The Defensive Fortress for Strengthening Religious Harmony: The Existence and Strategy of Pioneers in Religious Moderation to Educate Muslims in Sumatera Utara

Muhammad Qorib[1], Rahmat Rifai Lubis[2]

Abstract

Indonesia's diversity is a gift of infinite value, but some consider it as the basis for triggering conflict. The religious aspect is also often highlighted by the conflict. Religious moderation is one of the solutions offered. It requires the presence of pioneers to become the leading agent in religious moderation. This study was aimed to analyze the existence, strategies, obstacles, and future agenda of the pioneers of religious moderation in fostering the religiosity of Muslims. The pioneer as the object of this study is a cadre from Indonesian Ulama Council in Sumatera Utara. The method used qualitative based on phenomenological studies. Data collection techniques used observation, interviews and documentation studies. The results revealed the existence of pioneers of religious moderation in Sumatera Utara initiated by Indonesian Ulama Council of Sumatera Utara with the regeneration pattern in training and Training of Trainers, that currently has a certificate license. The coaching strategy carried out by the pioneer is da'wah bil lisan (speech), da'wah bil hal (action), and da'wah bil kitabah (writing). The obstacles faced are the negative views about religious moderation, coordination, pioneer welfare, the absence of organizational structure. The future agenda of the pioneers is to increase the number of pioneers, particularly the sub-district and village levels, to cooperate with the government, and to massively declare the village of religious moderation.

Keywords: *Pioneer of Religious Moderation, Religiosity, Religious Harmony*

Introduction

Diversity is nature and gift from God to human life(Hariyanto & Islamy, 2023; Munandar & Amin, 2023; Zulfatmi, 2023). Human nature is helpless (*dhaif*), requiring the contribution of other people to make it empowered or strong (*qawiy*). Human (*nafs*), requires the existence of other people to make it live collectively (*jama'i*). This diversity is not requested by humans, but a gift from God; essentially shows God's omniscience regarding the needs of His creation.(Amiruddin et al., 2021; Qorib, 2023). Ibn Khaldun said without diversity, humans would not have been created and would not be able to continue their life on earth.(Al-Hadhrami, 2001).

The diversity is manifested by differences in ethnicity, ethnicity, customs, culture, race,

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[1] ˙Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara
Email: muhammadqorib@umsu.ac.id
[2] ²Sekolah Tingga Agama Islam Sumatera
Email: faillubis@gmail.com

nation and religion.(Anwar & Muhayati, 2021). A wise human being certainly accepts this gift with pride, and manages it well becomes strength (*qawiy*) to live life collectively and sociologically (*jama'i*). Humans who are not wise and have no understanding will reject diversity, and use it to create conflict and strife. This rejection engenders two polar intersections of human attitudes. The first attitude intersection pole is ignoring about the existence of differences (intolerance), and the second is blinding on their own beliefs and existence; they often blame other's beliefs and existence (radical)(Qorib, 2018).

Among the diversity mentioned above, one thing often catches the attention is religious. Due to the uniqueness of Indonesia that adheres to the philosophy of one supreme God, with ownership of six official religions (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism). This pluralism ultimately maps out the majority and minority sides, that become a trigger for mutual domination and power.(Umiarso & Muhammad Qorib, 2022). A wise person or group of people will respect religious differences, but in fact, sometimes they use it as an arena for mutual claims about the truest religion, and blaming other people's religions.(Jati et al., 2022).

Religious conflicts and disputes have colored the journey of this nation, several major religious conflicts have been recorded; including conflicts in Poso, Ambon, Tolikara, Lampung, Tanjung Balai, Aceh Singkil, terrorism, suicide bombings and others. These conflicts brought serious losses, ranging from tarnishing the good name of their respective religions, damage to places of worship, to the loss of lives. These conflicts can occur at any time; since they don't always have to wait for big problems. Sometimes small problems can be happened, but they become big since they are in the name of religion.(Suhendi et al., 2020). Lukman Hakim Syaifuddin described this condition as fire in the chaff.(Mahamid, 2023).

Disputes over religious aspects also often occur internally, for instance disputes between Muslims. Various understandings of *Shari'a* often lead to fanatical and radical attitudes, who consider their own understanding as the most correct, and others are wrong. In real life, the dispute is no longer limited to blaming, but come to the level of mutual judgments of being heretical and misleading, even infidels. It certainly has an impact on religious harmony, even national unity.

Regarding this condition, several institutions (government and non-government) are paying serious attention to overcome this condition. The Ministry of Religion as a government institution initiated religious moderation in 2019 as priority program aimed to promote moderate religious understanding.(Irama & Zamzami, 2021; Sumarto, 2021). Considering that this program is so important till four years later, the President issued Presidential Regulation Number 58 of 2023 concerning strengthening religious moderation. The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) also initiated the formation of pioneers as the front guard in establishing religious moderation in every province of Indonesia.(Admin Ministry of Religion, 2015).

