

P-ISSN: 2338-8617

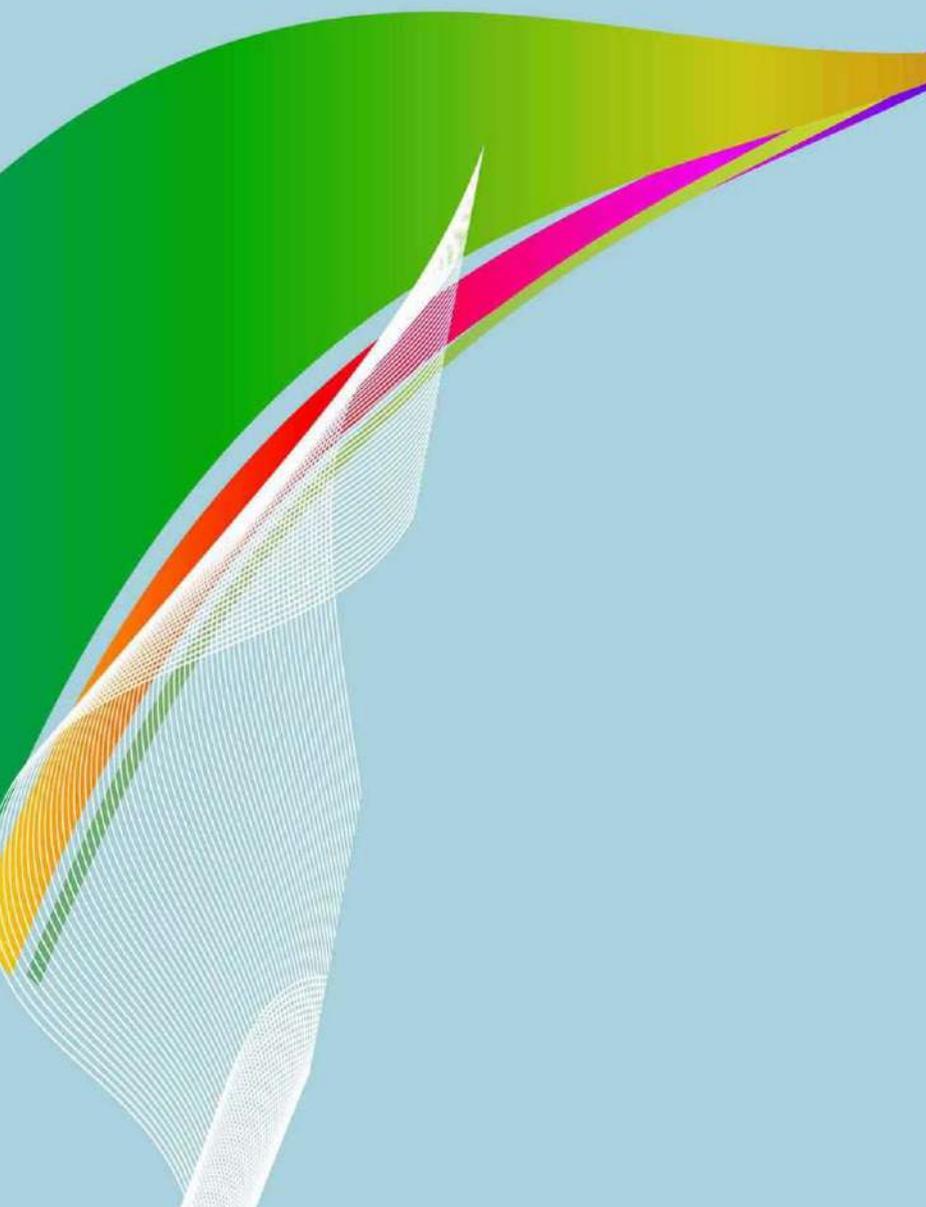
E-ISSN: 2443-2067

*Jurnal Ilmiah*

# PEURADEUN



**Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2020**



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**JIP**  
The Indonesian Journal of the Social Sciences  
[www.journal.scadIndependent.org](http://www.journal.scadIndependent.org)  
DOI Prefix Number: 10.26811



