitment to national unity and religious harmony, as evidenced by their voluntary involvement in cross-religious activities and peaceful conflict resolution through dialogue. This reflects the potential of bottom-up, culturally grounded approaches in promoting religious moderation. Unlike the urban focus of Hermawan's research, Bagansiapiapi presents a rural success story that exemplifies the power of local wisdom. It emphasizes that governmental policy, while important, is not the sole determinant of successful interfaith relations. The internal strength of a community's values plays an equally crucial role.

Moreover, the active role of religious leaders, cultural figures, and local authorities in Bagansiapiapi mirrors the dynamics outlined in Siddiq et al.'s (2024) study of interfaith communication in Bandung. Siddiq highlights the importance of leaders in facilitating dialogue, mediating conflicts, and promoting religious harmony in urban tolerance villages. Similarly, in Bagansiapiapi, religious leaders serve as bridges across faiths, encouraging participation in joint activities and reinforcing values of peace and solidarity. The FKUB (Forum for Religious Harmony) actively organizes interfaith events and promotes cooperation among different religious groups. This reinforces the idea that religious moderation can be effectively fostered when supported by proactive leadership and community-based programs. The presence of strong interfaith communication structures contributes to a more resilient and inclusive society. Such parallels between different regions underscore the replicability of community-led models of religious moderation.

The relevance of local values in shaping moderation is also in line with Kawangung's (2019) assertion that traditional models of tolerance need to be adapted for the digital era. In Bagansiapiapi, values like cooperation (gotong royong), deliberation (musyawarah), and the collective desire to avoid conflict remain strong and are passed down across generations. These cultural foundations serve as buffers against divisive narratives, including those potentially propagated through digital platforms. The community's preference for peaceful resolution, mutual respect, and non-violent responses to sensitive issues showcases a culturally adaptive form of moderation. While the digital era introduces new challenges, traditional

values remain relevant and even more crucial. Bagansiapiapi illustrates how local traditions can coexist with modern pressures without losing their unifying force. In this sense, religious moderation in this region is both timeless and timely.

Zaluchu et al.'s (2025) bibliometric study identifies the multidimensional nature of religious moderation in Indonesia, including its social, cultural, and educational dimensions. The case of Bagansiapiapi supports these findings by illustrating how education, both formal and informal, contributes to a shared understanding of moderation. Community members learn from each other through daily interactions, local wisdom, and lived experiences rather than through structured curricula. This form of cultural education plays a key role in transmitting values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. The role of community leaders, elders, and even local festivals in reinforcing inclusive values is particularly notable. Such organic methods of education foster a deeper emotional and cultural connection to the principles of moderation. Thus, Bagansiapiapi offers a practical example of how religious moderation can be sustained and reinforced through community-based learning.

Hati et al. (2023) emphasize the significance of communication models employed by FKUB in Medan to foster religious harmony. Similar efforts are evident in Bagansiapiapi, where FKUB and local leaders engage in proactive initiatives like interfaith dialogues and public discussions to strengthen social cohesion. These efforts highlight the importance of participatory communication in managing religious diversity. The community's ability to sustain harmony despite occasional tensions is a testament to the success of such initiatives. Moreover, the coordination between civic institutions and religious actors reinforces the institutional framework for moderation. Though Bagansiapiapi may lack the bureaucratic scale of urban centers like Medan, it compensates with grassroots energy and cultural solidarity. This suggests that religious moderation does not necessarily require large-scale infrastructures, but rather effective localized engagement.

The findings also echo Subchi et al.'s (2022) research, which links religiosity to moderate behavior among university students. In Bagansiapiapi, figures like Ustadz Junaidi emphasize that moderation is intrinsic to Islamic teachings, such as justice, compassion, and respect for others. This theological foundation encourages Muslims in the area to engage respectfully with non-Muslims and to celebrate differences rather than suppress them. Religious teachings are interpreted and practiced in inclusive ways, promoting values that align with national unity and peace. Such interpretations also shape public attitudes and interactions,

particularly among the youth. When faith is understood as a bridge rather than a barrier, interfaith relations become more constructive. The community's experience demonstrates how religious principles, when contextualized appropriately, can foster a more harmonious society.