Religious moderation is a religious perspective, attitude and practice in living together by embodying the essence of religious teachings and beliefs to protect human dignity and build public benefit based on the principles of fairness, balance and compliance with Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution of Republic of Indonesia as an agreement. The term religious moderation is equated with *wasathiyah Islam*. It is an integral element of this country's strategy to care for Indonesia. As a very diverse society, the nation's pioneers succeeded in inheriting a

form of fundamental agreement in building and managing the country; namely the Republic of Indonesia. The real success is seen in the country's ability to unite various religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups.(Agus & Muryono, 2021; Fathurahman, 2019; Pagar & Akhyar, 2022).

According to Islamic theory, there are nine normative bases for religious moderation; namely (1) *at-Tawassuth* (middle), (2) *I'tidal* (upright and proportional), (3) *Tasamuh* (tolerance), (4) *Ash-Shura* (musyarawah), (5) *Al-Ishlah* (repair), (6) *al -Qudwah* (pioneering), (7) *Al-Muwathanah* (love of the homeland), (8) *Al-'Unf* (non-violence), (9) *I'tiraf al-'Urf* (Cultural Friendly). Regarding to the topic of this study; the sixth one, al-Qudwah, emphasizes that religious moderation requires the formation of personal character or group of people to become pioneers for Muslims themselves and other people in implementing the values of justice and humanity.(Aziz & Anam, 2021).

The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) initiated the formation of this pioneer of religious moderation. MUI in Sumatera Utara carried it out in the last three years, 2021, 2022, 2023. This activity consists of two stages; training of religious moderation pioneers and training of trainers for pioneers. This program aimed to create pioneers of religious moderation, and so that the dissemination of understanding of religious moderation can spread to all regions. It is certainly not free from problems both from the organizers and the potential pioneers themselves. However, the testimonies of ups and downs in preaching, and the spread of Islam by the pioneers are studied that deserve to be explored and analyzed. It is wise if the pioneers are called the fortress of upholding religious harmony.(Pagar & Akhyar, 2022).

The program has been carried out by MUI in Sumatera Utara is worthy of analysis about its existence and implementation. This study aimed to analyze the existence of the pioneers in Sumatera Utara, the strategies and obstacles to pioneers of religious moderation in educating Muslim in Sumatera Utara; as well as future agenda of MUI in terms of enforcing religious moderation. Based on the philosophical theory of existentialism, existence is defined as existence based on ideas, initiators, forms, affiliations and other people's responses to the existence. Strategy is defined as a way of carrying out a task; related to the type of task, guidance or material, method and coordination. Obstacles are defined as obstacles consisting of internal and external. Meanwhile, the future agenda means related to future planning programs.

This study contributes to several parties, namely: (1) MUI of Sumatera Utara, the results are the basis to improve program for pioneers of religious moderation, (2) the Provincial governments, the results are the basis for formulating policies related to the implementation of Presidential Decree No.58 of 2023 concerning in strengthening religious moderation, (3) educational institutions, the results become the basis for preparing materials and learning strategies for religious moderation, (4) pioneers, the results become the basis for determining strategies and materials for carrying out tasks in the regions, (5) other researchers, the results can be the basis for further research development, particularly in model aspect and development of the profile of the ideal leader.

The focus of this study certainly different from others; to find out, the publish or perish software version 8.4.4041.8250 and VOS Viewer version 1.6.1.9 were used. The database used the Scopus index page, with the keyword 'religious moderation'. The search succeeded in identifying 200 papers related to these keywords. The identification results were visualized
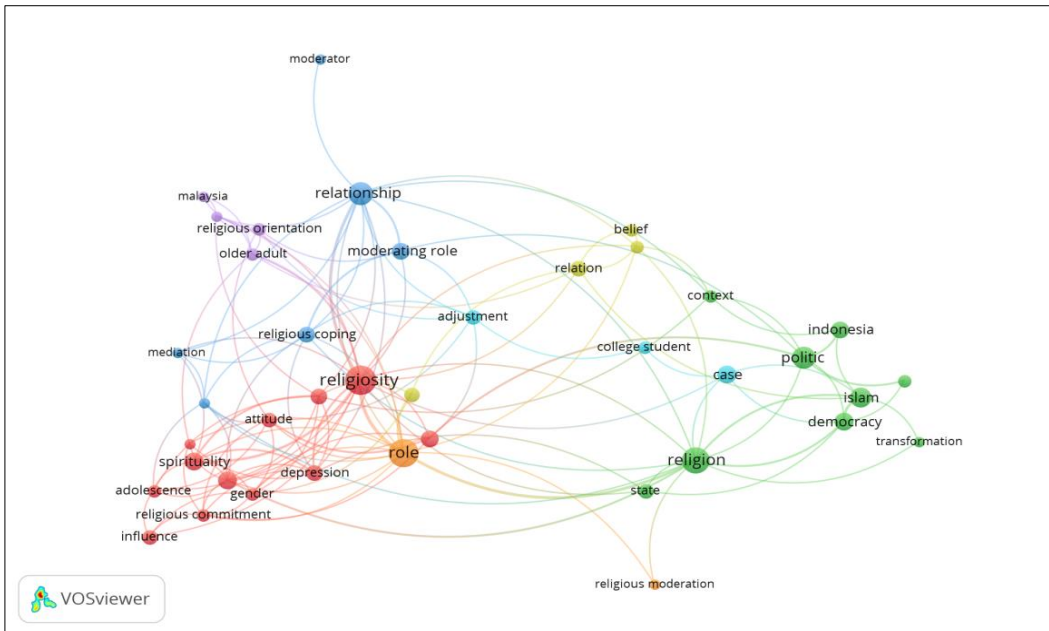
using Vos viewer, the results are as follows:

