

The Fragility of Plausibility Structures: Reconstructing the Social Foundation of Religious Moderation Policy in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article extends the author's previous research on the social construction of religious moderation in Indonesia by focusing on Peter L. Berger's concept of plausibility structures. Rather than revisiting the full dialectical framework of externalization, objectification, and internalization, it examines why religious moderation continues to experience a plausibility deficit despite its strong institutionalization through Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023. Using theoretical content analysis of policy documents and secondary data on freedom of religion or belief (2023–2024), the study argues that the primary challenge lies not in weak legal or bureaucratic instruments but in the absence of an organic social foundation that enables moderation values to become part of everyday life. The analysis identifies three sources of bureaucratic plausibility fragility: dependence on political and budget cycles, the distance between policymakers and local communities, and limited intersubjective contact spaces. The study contributes by proposing four practical pillars for reconstructing an organic-cultural plausibility structure involving policymakers, educational institutions, and civil society, while recommending longitudinal research to examine the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of these strategies.

Keywords

Plausibility Structures, Religious Moderation, Presidential Regulation No. 58/2023, Sociology of Knowledge, Peter L. Berger.



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INTRODUCTION

Strengthening religious moderation has gained a stronger institutional foundation since the enactment of Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023. This regulation is a key milestone in the development of Indonesian religious policy because it encourages the institutionalization of moderation through various administrative instruments. The implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) for the Professionalism and Religious Moderation Index for State Civil Servants within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the establishment of Religious

Moderation Working Groups in all provinces, and the integration of moderation values into the education curriculum demonstrate a high level of policy objectivity. This administrative success reflects the state's capacity to build a relatively comprehensive legal, institutional, and governance framework.

Empirical reality, however, reveals a different dynamic. Independent monitoring data on freedom of religion and belief shows an increase in the number of violations, from 217 incidents in 2023 to 260 incidents in 2024. This development indicates that administrative success has not been fully accompanied by increased social acceptance of moderate values. This situation presents a paradox that demands a deeper explanation of the policy's effectiveness at the community level. The author's previous research examined this phenomenon through the social dialectics framework developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, namely externalization, objectivation, and internalization. This study demonstrated that the gap between formal success and social reality is closely related to the weak structure of plausibility that supports the narrative of religious moderation. This article does not intend to rehash the discussion of this entire dialectical process. The research focuses specifically on a more fundamental issue: why policies that have gained legal legitimacy and strong bureaucratic support still experience a plausibility deficit in public consciousness.

Berger and Luckmann's dialectical framework remains the theoretical foundation of this research. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, social reality is understood as the result of a dialectical process that occurs through externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Previous research has explained how these three processes operate in the formation of religious moderation as a metanarrative of state policy. The focus of this study shifts to the factors that determine the success or failure of the internalization process, namely the existence of social structures that support the continuity of a world of meaning.

Berger's concept of plausibility structures, introduced in *The Sacred Canopy*, provides an important analytical foundation for addressing these issues. Plausibility structures refer to social networks, everyday practices, and interpersonal relationships that continually reinforce a system of meaning, making it perceived as legitimate and worthy of preservation. The world of meaning cannot survive solely through legal or institutional legitimacy, as it requires a process of reality maintenance that occurs in everyday social interactions. Without such support, formally constructed objectivations have the potential to lose their binding power and experience a crisis of meaning.

The conceptual implications of this view suggest that policy objectivation and social plausibility are two distinct dimensions. A policy can have a strong legal basis, a comprehensive institutional structure, and adequate oversight mechanisms, yet still fail to become part of the collective consciousness of society. This situation illustrates what this article calls objectification without plausibility, namely the successful establishment of a legal framework without the formation of a social base that supports the internalization of values. This situation explains why the implementation of religious moderation still faces challenges at the grassroots level.