Lastly, the sense of acceptance expressed by minority groups such as Khonghucu adherents aligns with Niazi's (2023) framework on the conditions required for sustainable religious harmony. Respect, fairness, and mutual understanding are key to fostering interreligious peace, and these are practiced in Bagansiapiapi. The willingness of Muslims to assist in Chinese religious ceremonies and vice versa, such as during Bakar Tongkang or Eid celebrations, reflects a high degree of interfaith solidarity. Similarly, Nazmudin (2017) underscores the need for ongoing interfaith dialogue to prevent miscommunication and negative prejudice. In Bagansiapiapi, dialogue takes place not only in formal settings but also in everyday interactions, contributing to a stronger social fabric. This, as also noted by Nisa et al. (2021), is particularly important in the digital era, where radical ideas can spread quickly. Community efforts to pass down values of moderation across generations ensure that tolerance remains a core social norm, not just a political slogan.

4.2 The Concept of Religious Moderation Communication in Fostering Interreligious Harmony

The findings from Bagansiapiapi reveal that religious moderation communication is not limited to discourse but is manifested through daily practices that promote tolerance, empathy, and inclusive social interaction. This is consistent with Setinawati et al. (2025), who highlight how the integration of religious and cultural values, such as *Belum Ruhui Rahayu*, fosters social harmony in Kalimantan. Just as the Tewang Darayu community internalizes moderation through cultural rituals and communal participation, Bagansiapiapi exhibits similar characteristics through symbolic interfaith actions like mutual participation in religious festivals and social solidarity during community events.

At the grassroots level, interpersonal communication in Bagansiapiapi is marked by friendliness and mutual respect across religious lines, echoing Siddiq et al.'s (2024) study in Bandung, where religious leaders actively mediate and foster interfaith understanding through sustained personal interaction. These daily micro-interactions in Bagansiapiapi serve as a medium for peacebuilding, much like the *Jamika Tolerance Village* in Siddiq's case, where religious harmony is built upon consistent, empathetic engagement among communities of differing beliefs.

Institutionally, the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) in Bagansiapiapi plays a pivotal role in promoting structured interfaith dialogue, as explained by Firdaus.

This aligns with Hermawan and Matas' (2024) comparative study on Indonesia and Malaysia, which demonstrates how structured government and community-based initiatives contribute significantly to religious harmony. In Bagansiapiapi, FKUB's approach reflects a bottom-up commitment to moderation, supporting Hermawan's claim that localized engagement is vital for interfaith coexistence, particularly when national policies are limited in rural settings.

From a governance perspective, agencies such as the Department of Social Affairs and Kesbangpol apply inclusive communication strategies that ensure equal access and participation, regardless of religious affiliation. This mirrors Anas's (2025) findings in Salatiga, a city celebrated for its tolerance, where government-led inclusivity in development planning reinforces social cohesion. The intentional effort of Bagansiapiapi's officials to engage all groups, especially in public services and conflict resolution, demonstrates a best practice in institutional communication for moderation.

Symbolic communication, where actions speak louder than words, was another key feature in Bagansiapiapi. Participation across religious lines in major cultural and religious events sends a powerful message of solidarity and mutual acceptance. Niazi (2023) emphasizes the importance of fairness, cooperation, and mutual respect in sustaining religious harmony; Bagansiapiapi exemplifies this through its shared celebration of traditions like *Bakar Tongkang* and *Idul Fitri*. Such cultural integration strengthens inter-religious trust and community resilience, consistent with Zaluchu et al.'s (2025) bibliometric review, which identifies local culture and shared rituals as critical elements of religious moderation discourse in Indonesia.