Figure 1. VOS viewer Visualization of Topic Research Distribution Religious Moderation Indexed by Scopus.

From the picture, can be seen that the research topic of religious moderation is dominant in roles, religious orientation, politics and nationality, social attitudes and interaction between religious communities. Meanwhile, the topic of pioneers of religious moderation has not been touched at all in previous study. This study has great novelty since the results are still fresh and contribute to the treasury of Islamic scholarship, thus adding to the theoretical activity and practice of religious moderation.

Several previous studies had different study focus, including: (1) focus on the understanding of educational institution managers regarding religious moderation(Hefni, 2022; Helmy, 2021; Mujani et al., 2015), (2) focus on the relationship between religious moderation and individual or group religiosity(Reutter, 2014; Tix, 2005; Tongeren, 2013), (3) focus on the relationship between religious moderation and politics and democracy(Buehler, 2013; Schwedler, 2013; Somer, 2014; Tepe, 2012), (4) focus on the role of religious moderation in overcoming religious conflict(Osman, 2020; Tan, 2007; Ushama, 2014); (5) focus on the relationship between culture-based religious moderation and local wisdom(Ediyono, 2017; Pajarianto, 2022; Subchi, 2022). Based on these several focuses, it is clear that the distinction of this research focuses on analyzing the existence and how the strategies of pioneers of religious moderation in the context of moderate Islamic religious education.

Research Methods

This study used qualitative research methods and a phenomenological study approach. The choice of phenomenology as an approach is based on the reason that the pioneers of religious moderation are considered a new phenomenon in the development of religious moderation. Its existence has made it popular and now in the spotlight of many institutions, and starting to

be followed by several institutions including Islamic organizations.(Creswell, 2012). According to Creswell, phenomenological studies assume that each individual experiences a phenomenon; in this case, phenomenological studies attempt to explore the subjects' deepest awareness regarding their experiences in an event. It attempts to find answers about the meaning of phenomenon based on subject's experience. The meaning of program for the formation of religious moderation pioneers and individual experiences of pioneers will be the starting point for researchers to explore.(Creswell, 2007).

This study was carried out at Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of Sumatera Utara Province, administratively located in Medan. The reason for choosing this location was because for the last three years (2021, 2022 and 2023), Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of Sumatera Utara Province carried out for training activities and training of trainers (TOT) for pioneers of religious moderation. It is a national program of Central MUI, currently receiving attention, and has received various positive appreciations from regional heads. This study was carried out for eight months, starting from January to August 2023.

The data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary data source is research informants totaling 15 people; consisting of 4 leaders of MUI Inter-Religious Harmony (KAUB) division and commission of Sumatera Utara Province, 2 training resource persons, and 6 pioneer participants in religious moderation, 3 members of public. Secondary data sources are documents supporting the training activities and ToT; such as resource material, news coverage, and literature sources that support the theoretical study. The details are as follow:

Table 1. Details of Research Data Sources.

No	Data	Data source type	Description	Amount
1	Primary	- Main InformantsInformants	- Leaders of divisions and commissions of KAUB MUI Sumatera Utara ProvinceTraining resource personPioneer of religious moderationPublic	4263
2	Secondary	- Resource materialsDocumentationLibrary MaterialPreamble	- Training teaching materialsNews/website coverageArticles, modules, booksLaw, PP, Presidential Decree	23303

Data collection was carried out by using observation techniques, interviews and documentation studies. Observations were carried out by directly observing the training process and training of trainers for religious moderation pioneers carried out by MUI of Sumatera Utara Province. Interviews were conducted with 15 main and supporting informants using a structured interview method. The documentation study was carried out by analyzing training and TOT materials, activity documentation, library materials and policy considerations related to religious moderation.