ACCREDITED "B" by the Ministry of Riset, Teknologi, dan Pendidikan Tinggi  
from October 30, 2017 until October 30, 2022

**Negotiating Piety and Radicalism:  
A Study Among Muslim Youth in Pekanbaru, Indonesia**

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**Article in Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun**

Available at : <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/377>

DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v8i3.377>

**How to Cite this Article**

APA : Khotimah, K., & Rosidi, I. (2020). Negotiating Piety and Radicalism: A Study Among Muslim Youth in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 8(3), 633-648. doi:10.26811/peuradeun.v8i3.377

Others Visit : <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun>

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## NEGOTIATING PIETY AND RADICALISM: A STUDY AMONG MUSLIM YOUTH IN PEKANBARU, INDONESIA

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Received: Dece 27, 2018

Accepted: Dec 15, 2019

Published: Sep 30, 2020

Article Url: <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/377>

### Abstract

*Muslim youth in Pekanbaru currently interacts with different culture and tradition. They actively consume modern values spread by global media from different countries. In Muslim societies like Pekanbaru, the rise of modernity and globalization brings multiple impacts on them. One of them is that it supports the growth of piety or religiosity both in the private and public sphere among young Muslims. However, some people may indicate that this piety is a potential or same as radicalism. Radicalism and piety are two complicated terms among young Muslims in this town. As a result, this raises a question on how these Muslim youth understand and practice radicalism and piety. This article argued that, as the impact of globalization and modernity, piety was blended with capitalism and other non-Islamic ideologies. As a result, this article found that, first, Muslim youth in Pekanbaru were negotiating their piety and radicalism with non-Islamic ideologies such as modernity, capitalism, and so forth. Secondly, they could not be labeled into a single term like pious or radical. This is because they were still in the process of negotiation between piety and radicalism.*

**Keywords:** *Piety; Radicalism; Muslim Youth; Pekanbaru*



## A. Introduction

Pekanbaru is a growing town in Sumatra which is religiosity or piety appears in both the private and public sphere. The rise of piety in Pekanbaru cannot be separated from the condition of the national context. Feally and White (2008:1) identify that in the late 1990 Islam in Indonesia began to change in which conservatism and radicalism have been growing. However, one should be careful to look at this phenomenon since it may have different meanings among Muslims. A study on religiosity and radicalism mostly put Muslims as an object rather than a subject. As a result, some scholars wrongly identify the growing rise of piety as the growth of radicalism.

This radicalism is the term that can be labeled among adherents of any religion. However, with the growth of terror in Muslim countries, this term is mostly denoted to Muslims. In this case, the issue of radicalism in Muslim countries is interesting to study as many people around the globe point their fingers to Muslims. This justification is extremely simple because Muslims are heterogeneous. In Indonesia, Muslims are difficult to be captured into a single category, let alone in this global planet. The nature of Muslims is multifaceted. Even, in this globalizing world, their plurality is more complex than before. The rise of global media in Indonesia for instance challenges the term 'radicalism' as some of them are interacting with these global media. This article seeks to know how the piety and radical term is understood and practiced by young Muslims in Pekanbaru.

Studies on Muslim youth in Indonesia are not much. French, Purwono, and Triwahyuni (2011) study that religiosity among youth has a close relationship with their peers. This finding does not however discuss radicalism. Nilan, Parker, Bennett, and Robinson (2011), look at the aspiration of Indonesian youth for their future. It does not focus on Muslim youth definition and negotiation on piety and radicalism. In this article, the focus is given to the understanding of Muslim youth to radicalism and piety under the challenges of modernity, capitalism, and other non-Islamic ideologies. This is an attempt of studying Muslim youth's definition and understanding of radicalism and piety. This article argues that Muslim youth in Pekanbaru are still negotiating their identity

to be pious and radical under the challenges of modernity. These young people may be prone to be the object of 'moral' imperialism from the West on the one hand and 'radical' ideology from the Middle East on the other. They have an innate cultural identity as well as conscious knowledge, which they gained from their learning environment (e.g education) and culture (Wilis, 1998: 550). Secondly, these young Muslims basically may not be categorized easily into pious or radical Muslims. Both terms are simplistic because they now consume and interact with many Islamic and non-Islamic elements of global modernity. Rather than labeling these young Muslims as pious or radical, this article proposes that they are in between radicalism and piety.