In the context of digital communication and media engagement, Bagansiapiapi's avoidance of hate speech and preference for respectful dialogue reflect Hadiyanto et al.'s (2025) exploration of religious moderation through Instagram. While Hadiyanto focuses on virtual platforms, both studies emphasize the power of communication, online or offline, in shaping public attitudes toward diversity. Similarly, Wang (2023) highlights how individual perceptions shape responses to moderation systems; in Bagansiapiapi, it is the collective cultural disposition, rather than algorithmic filters, that preserves the ethical tone of interfaith dialogue.

Bagansiapiapi's moderation is also deeply spiritual. As noted by Ustadz Junaidi and H. Suhaimi Hasyim, moderate communication is grounded in Islamic values of *ukhuwah,* brotherhood in humanity, religion, and nation. This theological framing resonates with Preston et al.'s (2025) study, which emphasizes intellectual humility and the compatibility of religious and scientific values in fostering open-mindedness. Likewise, Upenieks et al. (2024) found that support from religious figures mitigates spiritual struggles among the elderly, highlighting the role of trusted voices, like religious leaders in Bagansiapiapi, in preserving interfaith peace.

Lastly, the non-dominant, dialogical nature of communication in Bagansiapiapi, as testified by minority representatives, supports Idi and Priansyah's (2023) and Kawangung's (2019) observations that true religious moderation emerges when communities engage in egalitarian and inclusive dialogues. The rejection of symbolic dominance and the consistent practice of cultural humility make Bagansiapiapi an exemplary model of how religious moderation is not just taught but lived. These characteristics align with Subchi et al.'s (2022) assertion that demographic and religious commitment factors significantly influence one's capacity for moderation, qualities embodied by the people of Bagansiapiapi.

4.3 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Realizing Interreligious Harmony in Bagansiapiapi

One of the most prominent supporting factors in fostering interreligious harmony in Bagansiapiapi is its inclusive local culture. Rooted in Malay traditions, values such as gotong royong (cooperation), deliberation, and politeness form a social foundation that encourages mutual respect and acceptance. Samsul Bahari (Head of the Culture Department) emphasized that these cultural norms help shape tolerant behavior and prevent the escalation of sectarian issues. This finding aligns with Setinawati et al.'s (2025) study in Central Kalimantan, which showed that the harmonious blending of religious values with cultural traditions like Belum Ruhui Rahayu fosters inclusivity and peaceful coexistence. Similarly, Anas et al. (2025) identified cultural integration and policy alignment as crucial to building tolerance in Salatiga. These findings suggest that culturally grounded communities are more resilient against divisive narratives.

Another key factor is the proactive role of religious and customary leaders. In Bagansiapiapi, figures such as Ustadz Junaidi and Khonghucu leader Kang Siu Kie actively promote peace through exemplary behavior and interfaith dialogue. Their approach resembles that of the religious leaders in Burhan's (2017) study in Lewoleba Utara, where interfaith harmony was maintained through a principle of "agree in disagreement."

Similarly, Widiyaningsih and Yani (2023) found that spiritual leaders in Gresik provided vital services that united people of various faiths. These findings underscore the importance of local religious figures in framing and maintaining interfaith harmony by serving as role models and mediators in community life.

Governmental support through institutions like the FKUB, Social Affairs Department, and Kesbangpol has also proven instrumental. In Bagansiapiapi, these bodies routinely conduct interfaith visits, public dialogues, and inclusive programs to foster moderation. Firdaus (FKUB Chair) and Asuar (Kesbangpol) emphasized these strategies as essential for sustainable peace. These mechanisms reflect findings from Handayani and Giantara (2021), who observed that policy and institutional engagement played a central role in shaping religious tolerance during the pandemic. Likewise, Hadiyanto et al. (2025) emphasized that digital governance and state narratives are critical in countering radicalism and promoting religious moderation. Institutional intervention, when paired with community engagement, becomes a powerful tool for conflict prevention and harmony-building.