The data analysis technique used Miles and Huberman technique; namely data collection, data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions. To ensure the data validity, researchers used several techniques; namely data triangulation, extending observations and increasing persistence in data analysis process. The presentation of findings and discussion is carried out using descriptive-analysis techniques; namely (1) the findings are described, (2) analyzed using a theoretical basis and (3) compared with relevant research findings. Regarding the
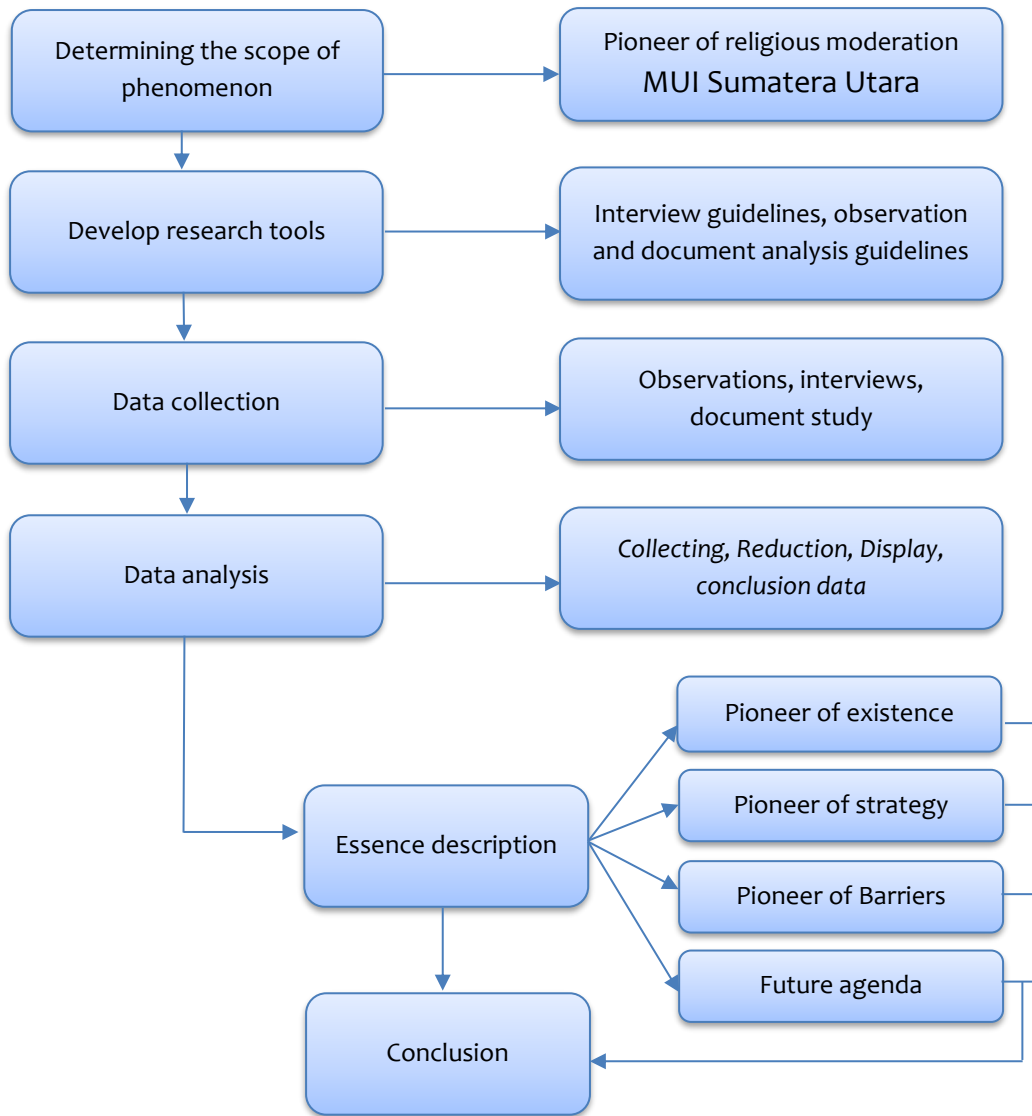
phenomenological approach, here is the chart:

Figure 2. Phenomenological Research Procedure Scheme based on Creswell's Theory.

Results and Discussion

Research result

The findings obtained through observation activities on three training activities and three TOT pioneers of religious moderation, over the last three years. For data purposes, the researcher made two observations; (1) on activities training for MUI Sumatera Utara religious moderation pioneers in Medan and (2) at Sumatera Utara MUI Religious Moderation Pioneer Training of Trainers activity in Tanjung Balai. The data as follow:

Table 2. Observation Results.

