



## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF RELIGIOUS MODERATION (RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TJONG A FIE AND ISLAM IN NORTH SUMATRA 1880-1990)

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the historiography of religious moderation through the relationship between Tjong A Fie and Islam in North Sumatra during the 1880–1990 period. The background of this research is the lack of in-depth studies on the contribution of non-Muslim figures in building interfaith harmony amid historiography that tends to emphasize narratives of conflict. Using historical methods—including heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography—this study reconstructs the role of Tjong A Fie, a Chinese businessman and philanthropist, in supporting the development of the Muslim community through the construction of worship facilities, financing religious activities, supporting Islamic education, and maintaining harmonious relations with local ulama. The research findings show that his contributions formed a model of religious moderation that was pragmatic, inclusive, and rooted in cross-identity social capital. Academically, this study offers a new perspective in the historiography of religious moderation in Indonesia by emphasizing the strategic role of non-Muslim figures as agents of interfaith harmony. The novelty of this research lies in the disclosure of Tjong A Fie's practice of "philanthropic diplomacy" as a historical mechanism for forming social cohesion, which is relevant as a reference for multicultural policies and tolerance education in the contemporary era.*

**Keywords:** Tjong A Fie; Religious Moderation; Historiography; Islam; North Sumatra.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religious tolerance and moderation are crucial issues in pluralistic societies, particularly in Indonesia, with its rich ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity (Azra, 2020). National historical narratives often focus on reactive conflict or reconciliation, while the role of non-Muslim figures in building interfaith harmony is often overlooked. Yet, their presence has been a crucial part of socio-religious dynamics, particularly in the context of Islam in North Sumatra. This research

seeks to fill this gap by examining the historical relationship between Tjong A Fie—a Chinese businessman and philanthropist—and the Islamic community during the period 1880–1990.

The issue of religious moderation has received significant attention amidst increasing polarization and religious extremism in various parts of the world (Mujani & Liddle, 2017). In Indonesia, the government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has prioritized religious moderation as a strategy to maintain social cohesion (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). However, historical narratives about past moderation practices, particularly those involving interfaith interactions, remain rare. Islamic historiography in Indonesia tends to focus on the internal development of the Muslim community or Muslim-colonial relations, while the positive dynamics between non-Muslim figures and the Muslim community are rarely highlighted (Ricklefs, 2008).

Studies on the Chinese community in North Sumatra have focused primarily on their economic role or the discrimination they experienced (Suryadinata, 2007), while their contributions to the development of Islam and interfaith harmony have remained largely unexplored. Research on Tjong A Fie, for example by Lee (2015) and Purba & Simanjuntak (2021), does highlight his role in the development of Medan and the leadership of the Chinese community, but does not delve into his specific support for Islamic religious institutions or his role as an agent of religious moderation. Thus, there is a significant research gap in the literature, where the intersection between Chinese figures, the development of Islam, and religious moderation has not been comprehensively examined.

Theoretically, this study utilizes the concept of religious moderation, which emphasizes an active role in building understanding, cooperation, and support across identities (Barton, 2019; Ma'arif, 2020). This approach is strengthened by social capital theory (Putnam, 2000), which explains how networks and mutual trust can foster intergroup collaboration. The primary hypothesis of this study is that Tjong A. Fie's relationship with the Muslim community in North Sumatra constitutes a concrete form of religious moderation that is informal, philanthropic, and based on social capital.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to historically reconstruct Tjong A. Fie's relationship with the Muslim community in North Sumatra during the period 1880–1990; (2) to identify Tjong A. Fie's concrete contributions to the development of Islam and the practice of religious moderation; (3) to analyze the socio-religious impact of this relationship; and (4) to offer a new perspective in the historiography of religious moderation that involves the role of non-Muslim figures. With this focus, this research is expected to not only fill a historiographical gap but also provide inspiration for strengthening contemporary religious moderation in Indonesia.

The novelty of this research lies in its shift in focus from a narrative of conflict to a narrative of cross-identity collaboration. Unlike many studies that emphasize

the formal role of religious or state institutions, this research highlights the figure of a non-Muslim entrepreneur as an agent of moderation who plays a role through "philanthropic diplomacy." By tracing its historical roots back to the colonial era, this study demonstrates that religious moderation is not merely a modern concept, but rather a social practice that has developed organically in the past. Tjong A. Fie's contributions to mosque construction, Islamic education, and cross-community relations are historical evidence that harmony can be built through visionary individual initiatives oriented toward the common good.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses historical methods to reconstruct and analyze Tjong A. Fie's relationship with the Muslim community in North Sumatra during the period 1880-1990 within the framework of the historiography of religious moderation. Historical methods were chosen because they allow researchers to systematically, critically, and in-depthly explore past events and understand their meaning and context (Sjamsuddin, 2007). This approach is relevant for revealing the role of non-Muslims in promoting religious moderation, a dimension often overlooked in conventional historical narratives.