## **B. Method**

The above argument is supported by observation and interviews with several Muslim youths in Pekanbaru. There are eleven Muslim youth are selected based on their observable religious identity. All of them are Muslim students studying Islamic studies in several universities in Pekanbaru, namely State Islamic University of Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Riau University and the Islamic University of Riau. Male Muslim youth selected as informants are mostly staying in mosques while they are studying. This is a part of their practice to improve their piety. Pekanbaru is selected to be studied because Pekanbaru plays an intermediary role between cosmopolitan centers and hinterland. It serves as a place of negotiation between modern and traditional values. Pekanbaru represents a provincial town which "seeks to manage the tension between the global and local more smoothly" (Hasan, 2011: 119-157). Young Muslims are selected as informants based on the consideration of demographic factors in which based on the 2010 government census, more than 60% of Indonesia's population is a population of 40 years of age (Suransky: 2012). As the majority population in Indonesia, they play an important role as 'actors' or 'victims' in preventing the flow of religious radicalism which is currently quite strong both globally, nationally, and locally. These young Muslims are then interviewed in-depth as well as observed. Data collected from interviews and observations are analyzed qualitatively.



## C. Result and Discussion

### 1. Muslim Societies in the Indonesian Context

Historically, the arrival of Islam into Indonesia was not through radical means. Islamization to the archipelago as stated by Uka Tjandrasmita (2009: 21) is a mutual benefit for each party, namely for Muslims who come to spread Islam and those who accept Islam. Islamization in Indonesia or the archipelago has never been mentioned by historians through war. Uka said that Islam came to the archipelago through at least six lines; trade, marriage, bureaucracy, education (*pesantren*), Sufism, and art.

The growth of the piety appearance in the public space in Indonesia can be traced to the twilight of the New Order. In the 1990s, Suharto began to approach the Islamic community after years of ignoring even the oppression of this group. In the New Order, there was suspicion and prejudice against the political Islamist movement as well as repressive politics against the Islamic community. But when there is a reduction of political support from the military group, he needed support from Islamic groups to support his power.

Soeharto allowed the establishment of ICMI (Indonesian Muslim Intellectual Association) in 1995 and was followed by other policies that were accommodating to the Islamic community. In connection with the establishment of ICMI, for example, the State (New Order government) and ICMI have a mutually beneficial relationship. On the one hand with the existence of ICMI, Muslim groups that are members of ICMI are easier to promote Islamic values to the State so that the State is expected to be more Islamic.

On the other hand, the New Order State used ICMI as a political tool. The New Order embraced Muslim groups into ICMI to support the continuation of the political power of the New Order. But it should be noted that Soeharto's "accommodative" policy towards Muslims did not touch the political aspect. Political Islam is still considered a danger that threatens its power. On that basis, some Muslim groups then carried out the Islamization movement in non-political areas to avoid Suharto's repressive actions. The emergence of Islamic symbols in the public sphere

such as the wearing of headscarves and the emergence of Islamic songs began in the last decade of Soeharto's rule. At the end of the New Order, thus, it was the early days of the growing symbol of piety in non-political Islam celebrated in the public sphere.

This public piety is unsurprising since more than 80% of Indonesian people acknowledge their identity as Muslims. Therefore, with the growing rise of modern media, Islam is not being reduced its roles in the Indonesian public life. Islamic identity is celebrated in the public sphere. Even, in the public space, Islam is blended with non-Islamic elements coming from the West. The peaceful accommodation of Islam and non-Islamic ideologies can be seen from the use of social media for da'wa or Islamic preaching. It also can be seen from the high consumption of Indonesia Muslims on Islamic songs, Islamic films, and Islamic soap operas. This accommodation indicates that the real practice of Muslims cannot be simply identified into several categories, let alone one category.