Traditional interfaith events such as Bakar Tongkang further act as symbolic platforms for unity. The participation of Muslims in this Chinese cultural-religious festival and the reciprocal involvement of Chinese communities during Islamic celebrations demonstrate mutual respect beyond ceremonial courtesy. This aligns with Preston et al.'s (2025) study, which argued that intellectual humility facilitates compatibility between different belief systems. In Bagansiapiapi, these events are not merely cultural performances but living expressions of interfaith communication, echoing Upenieks et al.'s (2024) findings that trust and relational support, especially from faith leaders, have tangible effects on social wellbeing and cohesion.

Another important factor is the region's stable social and economic condition. As noted by Zaiful Alam Jayaputra (Head of the Social Affairs Department), equitable social assistance and widespread welfare programs create a climate of shared security, reducing susceptibility to religious provocation. Wagner et al.'s (2024) study on digital content moderation found that clarity and fairness in systems of governance online or offline are crucial in mitigating conflicts. Meanwhile, Widiyaningsih and Yani (2023) observed that mutual aid and kinship sentiments enhanced emotional participation in Gresik's religious harmony programs, reinforcing the idea that security, both social and emotional, supports unity.

Finally, the presence of peace-oriented religious narratives contributes to sustaining harmony. Leaders like H. Suhaimi Hasyim (Chairman of MUI Rokan Hilir) stress Islam's essence as rahmatan lil 'alamin (a mercy for all beings), promoting messages of human fraternity (ukhuwah insaniyah), national solidarity (ukhuwah wathaniyah), and interreligious compassion. These messages resonate with Preston et al.'s (2025) emphasis on intellectual humility and compatible faith-science frameworks, as well as with Karaosmanoglu et al.'s (2018) insights on how intrinsic religiosity fosters ethical, tolerant behavior. The reinforcement of these narratives in sermons and community gatherings ensures that moderation becomes an everyday norm rather than an abstract ideal.

One of the most pressing challenges faced in Bagansiapiapi is the potential for provocation through social media. As highlighted by Firdaus (FKUB) and Asuar (Kesbangpol), digital platforms often become vehicles for misinformation or religiously-charged hoaxes that can damage interfaith trust. This aligns with the findings of Hadiyanto et al. (2025), who noted that social media has played a significant role in the rise of religious radicalization among youth in Indonesia. Wagner et al. (2024) also revealed how content moderation failures can lead to either overblocking or underblocking, which exacerbates misunderstanding in digital spaces. Wang's (2023) study further illustrates how political ideology and low algorithmic trust impact perceptions of AI-based moderation, emphasizing the need for digital literacy. In Bagansiapiapi, the lack of verification mechanisms and critical media consumption allows rumors to spread unchecked, creating rifts in previously harmonious communities. Promoting digital literacy is therefore essential to empower the public to discern credible information and prevent unnecessary conflict.

Another inhibiting factor is the lack of inclusive interfaith dialogue among youth. Although communication among religious leaders is well-established, younger generations are not yet fully involved in cross-faith interactions. This observation mirrors Widiyaningsih and Yani's (2023) study in Gresik, where emotional and mental involvement was critical in sustaining religious harmony, especially among youth. Without active platforms for interfaith exchange, young people may become susceptible to polarized ideologies. Preston et al. (2025) noted that intellectual humility fosters compatibility in worldviews, a trait that must be cultivated early through exposure to diverse perspectives. In Bagansiapiapi, Rina and Suhaimi expressed concern that generational gaps in interfaith understanding could lead to future division. Building inclusive youth forums could act as a preventive measure, fostering empathy and shared identity across religious lines.