This research is qualitative historical research. Historical research allows for the exploration of past phenomena to identify patterns, changes, and continuities relevant to the research questions (Gottschalk, 1969). A qualitative approach was used to deeply understand the social, cultural, and religious context in North Sumatra during the period studied, as well as to interpret the meaning behind the actions and interactions between Tjong A. Fie and the Muslim community. The emphasis on data quality, rather than quantity, allows researchers to explore the complex nuances of interfaith relations that are not always captured in statistics (Creswell, 2018).

The interpretation stage is the process of interpreting and linking various facts from critical sources. At this stage, researchers look for patterns, causal relationships, and the meaning behind events. Interpretation is carried out heuristically (finding facts) and synthetically (arranging facts into a meaningful narrative). Researchers connect data on Tjong A. Fie's philanthropy, his interactions with religious scholars, and his support for Islamic facilities with the concept of religious moderation (Barton, 2019; Ma'arif, 2020). For example, how Tjong A. Fie's financial assistance for the construction of mosques and religious schools can be interpreted as a concrete effort to build bridges between religious communities and create a climate of moderation. The interpretation also considers the socio-political context of North Sumatra during that period, including colonial policies and inter-ethnic dynamics.

The final stage is historiography, which involves compiling research findings into a systematic, logical, and communicative historical text. At this stage, all

findings from the heuristic, critical, and interpretive processes are presented in a coherent narrative. The writing follows the standards for scientific journal articles, with a clear structure (introduction, literature review, methodology, results and discussion, conclusion). The author strives to present arguments clearly, supported by strong historical evidence, and avoids personal bias. The writing also emphasizes the novelty of this research in the historiography of religious moderation and its contribution to the understanding of interfaith interaction in Indonesia.

### 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

#### **Historical Reconstruction of the Relationship between Tjong A Fie and the Islamic Community in North Sumatra (1880-1990)**

Historical reconstructions show that the relationship between Tjong A Fie and the Islamic community in North Sumatra, particularly in Medan and the Deli Sultanate, was a complex, strategic, and nuanced one, extending far beyond mere business relations or passive tolerance. This relationship stemmed from pragmatic colonial needs but evolved into significant forms of mutual understanding and support. Tjong A Fie, who arrived in Medan in the 1870s and later became *Majoord der Chinezen* in 1911, quickly grasped the socio-political landscape dominated by the Deli Sultanate and the predominantly Muslim Malay community, as well as the economic interests of the colonial government and plantation entrepreneurs (Lee, 2015).

The origins of this relationship can be traced to Tjong A Fie's need to build networks and legitimacy to conduct his businesses, which ranged from trade and plantations to banking. To operate effectively in this multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment, he had to build trust not only with colonial authorities but also with local rulers and indigenous communities. The Sultan of Deli, as the political and religious leader of the Malay Muslim community, was a central figure in Tjong A Fie's strategy. He forged close personal relationships with the Sultans of Deli, particularly Sultan Makmun Al-Rasyid Perkasa Alam (reigned 1873-1924), known for his visionary and openness to modernization. This relationship often manifested itself in economic cooperation and mutual support for development projects in Deli (Purba & Simanjuntak, 2021). For example, Tjong A Fie was involved in infrastructure development that also benefited the Muslim community. Tjong A Fie's relationship with the Islamic community was not limited to the ruling elite. He also actively cultivated connections with Islamic religious leaders (*ulama*) and community leaders at various levels. This was achieved through various means:

- a. Tjong A Fie's companies employed a large local workforce, predominantly Muslim. These daily interactions in the workplace indirectly created a network of communication and interdependence. Tjong A Fie was known as a

businessman who cared about the welfare of his workers, which may have also helped build a positive reputation among Muslims (Basri, 2023).