Berger also distinguishes between plausibility structures artificially created through bureaucratic mechanisms and those that develop organically within communities. Artificial structures generally rely on regulations, formal organizations, budgets, and state intervention. Organic structures develop through recurring social relations, local traditions, kinship ties, and long-term shared experiences. This distinction serves as a primary framework for analyzing the strengths and limitations of religious moderation policies in Indonesia. The existence of a community that supports meaning plays a central role in maintaining the plausibility of a value. The intensity of interaction within the community determines the extent to which a belief continues to receive social confirmation. Dense and continuous relationships strengthen the internalization of values, while sporadic interactions make the world of meaning susceptible to erosion. This explanation also demonstrates why formal socialization, seminars, training, and administrative lectures often have a limited impact on changing public awareness, as they function more as information transmission than as the formation of a community that supports meaning.

This article is structured to provide a more focused contribution to the development of religious moderation studies. The first section presents an introduction, followed by a conceptual foundation regarding the plausibility structure as the primary analytical perspective. The following section explains the research method, followed by a discussion of the anatomy of the fragility of the artificial-bureaucratic plausibility structure and its theoretical implications for the development of the sociology of knowledge. The final section offers strategic recommendations regarding the reconstruction of a more organic plausibility structure as a basis for strengthening religious moderation policies.

This article's position is not a rejection of the policy of strengthening religious moderation. This study is based on the belief that religious moderation is a strategic necessity for maintaining national integration in Indonesia's diverse society. The

critique is directed at the social architecture supporting the policy's implementation, not the policy's normative objectives. The recommendations developed aim to strengthen the foundation established through Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 by complementing it with the establishment of a plausibility structure that grows organically within society.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with theoretical content analysis combined with library research. Primary data sources include two clusters: first, fundamental theoretical texts of the sociology of knowledge, namely *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and *The Sacred Canopy* (Berger, 1967), as the epistemological basis of the concept of plausibility structure; second, state policy documents, including the academic paper *Religious Moderation* (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019) and the legal text of Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023. Secondary data are collected from the annual report of an independent monitoring institution regarding the condition of freedom of religion and belief (KBB) for the period 2023–2024, as well as supporting literature on the contemporary sociology of religion.

As emphasized in the previous review, the secondary data cited in this article are illustrative of the theoretical dynamics discussed, not intended as strict statistical generalizations; readers are advised to refer directly to the official publications of the data sources for the most recent figures. The analysis was conducted in three stages: open coding of text units relevant to the concept of plausibility (e.g., references to budgets, institutional structures, social interaction spaces, and customary institutions), categorization of the codes into two conceptual poles of artificial-bureaucratic plausibility versus organic-cultural plausibility, and theoretical synthesis to formulate a reconstruction agenda. The observation period for empirical data is limited to 2023–2024, as a short-term transition period following the enactment of Presidential Regulation No. 58/2023. Therefore, the findings of this study are best understood as an initial mapping that requires further longitudinal in-depth study, rather than as a final conclusion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A content analysis of policy documents and secondary data shows that the plausibility structure currently underpinning religious moderation policies in Indonesia is dominated by artificial-bureaucratic characteristics. This finding can be broken down into three interrelated anatomical characteristics.

Dependence on Budget and Political Cycle

The first characteristic is structural dependence on the state budget and the continuity of the political regime. Nearly all concrete manifestations of religious moderation policies—the formation of provincial-level working groups, the implementation of the IPMB CAT test, outreach activities, and coordination meetings—rely on the annual budget items of ministries/agencies. This characteristic makes the policy's plausibility ontologically fragile: it exists as long as the budget is available and the leadership's political commitment remains, but it has the potential to dissolve instantly when there is a regime change, budget refocusing, or shift in national political priorities. A plausibility structure that relies entirely on external factors like this lacks deep roots in the sociology of everyday society, so its sustainability is always contingent, not taken for granted.