No	Aspects/activities	Description
1	MUI religious moderation pioneer training activities in Medan	The training was carried out on 02nd October 2021 at Grand Ina Hotel Medan; gaining 30 participants from MUI from cities in Sumatera Utara and Islamic organizations. It is a basic level before TOT level. It was carried out for 2 days; filled with theoretical and practical material.
2	Training of trainers for Sumatera Utara for MUI religious moderation pioneers in Tanjung Balai	This activity was held on August 26th 2023 at Hall of the Mayor's Office of Tanjung Balai, gaining 45 participants from MUI from cities in Sumatera Utara and Islamic organizations that previously taken part in pioneering training on religious moderation. It was carried out for 2 days; filled with theoretical and practical material on the application of religious moderation, and simulations of handling religious conflicts.

The research findings were also obtained from interviews conducted since April to May 2023 with 15 research informants. It was structured with questions that have been prepared in accordance with the research question criteria. The results are as follow:

Table 3. Interview Result.

	Question	Informant	Transcript
1.	The Existence of a Pioneer of Religious Moderation Educates the Religiosity of Muslims in Sumatera Utara		
a.	The idea was born as a pioneer of religious moderation	Leader 1Leader 2Leader 3Leader 4	In response to the national program, the Central MUI is targeting 50,000 pioneers of religious moderation for each province.The condition of religious pluralism in Sumatera Utara has the potential for religious friction or conflict to arise.The Ministry of Religion's priority program since 2019, and Presidential Decree no. 58 in 2023.The Qur'an commands humans to become a *wasatho ummatan*.
b.	Initiator of the form of religious moderation	Leaders 1, 2Leads 3, 4	The Central MUI became the initiator through their national program.The Ministry of Religion hopes that preachers will become initiators of implementing religious moderation in society
c.	Who and how many pioneers of religious moderation?	Lead 1.3Lead 2.4	Pioneers of religious moderation were recruited from representatives of regional MUI and Islamic organizations in Sumatera Utara province, totaling 30 for each zone. It was carried out in three zones.Regional MUI of Sumatera Utara representatives were added to Islamic mass organizations, both men and women. The number was adjusted to the existing budget.
d.	Affiliates and licensing pioneers of religious moderation	Lead 1,2Lead 3.4	The pioneer's affiliation is attached to the original institution, namely regional MUI in Sumatera Utara, and several Islamic organizations. The license they receive is in the form of a training certificate and TOT.Pioneer delegate from regional MUI in Sumatera Utara, but serves the wider community.Training certificate and TOT license.

Question	Informant	Transcript
e. Community response to the existence of pioneers	Society 1Society 2Society 3	Excited, because someone teaches about tolerance and religious harmony.Feeling helped in solving the problem. These pioneers should be given a salary to take full responsibility, if they are only volunteers.
2. Pioneering Strategy for Religious Moderation to Educate the Religiosity of Muslims in Sumatera Utara		
a. The main task of the pioneers of religious moderation	Pioneer 1.2Pioneer 3.4Pioneer 5.6	Spreading Islamic values and teachings based on Al Qur'an and hadiths, and educating Muslims to behave as *rahmatan lil alamin* In line with the role of MUI; as the huge tent for Muslims, it plays a role in educating people to become *wasatho ummah*, *tasamuh*, and full of a sense of peace with others.There is no main task, since they were not given a special assignment decree, but training and TOT educate them as volunteer in spreading Islam, building good relations with Muslims and non-Muslims, and minimizing the occurrence of conflicts for harmony.
b. Work coordination structure and lines	Pioneers 1,3,4Pioneer 2,5,6	Religious pioneers are structured with coordination line in regional under MUI in province.There is no structure, but the line of work coordination with the leadership of MUI in Sumatera Utara Province; still connected to the ministry of religion, the Regional FKUB.
c. Various activities and forms of pioneering strategy	Pioneer 1.2Vanguard 3.5	Carrying out recitations teaches moderate religious attitudes and responds to community complaints.Carrying out recitations, conducting dialogue, and building good social relations
	Pioneer 4Pioneer 6	Socialization to regional MUI about the religious moderation program, coaching teachers for Islamic studies.Pioneers participate in overcoming religious problems and coordinate them with leaders and authorities.
d. Special strategy for non-Muslims	Pioneers 1,2,3Pioneers 4,5,6	Problems of religious conflict are resolved through mediation between parties. At the unresolved level, we will coordinate with the authorities; such as FKUB, MUI, Ministry of Religion, and the police.Develop a good relation with them wisely in matters of *muamalah;* in matters of faith there is no tolerance.
e. Pioneer material for religious moderation	Speaker 1Interviewee 2	Material sourced from training resource persons and ToT, books on religious moderation by intellectuals in Sumatera Utara.Resource paper, religious moderation guidebook from Ministry of Religion.
3. Obstacles to Pioneers of Religious Moderation Educating the Religiosity of Muslims in Sumatera Utara		