- b. One of the most prominent aspects of this relationship was Tjong A Fie's philanthropy, which did not discriminate based on ethnic or religious background. He firmly believed that the advancement of society should be holistic. Therefore, he donated not only to Chinese temples and schools, but also to churches, hospitals, and, significantly, to Islamic institutions (Heng, 2020). These donations were often delivered directly or through respected intermediaries, ensuring that the aid was well-targeted and fostering emotional bonds.
- c. On numerous occasions, Tjong A Fie was recognized as a capable mediator in various disputes, whether inter-ethnic, inter-religious, or between the community and the colonial government (Anshorudin, 2021). The trust placed in him by various parties, including the Muslim community, enabled him to play a vital role in maintaining stability and social harmony in the rapidly developing Medan. This ability demonstrates maturity in conflict management and a commitment to social harmony that transcends personal or ethnic interests.

From the 1880s to the early 20th century, Medan experienced rapid growth as a center for tobacco and other commodity plantations. Migration from various ethnicities (Malay, Chinese, Javanese, Indian, and European) created a highly pluralistic society. In this context, figures like Tjong A Fie, who were able to bridge differences, became crucial. He bridged not only vertical differences (between the people and the rulers/colonials) but also horizontal ones (between ethnic and religious groups). The relationships Tjong A Fie built continued into his later years and even had a long-lasting impact until the mid-20th century, through foundations and collective memories of his generosity that transcended identity boundaries. Stories of Tjong A Fie's close relationships with Islamic scholars or his assistance in the construction of Islamic facilities are often passed down through generations, becoming part of Medan's multicultural identity. This relationship demonstrates that in a period often perceived as segregated, there have been real efforts by non-Muslim actors to integrate and contribute to the development of Muslim communities, creating a foundation for authentic religious moderation.

### **Identification of Tjong A Fie's Contributions to the Development of Islam and the Practice of Religious Moderation**

Research has found that Tjong A Fie's contributions to the Islamic community in North Sumatra were not merely sporadic, but rather an integral part of his philanthropic vision to build a harmonious and prosperous society. These contributions directly facilitated the development of Islam and indirectly practiced

and promoted religious moderation. These contributions can be identified as follows:

- a. **Substantial Financial Support for the Construction and Maintenance of Islamic Worship Facilities.** Tjong A Fie was known for his widespread generosity, and one significant beneficiary was the construction of Muslim places of worship. The most iconic example is his donation for the construction of the Al-Mashun Grand Mosque in Medan (Medan Grand Mosque). Although the initiative for the construction originated with the Sultan of Deli, Sultan Makmun Al-Rasyid Perkasa Alam, Tjong A Fie is recorded as having made a substantial financial contribution, amounting to thousands of guilders, which at the time was a staggering sum (Lee, 2015). This donation was more than just a casual donation; it demonstrated Tjong A Fie's recognition of Islam as the dominant religion in the region and his willingness to invest in the spiritual infrastructure of other communities. In addition to the Grand Mosque, oral sources and several local records also indicate that Tjong A Fie provided assistance for the construction or renovation of mosques and small prayer rooms (surau) in various Muslim settlements around Medan. For example, he often contributed to repairing mosque roofs, providing clean water, or constructing other supporting facilities. This type of assistance was crucial given the financial constraints often faced by local communities at the time. These actions significantly built bridges between communities, dispelling perceptions of dichotomy, and demonstrating that interfaith support was essential for social cohesion.
- b. **Providing Material and Financial Support to Islamic Educational Institutions (Pesantren/Madrasah).** In addition to mosques, Tjong A Fie also focused on the development of traditional Islamic education. Although archival evidence may be less extensive than for the Grand Mosque, oral narratives from descendants of Muslim figures and several informal records mention assistance provided by Tjong A Fie to several Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) or madrasahs. This support could take the form of land donations for facility expansion, provision of operational funds for teachers, or logistical assistance such as building materials and equipment. By supporting this educational institution, Tjong A Fie indirectly contributed to the spread of Islamic religious knowledge and the intellectual development of the Muslim community (Heng, 2020). This action reflected his inclusive view of the overall progress of society, believing that education, in all its forms, is the key to progress. This practice of proactive religious moderation, in which a non-Muslim leader invests in developing the spiritual and intellectual capacity of another religious community, without motives of conversion or domination.
- c. **Building and Maintaining Good Relationships with Local Muslim Scholars and Leaders.** Tjong A Fie was known for his ability to build strong personal networks that transcended ethnic and religious boundaries. He actively

fostered relationships and friendships with scholars, kyai (Islamic scholars), and Muslim community leaders in Medan and the Deli Sultanate. He often invited them to his residence, discussing social issues, or simply sharing views at informal events. These relationships fostered mutual trust and respect (Purba & Simanjuntak, 2021). For example, prominent scholars of the time, who often served as advisors to the Sultan, also had direct access to Tjong A Fie. This close relationship enabled constructive dialogue and facilitated cross-community communication. When problems or needs arose within the Muslim community, clerics could directly address them to Tjong A Fie, and he often responded quickly. This personal relationship laid the foundation for a pragmatic practice of religious moderation, where differences in belief did not hinder cooperation but instead served as catalysts for finding common ground for the common good.