The categorization of Muslims is difficult to be implemented in the complex, dynamic, and multifaceted Muslim life in Indonesia. In this case, using Muslim societies as the term in this article suggests the importance of 'plural and concrete entities' of Muslim groups. Bayat (2007: 6) states " the designation " Muslim societies", understood as *plural and concrete entities* allow a self-conscious Muslim majority to define their reality in an inevitably contested, differentiated, and dynamic fashion."

The moderate and tolerant Muslims popularly has been acknowledged by the West for a long time. The indigenization of local cultures into their Islamic practices has produced the distinctive character of Muslim societies in Indonesia. Fealy and White (2008: 1) mentions " this indonesianised form of Islam bore none of severity and rigidity attributed to Middle Eastern forms, earning praise for its moderation and tolerance." However, this character does not represent the whole 'face' of Muslim societies in Indonesia. The Bali bombing and other following incidents have shifted the perception of Muslim societies in Indonesia as moderate and tolerant. Martin van Bruinessen (2013: 1-20) denotes this recent development of Muslim societies in Indonesia with the term 'conservative turn'.



One should consider that the recent development of intolerant Muslims as explained by Martin van Bruniessen above does not mean that there is a 'new' group in Indonesian Muslim societies. The point is that the Muslim group identified promoting the conservativeness of Islam in Indonesia does not come up suddenly. It may already exist since the New Order or even earlier. This only indicates that these Muslims have the space to publish their own identity through their voices and actions. The freedom of speech which is issued after the collapse of Soeharto has supported the development of 'conservative turn' in Indonesia. Other Muslim groups may still exist but they do not have the chance to publish their ideas. In this context, Muslim societies in Indonesia are plural which cannot be captured into a single category easily. Therefore, the term radical or radicalism in Indonesia is not suitable to explain the complex and dynamic of Muslim societies. In the next section, Islamic radicalism and piety will be discussed in connection with the diversity of Muslim Societies in Indonesia.

## **2. Islamic Radicalism and Piety**

Based on the Indonesian Language Dictionary (2008: 1151-52), the term radicalism has at least three meanings, namely (1) radical understanding or flow in politics; (2) understanding or flow that wants social or political change or renewal violently or drastically; (3) extreme attitudes in political flow. Of the three terms, the second understanding seems more appropriate to explain the symptoms of religious radicalism in Indonesia and some other Muslim-majority countries. Radical Muslim groups have a strong tendency to make Islamic social and political changes in various ways, even with violence.

The meaning of radicalism thus has a negative sense. In contrast to radicalism, piety is not negative; it even has humanistic values that can be used to counter radicalism. Piety in Islam according to Pipensky (2016: 6), is closely related to Muslims who believe and practice or run the pillars of Islam, namely reciting the shahada, performing prayers, performing Fasting in the month of Ramadan, paying Zakat, and performing Hajj to the holy land if they can.

Even so, the term piety is also complemented by sunnah services such as reciting the Qur'an, giving charity, helping others, and other good social behaviors. The definition of piety conveyed by Pipensky above is very relative and debatable. Pipensky (2016: 6) even said that piety has four assumptions: (1) Piety is a property of individual (Piety is a private problem) (2) Piety is unobservable (3) Piety is multifaceted (Piety is diverse. (4) Piety is apolitical (piety is apolitical). Piety thus is difficult to observe because it relates to the level of Islamic devotion and faith that is centered in the heart. However, Pipensky once again held that the measure of a Muslim's piety can be seen from the implementation of the pillars of Islam. This is because the pillars of Islam are compulsory which is not limited by the geography and culture in which a Muslim lives. The mainstream schools of Islam recognize the pillars of Islam as an obligation that must be believed and implemented by a Muslim.

However, Islamic radicalism has caused social destruction in several countries such as in Syria and Afghanistan so that “ in the West, it has shaped particular, negative thinking about Muslim societies in particular” (Bayat, 2007: 5). Islam ideologically and symbolically may be universal and homogenous but empirically it could be heterogeneous (Azra: 2006, xv). Islam as a religion is always negotiated with different cultures and traditions. Islam as an ideology has universal value but when it grapples in the social life of society, the nature of Islamic universality turns out to be reduced with social, cultural, and lifestyle differences.