The Legitimacy Gap between the State and Social Awareness

The implementation of religious moderation still faces challenges in the form of a gap between the state's legitimate space and the legitimate space that exists within society. The policy established through Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 operates within a formal legal framework, bureaucracy, and technocratic administrative governance. Conversely, people's religious awareness develops through daily experiences, family relationships, local traditions, and deeply rooted beliefs in social life. The differences in the characteristics of these two legitimate spaces mean that the value of moderation is often understood as an administrative obligation originating from the state, rather than as a collective value growing from public awareness. The contrast between the high national achievement of the Interfaith Harmony Index and the increasing violations of freedom of religion and belief at the local level indicates that institutional success has not yet fully resulted in the internalization of values at the level of citizen experience.

Limited Interaction Space as a Basis for the Formation of Plausibility

The current policy architecture for religious moderation is still dominated by one-way communication patterns. Seminars, training, outreach, and symbolic campaigns are effective in disseminating information, but they are insufficient to create social experiences that strengthen the internalization of values. Studies on intergroup relations show that trust is more easily fostered through repeated collaboration in daily life than through formal delivery of material. Activities such as joint management of public spaces, collaborative disaster management, interfaith cooperatives, or community empowerment programs provide opportunities for individuals to build relationships of equality and mutual trust. This limited space for

interaction means that religious moderation lacks an adequate social platform for ongoing practice, testing, and confirmation.

The Disjunction between Policy Objectivation and Social Plausibility

A synthesis of previous findings reveals a fundamental gap between the success of policy objectivation and the formation of social plausibility. Legal instruments, institutions, budgets, and bureaucratic mechanisms have developed significantly, capable of producing a high level of objectivation. This condition has not automatically been followed by the formation of an appreciation of the value of moderation in community life. This situation demonstrates the objectification–plausibility disjunction, a situation where policies successfully create administrative compliance but fail to fully build commitment born of social awareness. The existence of an organic plausibility structure is a determining factor in whether a policy remains merely a formal procedure or develops into part of community culture. Without this social foundation, bureaucratic systems risk forming symbolic compliance that is easily changed when administrative support weakens.

Empirical Evidence of Plausibility Fragility in Freedom of Religion and Belief Data

Monitoring data on freedom of religion and belief provides empirical illustration of the conceptual arguments developed in this study. In 2023, 217 incidents with 329 violations were recorded, while in 2024, this number increased to 260 incidents with 402 violations. Most of these violations involved state actors at the local level, through discriminatory policies or condoning the actions of intolerant groups. This pattern indicates that strengthening regulations at the national level has not fully translated into strengthening the plausibility structure at the regional implementation level.

A different picture is seen in cases of disturbances to the construction and operation of houses of worship. The number of cases decreased from 65 in 2023 to 42 in 2024. This decline can be understood as an early indication that on certain issues a stronger structure of plausibility has developed through the role of local communities, customary institutions, and interfaith harmony forums. Sustained social interaction allows conflict resolution through dialogue and cooperation, reducing reliance on bureaucratic approaches. This interpretation is still tentative and requires further in-depth field research, but it provides a promising direction for developing religious moderation policies.

The comparison between the high national score on the Interfaith Harmony Index and the increase in violations at the local level further clarifies the discrepancy

between measures of objectification and plausibility. The national index reflects the success of policy institutionalization and macro-perceptions of harmony. Incident data at the local level, however, demonstrates concrete community experiences that do not always align with these achievements. The discrepancy between these two types of data reinforces the argument that institutional success cannot automatically be used as an indicator of successful value internalization. This finding provides empirical evidence supporting the research's main thesis regarding the disjunction between policy objectification and social plausibility in the implementation of religious moderation in Indonesia. To clarify the anatomy of fragility that has been described, the following table summarizes the characteristic differences between the currently dominant artificial-bureaucratic plausibility structure and the organic-cultural plausibility structure that this study recommends as the direction of shift.