- d. Role as a Mediator and Guardian of Social Harmony in Cross-Identity Conflicts. Tjong A Fie was often trusted by various parties, including the colonial government and indigenous communities, to mediate in various disputes. His reputation as a neutral, wise, and highly integrated individual made him an ideal choice for defusing tensions. In cases of inter-ethnic or inter-religious disputes that might arise in a multicultural city like Medan, Tjong A Fie often intervened to seek peaceful solutions. His ability to listen to all parties, understand differing perspectives, and lead to compromise was a concrete manifestation of his religious moderation approach (Anshorudin, 2021). His role as a facilitator of dialogue and solution-finder demonstrated his commitment to harmonious social cohesion, which is the essence of religious moderation. These actions significantly helped maintain social stability in Medan, a city at the time highly vulnerable to friction due to its diverse demographic composition.

Overall, Tjong A Fie's contributions to Islam in North Sumatra went beyond mere philanthropy. He demonstrates a model of informal leadership that actively supports religious pluralism, builds bridges of communication, and invests in the well-being of other communities. This is the essence of authentic religious moderation, in which a non-Muslim leader acts as an agent of harmonization.

### **Analysis of the Impact of Relations on Social and Religious Dynamics in North Sumatra**

The impact of Tjong A. Fie's relationship with the Islamic community and his contribution to the practice of religious moderation in North Sumatra was significant and can be observed in several key aspects of social and religious dynamics.

- a. **Strengthening Social Cohesion and Enduring Cross-Ethnic-Religious Tolerance:** Tjong A. Fie's contributions and attitudes directly strengthened social cohesion and fostered a unique climate of tolerance in multicultural Medan. Amidst the Dutch East Indies, which frequently practiced segregation and occasionally experienced inter-ethnic tensions (such as anti-Chinese incidents in several regions), Medan was relatively stable and demonstrated a high level of coexistence (Barton, 2019). Tjong A. Fie's actions, such as supporting the construction of the Grand Mosque and establishing close ties with Islamic scholars, sent a strong message about the importance of mutual respect and support between communities. The presence of a respected Chinese figure who visibly supported Islamic institutions provided a concrete example of how diversity can be transformed into a social unifying force, rather than a source of conflict. This helped shape Medan's identity as a harmonious multicultural city, where collective memories of cross-identity cooperation remain strong to this day. This impact was long-term, forming the foundation of a culture of tolerance that remains relevant in the modern era (Azra, 2020).
- b. **Effectively Reducing the Potential for Inter-Ethnic and Inter-Religious Conflict:** Between 1880 and 1990, particularly in the early 20th century, the rapid growth of the plantation economy in North Sumatra attracted migrants from various backgrounds. This situation, without wise leadership, was highly susceptible to friction and conflict. Tjong A Fie's role as a bridge between communities and mediator effectively reduced the potential for inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict. The trust he built with Muslim scholars and the community, as well as his ability to influence colonial authorities, created a strong buffer mechanism against incitement or provocation. If minor incidents had the potential to trigger unrest, Tjong A Fie often intervened to calm the situation, engage in dialogue with various parties, and seek peaceful solutions. This was supported by the high social capital he had successfully built (Putnam, 2000). His extensive network, based on trust, reciprocity, and norms of mutual assistance, enabled various groups to interact and resolve issues without escalating violence. Thus, he served as an anchor of stability amidst complex societal dynamics.
- c. **Establishing a Pragmatic and Inclusive Model of Religious Moderation:** The relationship between Tjong A. Fie and the Islamic community in North Sumatra presents a highly pragmatic and inclusive model of religious moderation, far from being merely a theoretical concept. This moderation is not merely the absence of conflict or passive tolerance, but rather a form of reciprocal support and concrete investment in the well-being of other communities. Tjong A. Fie did not simply "allow" Muslims to worship; he actively contributed to the physical and spiritual development of their communities. This model highlights that religious moderation can grow and develop from informal individual initiatives with a long-term vision for shared stability and progress,



transcending formal government dictates or rigid theological teachings. This is a moderation rooted in practice, not mere rhetoric. This concrete implementation provides a valuable example for contemporary religious moderation efforts (Ma'arif, 2020), demonstrating that true harmony can be achieved when there is recognition, support, and participation across identities.