In Indonesia, the term ‘radicalism’ is always contested among Muslims. It may not be accepted for some Muslims due to its violent characters. However several Muslims may accept it because this term is vague; it may refer to piety which is strongly supported by Muslim scholars (Ulama). But it should be noted that the meaning of piety in various social contexts is very relative and abstract. This is influenced by Islamic schools or *Madzab* and the use of authoritative sources in the implementation of religious practices and interpretation of the meaning of piety.



According to some Western scholars, in Indonesia, the influence of customs is instrumental in interpreting the meaning of piety. In some locations in the countryside, the meaning of piety is stronger with a mixture of religious practices and customs. Besides, today, with media globalization getting stronger, the meaning of piety is also influenced by transnational cultural values such as the value of modernity. Thus, the meaning of piety is negotiated by not only Islam and customs but also by global culture, especially the values of modernity.

The results of research conducted by PPIM (Center for the Study of Islam and Society) UIN Jakarta (Jamhari & Jahroni, 2004: 212) show that in terms of the practice of religion in Indonesia, especially Islam, Muslims in Indonesia can be categorized as pious Muslim. This can be seen from the high percentage of Muslims performing the optional (Sunnah) Islamic practices. The PPIM shows that the intensity of Muslims who carry out the ritual of reading the Qur'an after the five daily prayers is quite high. Surveys conducted in 2001 showed that 60% of Muslims read the Koran after five times of prayer, 2002 survey showed about 57.8%, and 2004 survey showed about 56.8% (Jamhari & Jahroni, 2004: 212).

Although such a survey succeeded in quantitatively mapping religious practices that supported piety, he was not sufficiently successful in explaining in detail the opinions of individual Muslims and the visible social phenomena; why and how did the practice of religious practice arise? This means that it is not an easy task to capture the piety of Muslim societies qualitatively. Therefore, in the next section, this article will demonstrate how young Muslims negotiate piety and radical in the Indonesian context.

### **3. Negotiating Radicalism and Piety in the Local Context**

Islam plays an important role in supporting moral order among young Muslims. Islamic instructors never stop voicing the importance of morality for mental stability and strong defense for de-moralization intensified by the media and other cultural channels. Free-sex and drug issues were taken seriously by parents by providing the widest space for moral teaching and

education that stemmed from Islamic teachings. Islam serves as a drug that is considered effective for de-moralization among young Muslims.

In sociology studies, Nottingham (2002: 9) explains that there are at least two main functions of religion. First, religion contributes to the creation of integrated and integrated social value systems. Second, religion plays a vital role in providing compelling forces that strengthen customs. Thus, religion functionally maintains social order and the continuity of its followers. So it is very difficult to imagine if there is no religion in this world. Religion has good rules which are very useful for security and public order. Religion maintains social relations between humans and humans with nature. Thus, religion participates in maintaining social harmony and harmony of the universe. However, religion also has the potential to create social chaos.

It is not surprising that Islam in Pekanbaru as in other big cities socially serves to strengthen the cultivation of moral values among young Muslims. The *Maghrib* Prayer Program, for example, is expected to counteract the behavior of young Muslims who like 'wandering' of uncertain directions on roads that have the potential to cause deviant behavior such as alcoholic beverages and so on. Besides, Islam also functions as an adhesive for social relations and harmony. Mosques in this city are not only used as individual worship but also as a means of strengthening the social relations of fellow Muslims through the events of "wirid" (a kind of majlis taklim).

The *wirid* program is usually held three times a week by inviting religious speakers. During the onslaught of globalization that encourages people to comfortably live independently and individually, Islam functions as an ideology that mediates an independent culture with the local culture that tends to be communal. Therefore, the social life of Muslims in urban areas such as Pekanbaru is semi-individualistic or semi-communal. This marks the struggle between modernism via globalization and local culture plus Islam. 'Wirid' activities marked two things. First, it functions as a place for meeting and social interaction. Nottingham (2002:



9) says that worshiping together using religious symbols - has united human groups in a tightly knit bond. Second, it functions for some people or groups of people as a symbol of piety.

However, people who do not participate in 'wirid' activities also have religious reasons too. They cannot be judged as 'not-pious' Mulism. This is because religion is not merely communal activity. Even Alfred North Whitehead (2009: 4), says that religion is solitude. For him, people who have never been alone are not truly religious.