Aspect	Artificial-Bureaucratic Plausibility	Organic-Cultural Plausibility
Main resources	State budget, formal institutional structure	Social capital, tradition, kinship relations
Durability	Vulnerable to regime/budget changes	Relatively stable across generations
Transmission mechanism	One-way socialization, regulations, sanctions	Repeated interactions, shared experiences
Compliance basis	Calculation of sanctions (fear of being punished)	Value calculation (ethical awareness)
Main actor	ASN, Working Group, state institutions	Traditional figures, interfaith communities, families
Main risks	Pseudo-compliance (lip service)	Lack of national reach/scale

The table above shows that the two types of plausibility structures are not mutually exclusive, but ideally complement each other. An artificial-bureaucratic structure remains necessary as a legal framework and minimum standard that binds all regions equally, while an organic-cultural structure is necessary to ensure that legal framework remains viable at the level of subjective consciousness. The problem is not the existence of the artificial-bureaucratic structure itself, but rather its sole dominance without the corresponding strengthening of an organic-cultural structure.

Discussion: Theoretical Implications for Contemporary Sociology of Knowledge

The findings of this study extend Peter L. Berger's thinking on the structure of plausibility to the context of a pluralistic nation-state like Indonesia. Berger developed the concept to explain how the world of religious meaning can be

maintained amidst modernity and pluralism. This study shows that the same concept is also relevant to understanding the sustainability of public policy metanarratives, particularly religious moderation policies. In the context of contemporary democracy, the state no longer functions solely as a regulator but also as an actor that produces and manages meaning through legal instruments, bureaucracy, and public policy. This perspective demonstrates that the success of policy institutionalization is not solely determined by regulatory strength but also by the ability to build a social base that supports public acceptance of the values espoused.

The theoretical implication of these findings is the need to distinguish between two forms of power in the sociology of knowledge: legal-rational power and plausibility power. Legal-rational power operates through regulations, institutions, and sanction mechanisms, thus producing formal policy objectification. Conversely, plausibility power develops through habits, social relations, shared experiences, and repeated interactions that occur in everyday life. The formation of legal objectification can be achieved relatively quickly through administrative decisions, while the formation of plausibility requires a gradual and ongoing social process. The differences in the characteristics of these two forms of power explain why the intensification of regulation is not necessarily able to resolve problems that fundamentally stem from the weakness of the social structures that support the internalization of values.

The success of religious moderation policies ultimately depends heavily on the state's ability to shift its implementation orientation from a bureaucratic approach to a more organic, socio-cultural one. Command-and-control management patterns are effective in fostering administrative compliance, but they do not always generate confidence that grows from public awareness. Strengthening plausibility structures requires a more participatory strategy through the development of communities, social relations, and interaction spaces that enable the values of moderation to be put into practice. The main contribution of this article lies in sharpening these dimensions so that the concept of plausibility structures is no longer understood as a complement to Berger's theory but as a central element in explaining the success and limitations of implementing religious moderation policies.

This discussion also relates to the concept of sociological schizophrenia proposed by Nurdin and Huda (2023). This phenomenon illustrates the gap between an individual's formal behavior within an institutional environment and the beliefs or orientations that develop in their personal lives. The structural plausibility perspective explains that this condition arises when an individual finds themselves

in two distinct environments of meaning: a bureaucratic environment that demands formal compliance and a social environment shaped by tradition, community, and daily life experiences. The tension between these two environments has the potential to result in symbolic administrative compliance without a deep internalization of values.

Another equally important implication relates to the limits of the state's ability to shape collective societal consciousness. Regulations can control visible behavior through mechanisms of oversight and sanctions. Conversely, the formation of inner convictions cannot be enforced solely through legal instruments, as they require social networks that continually confirm a system of meaning. This consciousness develops through families, local communities, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and various natural spaces of social interaction. The state's position in this context is more accurately understood as a facilitator strengthening the social ecosystem rather than as a sole actor controlling the entire process of internalizing values.

The experiences of various countries with high levels of religious plurality also support this argument. Models of managing harmony that rely too heavily on state regulation and oversight tend to result in procedural compliance that is easily compromised when bureaucratic pressures ease. Conversely, policies that provide greater space for cross-group social interaction have demonstrated a greater ability to build sustainable social cohesion. While Indonesia's social and political character has its own unique characteristics, this general pattern reinforces the argument that investing in organically plausible structures is a more sustainable strategy than simply expanding legal and bureaucratic instruments.