Question	Informant	Transcript
a. The most frequently encountered forms of obstacles	Pioneer 1Pioneer 2Pioneer 3Pioneer 4Pioneer 5.6	It is difficult to straighten out the perspective of society considered religious moderation to weaken Muslims.When conflict problems occur, it is difficult to coordinate with several parties.The absence of special welfare provided makes preaching movements limited.There is no specific policy regarding pioneers of religious moderation.There are limited volunteers; then the activities carry out are not systematic.
b. Coordination lines and forms of obstacle resolution	Pioneers 1,2,3Pioneers 1,2,3	Conflicts are resolved directly; if not resolved then coordinate with Central MUI, FKUB, Ministry of Religion.If conflicts are not resolved, they are brought to authorities; dialogue between religious leaders is carried out to find a solution.
4. Future Agenda for Pioneer of Religious Moderation Educating the Religiosity of Muslims in Sumatera Utara		
a. Future plans based on follow-up of obstacles	Pioneer 1Pioneer 2,3Pioneers 4,5,6	Carry out the formation of pioneers of religious moderation at the sub-district level.Collaborate with FKUB to create dialogue activities for religious harmony.Strengthening *wasathiyah* Islamic studies to change the extreme attitudes.
b. Coordination line to the center regarding future agendas	Pioneers 1,2,3Pioneers 4,5,6	Coordinating with Provincial MUI to hold harmony-based activities.Coordinating with local government regarding pioneer welfare.
c. Community Expectations	Society 1Society 2Society 3	Increasing the pioneers of religious moderation.Carry out routine and systematic activities and create a moderation village.Create a complaint service to anticipate conflicts.

Data findings were also obtained from documentation studies; several documents analyzed were (1) training teaching materials, in this material several materials were found, namely about the profile of the plurality of the Indonesian nation, Islamic understanding of *wasathiyah*, ideal religious attitudes, nine principles of religious moderation, Islamophobia, factors causing conflict and simulation of handling religious conflict; (2) news/website coverage, several websites publish training activities for pioneers of religious moderation and TOT, including https://infomu.co/mui-sumut-gelar-bisnis-pelopor-wasathiyah-islam-di-tapanuli-tengah/, https://persindonesia.com/mui-provinsi-sumut-gelar-bisnis-pelopor-moderasi-beragama/, https://muisumut.or.id/category/berita/komisi_ukhuwah_islamiyah/; (3) religious moderation articles tracked using the Scopus index page, and religious moderation modules published by the ministry of religion; (4) Presidential Decree No. 58 of 203 concerning strengthening religious moderation, letter and rundown of TOT activities pioneering religious moderation no. A.496/DP-P II/SR/VIII/2023.

Research Discussion

1. The Existence of Pioneers in Religious Moderation in Educating Muslims in Sumatera Utara

Kierkegaard as a philosopher of existentialism interprets existence as a dynamic existence that can emerge since it is motivated by certain ideas, and will develop as the ideas pattern (Kierkegaard, 2000). The results revealed two patterns of ideas; internal and external ideas.

Internal ideas mean the originate idea from teachings and needs of Muslims themselves, namely: (1) returning to Al-Qur'an surah al-Baqarah verse 143, namely being *ummatan wasatho*– according to the interpretation of ulama, it means a moderate community(Quraish, 2002; Yahya et al., 2022), and returning to Al Qur'an surah al-Hujurat verse 13; respecting differences as *sunnatullah*; (2) the condition of pluralism in Sumatera Utara has the potential to produce seeds of friction and conflict; then must be countered by sowing antidotes to suppress the potential for friction and conflict. Giving birth to the seeds of antidote was understood by Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of Sumatera Utara as a demand for *Wasathiyah* pioneers (*qudwah*); (3) The central MUI program targeting 50,000 preachers of *Wasathiyah*; (4) the Ministry of Religion priority programs since 2019, and presidential regulation no. 58 of 2023 concerning strengthening religious moderation; automatically requires pioneers to socialize the program.

The external ideas mean ideas from outside; namely the era of disruption that forces change on all front's human life. Under the pretext of innovation, it is not impossible to shift Islamic values and religious harmony. For instance, technology makes the interpretation of Al Quran be wild and baseless, thereby blurring understanding and creating extremism in understanding religious teachings.(Kamaludin & Purnama, 2021). This condition needs to be addressed and anticipated well; by spreading the pioneers of *wasathiyah*, to straighten out the shifts that occur.

The upholding religious moderation is indeed the responsibility from all parties; limited knowledge, motivation, time, and extreme mindsets are reasons for some parties not to assert themselves and participate in upholding religious moderation. It naturally selects those who have knowledge, will and moderate mindset for *da'wah*. The idea of the emergence of the pioneers by MUI in Sumatera Utara Province; there must be a pioneer, someone who stands in front as the agent to speak up about *ummatan wasatho*(Fathurahman, 2019).