In that context, Islam has supported the public and personal piety. The role of Islam in public space has a historical and normative root. The demands of the Islamic religion to support orphans and the poor are very useful for economic equality and social justice. In the context of statehood, Islam has a major contribution to the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia. During the pre-independence period, jihad against Dutch colonialism was echoed by the Ulama such as KH. Hasyim Asy'ari.

They played an important role in burning the spirit of the people to overthrow Dutch rule in Indonesia. Islam which embraced the majority of Muslims became a dividing wall with Christian Dutch colonialism. Harry J. Benda (1958: 338-347) said "ever arrival of the Dutch East India Company in Southeast Asia at the turn of the seventeenth century, the Dutch had encountered Muslim hostility in Indonesia. Time and again, the consolidation of their expanding power was threatened by local outbreaks of Islamic-inspired resistance...".

In the local context, Islamic piety and radicalism have been negotiated as Muslim youth interact with some resources of piety and radical. Islamic piety in Pekanbaru is expected to play an important role in supporting moral order among young Muslims. Islamic instructors never stop voicing the importance of morality for mental stability and strong defense for de-moralization intensified by the media and other cultural channels. Free-sex and drug issues were taken seriously by parents by providing the widest space for moral teaching and education that stemmed from Islamic teachings. Islam serves as a drug that is considered effective for de-moralization among young Muslims.

Islamic piety serves to strengthen the cultivation of moral values among young Muslims. However, based on Whitehead's opinion, it is necessary to draw an interpretation that piety which leads to radicalism could be due to communal worship in crowded places that have been carried out. This is because it is not balanced with individual worship in a quiet place. The first revelation revealed to Prophet Muhammad SAW was in a quiet and quiet place, *Gua Hira*.

Privacy worship services are important to be encouraged, to be trained and familiarized by the Muslim community. No wonder if in Islamic teachings the *Tahajjud* prayer service in the middle of a quiet night is highly recommended. This shows that worship alone and in a quiet place is important for increasing the piety of a Muslim. However, in the Indonesian context, the phenomena that appear are the strengthening of the public rather than private piety. This is greatly influenced by the rise or emergence of popular culture in Indonesia due to globalization and the media.

Zul (Male, 25 years old) said that the "wirid" activity held at the mosque where he lived was not as crowded as obligatory religious activities such as Friday prayers. As a mosque guard and Muslim student, he is often the host of "wirid" activities. He said that such activities were only attended by certain Muslims whom he called pious Muslims. Their presence is a symbol of piety. The contents of the religious lectures delivered by the preachers are not far from ways or invitations to increase piety. Radical behavior is often conveyed as a prohibited act in Islamic teachings. So it is not strange if Zul said "I do not agree to radicalism because it can give birth to understanding that justifies all means. Islam does mean peace?" The rhetorical remarks above reflect a firm rejection of Muslim youth towards radicalism. For him, radicalism is an act that contradicts the values of Islamic teachings that teach the importance of social bonding and harmony.

Elsewhere, Arif (Male, 22 years) a student at an Islamic college in Pekanbaru said that he was not actively participating in wirid activities because in such activities he saw that he did not find anything that could



increase his faith. "Sometimes the contents of the lecture contain a lot of jokes or humor," he said. He prefers to increase his religiosity by worshiping *Sunnah* alone in the middle of the night. With solitude, he contemplates his existence as a human being who is close and needs God. When asked about radicalism, he replied "religion requires radical ways, but not all radical actions are approved by religion". For Arif, radicalism depends on the context. If radicalism refers to acts of terrorism, he opposes. However, if radicalism is an act of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* like what is done by FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) he supports.

These two young Muslims above have the same or homogeneous religious background; Islam. Also, both students are studying at Muslim universities and have a madrasa education background. However, both tend to have a different understanding of religiosity or piety and radicalism. If Zul tends not to like religious thoughts which - in his language - "weird", Arif is more closed and approves radical ways of practicing religion. This is according to the language of Azra (2006: xvi) as an empirical reality of Muslim society. Azra said that seeing Islam only from aspects of general doctrine and values will tend to understate the significance of differences that emerge in Muslim society. Many fundamental differences can no longer be understood as mere diversity.