- d. Long-Term Influence on Local Identity and Collective Memory: Tjong A Fie's legacy of supporting the Muslim community and interfaith harmony has formed an integral part of collective memory and local identity in North Sumatra, particularly Medan. Stories of his generosity, particularly those related to the Medan Grand Mosque, are often passed down through generations and become part of a heroic local historical narrative. He is remembered not only as a wealthy Chinese businessman, but as the "Father of Medan's Development" who cared for all groups, regardless of race or religion. This contributed to the formation of Medan's multicultural character, which values diversity as a city's strength and asset. This influence can even be seen in modern interfaith dialogue in Medan, where stories of past harmony are often cited and inspired (Sahal & Hamid, 2021). Tjong A Fie's legacy symbolizes that peace and interfaith cooperation are possible, and that they have been effectively practiced in the past by figures who transcended conventional boundaries of identity.

### **New Perspectives in the Historiography of Religious Moderation**

The results of this study offer a substantial new perspective in the historiography of religious moderation in Indonesia. Generally, studies on religious moderation focus on the role of the state, religious organizations, or religious figures within the Muslim community itself (Azra, 2020; Sahal & Hamid, 2021). This research, however, demonstrates that non-Muslim figures can play an active and significant role as agents of religious moderation. Tjong A. Fie's contribution demonstrates that moderation is driven not only by shared ideology or religious teachings, but also by shared interests, philanthropy, and the development of social capital.

The novelty lies in emphasizing that religious moderation is not a purely reactive phenomenon to extremism or a product of modern policies. Rather, it has strong historical roots in inclusive social practices and cross-identity philanthropic initiatives. Tjong A. Fie's role demonstrates that interfaith harmony can be built organically through positive interactions and tangible support, even in the often segregated colonial era. This research challenges overly narrow narratives about who can be agents of moderation, opening up space to examine the history of religious moderation from a broader, multi-actor perspective. Thus, this study not only fills a historiographical gap but also provides valuable lessons for

contemporary religious moderation efforts, demonstrating that solutions to harmony can be found in authentic, cross-identity social interactions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This research has successfully reconstructed the historical role of Tjong A Fie in strengthening religious moderation and supporting the development of the Islamic community in North Sumatra during the period 1880–1990. The historical reconstruction shows that his relationship with the Deli Sultanate, the ulama, and the Muslim community was not merely formal or ceremonial, but rather emerged from a socio-economic strategy rooted in trust, intensive interaction, and a commitment to the common good. These cross-identity relationships formed organically and were maintained over the long term, even beyond his lifetime.

Tjong A Fie's contributions were identified in four main forms: (1) substantial financial support for the construction and maintenance of mosques, including the Al-Mashun Grand Mosque in Medan; (2) assistance to Islamic educational institutions, in the form of funds, land, and materials; (3) maintaining harmonious personal relationships with ulama and Muslim figures; and (4) his active role as a mediator in inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts. These contributions not only strengthened social capital across communities but also served as a model of religious moderation based on concrete action and long-term collaboration.

The impact of these contributions is evident in the strengthening of social cohesion, the reduction of the potential for conflict, the formation of a pragmatic and inclusive model of religious moderation, and the emergence of a multicultural identity legacy in Medan. The collective memory of Tjong A. Fie's generosity remains alive in society, serving as a positive reference for interfaith dialogue today.

Academically, this research provides a new perspective in the historiography of religious moderation in Indonesia by emphasizing the strategic role of non-Muslim figures as agents of interfaith harmony. The research's novelty lies in uncovering the practice of "philanthropic diplomacy" as a historical mechanism for fostering harmony and social cohesion during the colonial era. These findings challenge historiographical narratives that tend to center on Muslim actors or formal institutions, demonstrating that religious moderation can be achieved through the initiatives of visionary individuals across identities.

Practically, the results of this research have implications for strengthening multicultural policies and tolerance education in Indonesia. The story of Tjong A. Fie can be integrated into local history and civics curricula to strengthen religious moderation literacy among the younger generation. In addition, the model of interfaith philanthropic collaboration demonstrated by Tjong A Fie is relevant as an inspiration for community leaders, entrepreneurs, and local governments in building social harmony in contemporary multicultural societies.

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