Limited religious literacy, particularly around moderate theological interpretations, also poses a barrier. Some individuals in the community still adhere to rigid, exclusive, or textual interpretations of religious doctrine. This resonates with Karaosmanoglu et al.'s (2018) study, which found that religiosity orientation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, affects how individuals respond to moral violations and social diversity. H. Suhaimi Hasyim (MUI Rokan Hilir) emphasized the need for context-sensitive preaching that incorporates local cultural values. Burhan (2017) also identified that weak religious education contributes to misunderstandings and reduces resilience against divisive ideologies. In Bagansiapiapi, fostering moderate religious education that integrates empathy and pluralism is key to preventing intolerance or extremism. When religious literacy is both deep and inclusive, it becomes a tool for peace rather than conflict.

Finally, differences in communication styles across religious groups can occasionally result in misunderstandings. Kang Siu Kie and other minority voices noted that these misinterpretations are often unintentional but still capable of creating tension. This issue echoes Upenieks et al.'s (2024) observation that social relationships, particularly with religious leaders, shape how individuals navigate spiritual conflict and miscommunication. While such differences are natural in a pluralistic society, they must be addressed through continuous learning and open dialogue. Anas et al (2025)showed that public policies promoting cultural interaction significantly reduce the chances of miscommunication in diverse cities like Salatiga. In Bagansiapiapi, fostering a culture of patient, empathetic communication can bridge these stylistic gaps. Ultimately, while the inhibiting factors are real, they are largely technical and manageable with strategic administrative and educational interventions.

5. Conclusion

This study has revealed that the people of Bagansiapiapi exhibit a profound, practical, and culturally grounded understanding of religious moderation. Unlike abstract or top-down policies, their approach is organically rooted in the lived experiences of the community. The four core indicators of religious moderation, national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and respect for local traditions, are not merely embraced in theory but actively embodied through everyday practices. These values are internalized via symbolic interactions, communal rituals, and mutual aid, demonstrating that moderation has become a collective social habit. This bottom-up model highlights that religious harmony can be cultivated

sustainably when it is woven into the very fabric of local identity and tradition.

In terms of communication, the people of Bagansiapiapi utilize inclusive, dialogic, and symbolic interaction patterns that foster interfaith understanding. Through the lenses of Symbolic Interactionism and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), it is evident that communication is not only a medium for conveying messages but also a means of co-constructing meaning and reinforcing social bonds. National symbols, shared greetings, and interfaith ceremonies act as communicative rituals that enhance solidarity and serve as informal peacebuilding mechanisms. Such practices demonstrate that moderation in this region is performative, adaptive, and socially negotiated, not imposed by formal doctrine. Communication, therefore, functions as both a symbolic and practical strategy for sustaining religious coexistence.

The success of religious harmony in Bagansiapiapi is supported by several contextual factors: an inclusive cultural ethos, strong traditions of cooperation (gotong royong) and deliberation (musyawarah), and the moral leadership of religious and community figures. These are reinforced by empathetic and accommodating communication norms that prioritize relational over confrontational interactions. However, the study also identifies critical structural challenges. The absence of institutionalized youth forums for interfaith engagement and the spread of misinformation via digital platforms pose potential threats to intergenerational continuity and social cohesion. These limitations underscore the need for structured, future-oriented strategies.

This study offers three key contributions. Theoretically, it enriches interfaith communication discourse by illustrating how Symbolic Interactionism and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) operate effectively within a multicultural rural setting, expanding their relevance beyond urban or institutional contexts and emphasizing the significance of everyday interactions in peacebuilding. Empirically, it provides qualitative evidence from Bagansiapiapi that religious moderation is not only a normative ideal but also a lived reality, deeply embedded in the community's cultural expressions, social identity, and ritual practices. Practically, the study presents a replicable and culturally grounded model of religious moderation that can be adapted for other rural regions in Indonesia. The bottom-up, participatory approach observed in Bagansiapiapi offers a strategic framework for sustaining interfaith harmony in areas marked by ethnic and religious diversity.

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