Furthermore, the media globalization has provided a space for young Muslims in Pekanbaru to interact and consume transnational cultural products. Their interaction with Korean cultural products for instance has been instrumental to make the fluidity of their identity-making. Islamic understanding which they own is being confronted with Korean culture promoted in Korean television dramas for instance. Young Muslims negotiate the representations of Korean television dramas as they love watching these Korean cultural products. In another case, young Muslims also consume other cultural products from foreign countries such as Hollywood films. These multiple and diversity of transnational cultural products coming to their homes have supported the diversity and plurality of young Muslim understanding about Islamic piety and radicalism.

Selly (Female, 18 years old) explains “ I love consuming foreign films. However, there are some representations of these films dramas which contradict with Islam. There are some actors and actresses who drink alcohol and other immoral actions.” The above statement indicates that she can identify some representations of which are not suitable for Islam. This is unsurprising since Selly is studying in the Islamic State University of Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau. This provides two important impacts. The first impact is that her negotiation practice of transnational cultural products is affected by her identity and religious educational background. The second impact is that her piety is negotiated with her consumption of transnational cultural products. This indicates that the emergence of global media amongst the young Muslims in Pekanbaru co-exists alongside Islamic teachings.

The rise of global and transnational cultural products signifies the complexities and plurality of negotiation practices of young Muslims with their piety. When they intend to improve their piety by rejecting these global cultural products, people may judge them as radical young Muslims. Novia ( Female, 20 Years Old) states “I do not want to consume or listen any song. For me, a song is not good for my piety. It destructs my faith as a Muslim. I also do not watch television. What I want now is just to be a better Muslim.” Novia is a Muslim student at State Islamic University of Sultan Syarif Kasim. Because she uses a veil to cover her face, other people may slightly claim that she is a ‘radical. Furthermore, she also does not want to join any student organization on the campus.

During their negotiation, there is a process of rejection, resistance, and compromises to non-Islamic elements. Their resistance to Islamic norms and compromise to non-Islamic elements which may cause their degradation of piety is normal. This is supported by Weber, as quoted by Taufik Abdullah (1995: 13) who states that the contextual and empirical life of Muslims allows for actions that may conflict with the religious norms embraced by the Muslim individual. Weber also emphasizes that ideas or thoughts have limited influence on events. What is thought and aspired does not necessarily have the same line as action.



Practically, these Muslim youth want to be a pious Muslim, not a radical Muslim. Their intention to improve their piety may be affected by their negotiation with the multiple Islamic and non-Islamic elements. They may deconstruct their Islamic identity to be 'liberal', 'pious', or 'radical' young Muslims. However, because they still in the process of negotiation, one cannot propose the simplistic and final categorization. The fact is that these young Muslims are multifaceted. The important consideration to their negotiation is that they cannot be called pious or radical but they are in between pious and radical young Muslims. In a modest term, they are exploring the Islamic identity of moderate Muslims.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This study looks at how Muslim youth in Pekanbaru understand and practice piety and radicalism. Thus, this is an attempt at studying piety and radicalism from within Muslim youth. In this article, they are put as subjects, not as an object of study. This article finds that piety and radicalism are two terms that have different meanings among Muslim youth in Pekanbaru.

As explained earlier, piety and radicalism are terms that are not static or fixed. They tend to be very flexible depending on social and cultural conditions also depend on the school and sect as well as depending on the interpretation of authoritative sources such as Ulama and religious texts. In Pekanbaru, young Muslims cannot be identified as pious or radical. They still negotiate their piety and radicalism understanding with multiple elements caused by globalization and modernization.

As a result, this article finds that, first, Muslim youth in Pekanbaru are negotiating their piety and radicalism with non-Islamic ideologies such as modernity, capitalism, and so forth. Secondly, they actually cannot be labeled into a single term like pious or radical. This is because they are still in the process of negotiation between piety and radicalism. They are in between pious and radical young Muslims. In a modest term, they are exploring the Islamic identity of moderate Muslims.

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