The Qur'anic perspective terms pioneers with the word *al-Qudwah*; interpreted as a role model. Muhammad Qutb stated a role model should have the following characteristics: (1) having good commendable attitudes that will be emulated; (2) having the knowledge to exemplify; (3) willing to be in front, including accepting risks; (4) willing to open or renew roads; (5) and sincerely spread kindness. Forming pioneers of religious moderation means forming people to have the characteristics of *al-Qudwah*. It becomes power for enforcing religious moderation amidst the diversity in Indonesia (Maya, 2017).

Research findings also reveal that the initiator who created this pioneer of religious moderation was the Central Indonesian Ulema Council. It started with KH Ma'ruf Amin's statement regarding MUI's seriousness in preaching *Wasathiyah Islam* at the opening of the 1st of Rapat kerja Nasional of Indonesian Ulema Council for 2015-2020 period, in Jakarta, November 10th 2015. Its seriousness continued by conveying MUI's willingness in preparing 50,000 *da'i* for each province. In 2021, 2022 and 2023, MUI in Sumatera Utara through the commission of inter-religious harmony (KAUB) initiated the cadre of religious moderation pioneers through two stages; training and training of trainers.(Admin Ministry of Religion, 2015).

This formation aimed at MUI Leadership Council of Sumatera Utara and Islamic organizations as 90 people. The training will be carried out in 2021-2022 by dividing the province into three zones for implementation, as well as training of trainers (ToT) that will be carried out in three zones. The training participants and ToT are attended by the same people, since ToT is the next level for those who have taken part in the first training. ToT level oriented in creating trainers at district level; they are skilled at training pioneers of religious moderation at the condemnation level.

The existence of these pioneers proven by the certificate obtained after training and ToT that issued and signed by the General Chair of Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of Sumatera Utara. They are affiliated with MUI in Sumatera Utara; in line with the working relationship under coordination of MUI in Sumatera Utara. Although up to now, the pioneers of religious moderation do not yet have a special organizational structure. The certificate not only validates a status as pioneer in society; but also validates their position in conducting training at sub-district levels. The management perspective views that a certificate as a license for someone to carry out their duties; but Islamic perspective views that it must be accompanied by sincerity, pleasure, patience and passion in preaching Islam. Financially, the pioneers did not get salaries; not surprisingly why KH Ma'ruf Amin called *Ulama/Ustadz* as heroes who do *jihad* towards protecting and improving the religious quality of the people.(Admin Ministry of Religion, 2015).

The existence of this pioneer also responded positively by communities; indicates that their existence brings benefits. In accordance with one of the nine principles of religious moderation, namely *al-Qudwah*, requires the formation of character in person or group to become pioneers for Muslims themselves and other people in carrying out the values of justice and humanity.

2. Pioneering Strategy for Religious Moderation in Educating the Religiosity of People in Islamic Region of Sumatera Utara

The pioneers of religious moderation do not have structured duties like other positions in MUI; since they have not yet been included in MUI management structure. They are only as trainer formed by MUI for Inter-Religious Harmony Division oriented towards transmitting the understanding of *Wasathiyah Islam* to the wider community. Thus, their main task is to spread Islamic values and teachings based on *Al-Qur'an* and *hadiths*, and understand the role as *ummatan wasatha*. In line with the role of MUI as the huge tent for Muslims and *khadimul ummah*, they must take part in realizing public, national and religious harmony.

The research findings also reveal da'wah activities in society, including:

a. Dakwah bil lisan; focus in oral delivery about religious moderation; such as through Friday sermons, routine recitations, harmony dialogues, seminars, counseling and learning at educational institutions.
b. Dakwah bil hal; focus in action or deeds; such as preventing and mediating religious conflicts, mutual cooperation, coordination meetings, developing moderate villages, establishing cooperation with FKUB and the government.
c. Da'wah bil kitabah; focus in writing about the spread of religious moderation; writing journals, proceedings, books, modules, papers and books. There are few people who simply write on social media, spreading messages of peace, harmony and national harmony, both among Muslims and between others.

Being a pioneer, there is material that must be mastered; based on the training and ToT carried out as follow:

a. Material on Indonesian Diversity

It concerns on the Republic of Indonesia with all its uniqueness and diversity. The diversity of ethnics, race, culture, language and religion needs to be understood by the pioneers; since by understanding, they will realize that diversity is the greatest gift that must be cared forever.

b. Material on Religious Moderation

It concerns on the basic concept of religious moderation, regarding the basic *islam*, and the nine principles of religious moderation; namely *at-Tawassuth* (middle), *I'tidal* (perpendicular and proportional), *Tasamuh* (tolerance), *Asy-Shura* (deliberation), *Al-Ishlah* (improvement), *al-Qudwah* (pioneering), *Al-Muwathanah* (love of the motherland), *Al-'Unf* (non-violence), *I'tiraf al-'Urf* (Cultural Friendly).

c. Material on Challenges and Development of Religious Moderation

It is related to the internal and external challenges of implementing religious moderation; and the future development of religious moderation in various aspects in Indonesia.