Reconstruction of Organic Plausibility Structure as a Policy Agenda

Based on these findings, this study proposes the reconstruction of a plausibility structure through four complementary strategic pillars. The first pillar emphasizes the importance of empowering customary institutions and local wisdom as a proven social foundation for maintaining community cohesion. Traditions such as *Pela Gandong* in Maluku, *Tri Hita Karana* in Bali, and *Rumah Betang* in Kalimantan demonstrate that the value of harmony is more resilient when it grows from a community's historical experience. Strengthening these institutions requires mapping local potential, facilitating engagement with customary leaders, and integrating local values into moderate policies without diminishing community autonomy.

The second pillar focuses on creating intersubjective contact spaces that enable communities of different faiths to interact in practical activities. Economic

cooperation, public space management, disaster mitigation, and community empowerment programs provide opportunities for individuals to build trust through shared experiences. The literature on intergroup contact shows that this form of interaction is far more effective in reducing prejudice than formal presentations. This social space also serves as a vehicle for the formation of vibrant and sustainable structures of plausibility.

The third pillar focuses on transforming the pedagogy of religious moderation in educational institutions. The learning process needs to shift from a transmission of knowledge to a critical-reflective approach that encourages dialogue, reflection, and direct experience. Activities such as visits to different places of worship, joint social projects, and experiential learning provide opportunities for students to understand diversity through real-life interactions. This approach allows religious moderation to develop as a result of reasoning and experience, not simply memorized material to meet administrative demands.

The fourth pillar emphasizes the need to reformulate policy design through the desecuritization of the discourse on religious moderation. The use of dichotomous categories needs to be reduced to maintain open dialogue and prevent stigmatization of certain groups. Policy evaluation also needs to shift from administrative measures to indicators that better reflect the quality of social relations, such as the level of trust between religious communities, the intensity of cross-group interactions, and public perceptions of policy fairness. Involving civil society organizations and independent institutions in the evaluation process will strengthen accountability and enrich perspectives for policy refinement.

The implementation of these four pillars needs to be carried out in stages, in accordance with the institutional capacity and social conditions of each region. Reformulating policy indicators can be a short-term priority because it is relatively easy to implement through regulatory adjustments. Strengthening customary institutions and developing social interaction spaces are more appropriately developed as medium-term programs through pilot projects in areas with strong social capital. Pedagogical transformation requires longer time because it involves curriculum changes, improving educator competency, and establishing a new learning culture. These stages align with the character of plausibility structures, which essentially grow through the accumulation of social experience, not through instant administrative decisions.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the main challenge to religious moderation policy in Indonesia lies not in weak regulations or bureaucracy, but rather in the lack of an organic plausibility structure that would allow the values of moderation to be internalized in people's daily lives. Although policy implementation has been strengthened through Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023, the increase in violations of freedom of religion and belief in the 2023–2024 period indicates a gap between the high objectivity of the policy and the low social acceptance of the values of moderation.

As a conceptual contribution, this study proposes four pillars of reconstruction to strengthen the plausibility structure: empowering customary institutions, creating intersubjective contact spaces, transforming critical-reflective pedagogy, and desecuritizing policy discourse. These four pillars aim to shift the orientation of religious moderation from a bureaucratic approach to an organic-cultural approach, allowing the value of moderation to develop as a lived practice born of collective consciousness, not merely administrative compliance. This study still has limitations due to its use of empirical data from the 2023–2024 period with an illustrative qualitative approach. Therefore, further research is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies, ethnographic research in educational institutions, develop quantitative instruments to measure the strength of plausibility structures, and comparatively evaluate the effectiveness of various models of intersubjective contact spaces. Ultimately, the success of religious moderation is not solely supported by regulations and bureaucracy; it requires a plausibility structure rooted in social life. Thus, religious moderation can develop as a sustainable cultural life and strengthen cohesion in Indonesia's pluralistic society.

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