d. Material of Islamophobia, Radicalism, Extremism and Intolerance

It covers attitudes that arise and must be immediately overcome by pioneers. Islamophobia is views and attitudes contain prejudice, fear and hatred towards Islam and Muslim people. Radicalism is the understanding and/or behavior using violence in responding to differences, solving problems or achieving goals. Extremism or *al-tatharruf* is exaggeration in religion, implementing religion rigidly and harshly. Intolerant is discriminatory attitudes or behavior carried out against certain religious groups.

e. Skills of Religious Moderation

It is oriented towards pioneering skills in terms of problem solving, mediation and reconciliation, religious moderation *da'wah bi lisan*, *bil hal*, and *bil kitabah*.

The findings also reveal a unique program carried out by the pioneers of religious moderation; initiating a religious moderation village. It is a priority from the Ministry of Religion and supporting factor for the National Medium Term Development Plan (RPJMN) in accordance with Presidential Decree Number 18 of 2020. Medan has become an area of massive growth in religious moderation villages; such as Medan Denai, Medan Johor, Medan Perjuangan, and others have declared as moderation villages religious.(Roslina (Admin), 2023). The program involves many parties (government, law enforcement officials, *ulama*, including pioneers of religious moderation) who actively work together in developing a moderate attitude. The existence of a religious moderation village is a positive step to promote peace, tolerance, and maintain harmony and diversity in Sumatera Utara.

3. **The Obstacles to Pioneers of Religious Moderation in Educating Muslims in Sumatera Utara**

The pioneers have different types of obstacles. The following are findings and a discussion of these obstacles:

f. Negative Views on Religious Moderation

It is on the top and often faced by pioneers dealing with Muslims. Some Muslims believe that religious moderation is a government instrument to weaken Muslim diversity. Religious moderation is a tool to suppress Muslim majority. This view will test knowledge, politeness, and preaching skills of the pioneers.

g. Obstacle in Coordination

The problem of religious conflict sometimes unavoidable; for instance, the case in Medan, where a Muslim died, but the procession for arranging his body was carried out by other

religious methods. Surely, the existence of pioneers is important; but sometimes it is not enough to involve the family, even involvement of other parties is needed. Involving these parties are sometimes difficult for pioneers due to lack of access and relationships.

h.   The Welfare of The Pioneers of Religious Moderation

The pioneers do not receive special salaries from institutions; since there is no special structure for them in institutions. They sometimes pay their personal costs when preaching.

i.   No Special Organizational Structure

The pioneers affiliated under the Regency MUI at Inter-Religious Harmony Commission; no special structure either under the Ministry of Religion or the district government. Related to job descriptions, work coordination, and recognition of their existence; even legally recognized by the Indonesian Ulema Council.

4.   The Future Agenda for Pioneers of Religious Moderation in Educating Muslims in Sumatera Utara

William N. Dunn, as a management science expert, stated that preparing the future agenda will focus on three things; the results of program evaluation, community expectations, and policies.(Dunn, 2005). There are several programs can be evaluated and improved in the future; the number of pioneers is still less; they have taken part in ToT required to form religious moderation pioneers at sub-district levels. It is difficult to handle problems due to the lack of lines of coordination; then the pioneers will collaborate with the Religious Harmony Forum and local governments to formulate work programs.

The community's expectations are in line with the Ministry of Religion's policy; establishing religious moderation villages. Medan, with its massive growth in religious moderation villages, will become role model for other cities in Sumatera Utara. For the future agenda, the coordination with the Ministry of Religion will involve pioneering elements of religious moderation affiliated with MUI; its existence is increasingly known and recognized by Islamic community.

Conclusion

can be concluded that the emergence of the pioneers of religious moderation was motivated by internal ideas to implement Islamic teachings themselves, the pluralistic conditions in Sumatera Utara, 50,000 *Wasathiyah Islamic* preachers' programs from the central MUI, as well as the Ministry of Religion program and Presidential Regulation no. 58 of 2023. The training was aimed at MUI Leadership Councils in cities in Sumatera Utara and Islamic organizations; in the form of training and ToT, then given certificates. There were three educational strategies carried out by the pioneers, namely *da'wah bil lisan* (verbal), *da'wah bil hal* (deeds), *da'wah bil kitabah* (writing). The materials presented were Indonesia's diversity, religious moderation, challenges and development of religious moderation, Islamophobia, radicalism, extremism, intolerance, and religious moderation skills. The obstacles faced by the pioneers are negative views regarding religious moderation, obstacles in coordination, welfare of the pioneers, the absence of a special organizational structure. The future agenda for the pioneers is to increase the number of pioneers, particularly at the sub-district level, develop the cooperation with the Religious Harmony Forum and the local regional government, as well as strengthening the village's declaration of religious moderation.

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