



The Theological Dimensions of the Old Testament: Love, Forgiveness, and Social Justice as the Foundation of Christian Discourse for Religious Moderation

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Abstract :

This article investigates the theological dimensions of love, forgiveness, and social justice in the Old Testament as a Christian contribution to the advancement of religious moderation in Indonesia's pluralistic society. Using a historical-theological approach and biblical hermeneutics, it examines key texts from the Law and the Prophets to elucidate the covenantal meaning of *hesed* (steadfast love), *sālah* (forgiveness), and *mishpat* with *tsedaqah* (justice and righteousness). The findings highlight that these values, deeply rooted in Israel's ethical tradition, continue to serve as a transformative moral foundation for social harmony. The novelty of this research lies in its Christocentric synthesis, presenting Old Testament ethics not as static moral codes but as fulfilled in Christ—thereby offering a dynamic theological framework for Christian engagement in interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding. These principles empower Christians to uphold their faith while fostering justice, reconciliation, and tolerance in a diverse religious landscape.

Abstrak :

Artikel ini mengkaji dimensi teologis mengenai kasih, pengampunan, dan keadilan sosial dalam Perjanjian Lama sebagai kontribusi Kristen terhadap penguatan moderasi beragama di tengah masyarakat majemuk Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan historis-teologis dan hermeneutik biblikal, artikel ini menelaah teks-teks kunci dari Kitab Taurat dan Kitab Para Nabi untuk menjelaskan makna perjanjian dari *hesed* (kasih setia), *sālah* (pengampunan), serta *mishpat* dan *tsedaqah* (keadilan dan kebenaran). Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai tersebut, yang berakar kuat dalam tradisi etika Israel, terus berperan sebagai landasan moral transformatif bagi harmoni sosial. Kebaruan dari penelitian ini terletak pada sintesis Kristosentrisnya yang menampilkan etika Perjanjian Lama bukan sebagai kode moral yang statis, melainkan sebagai pemenuhan yang terjadi di dalam Kristus—dengan demikian menawarkan kerangka teologis yang dinamis bagi keterlibatan Kristen dalam dialog antariman dan pembangunan perdamaian. Prinsip-prinsip ini memberdayakan umat Kristen untuk tetap teguh dalam iman sekaligus mendorong keadilan, rekonsiliasi, dan toleransi dalam lanskap keagamaan yang beragam.

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INTRODUCTION

Old Testament theology identifies three central themes that consistently underpin the foundation of Jewish-Christian ethical faith: love (אהבה / *hesed* or אהבה, *ahavah*), forgiveness (סליחה / *sālah* or סליחה, *selikhah*), and social justice (מישפט, *mishpat*) as well as righteousness (צדקה,

tsedaqah). These themes not only reflect the character of God (יהוה, YHWH) as the source of mercy and truth but also establish the moral framework governing human relationships both with one another and with the Creator.¹ In the reality of the modern world, often characterised by social polarisation and interfaith tensions, these values remain relevant as fundamental principles in building an inclusive and civil social order.

The Old Testament, particularly in the prophetic literature (*Nevi'im*), places social justice as a central aspect of true worship. Prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Micah highlight social inequalities and demand the integration of spirituality with public ethics. The terms מִשְׁפָּט (*mishpat*, justice) and תְּשׁוּבָה (*tsedaqah*, righteousness/holiness) recur throughout the texts as divine expressions that call for the embodiment of legal and social justice in everyday practice.² Without the application of these principles, the relationship between the people and God becomes hollow, for true worship should give rise to concrete actions that defend the weak and advocate for justice.

The prophet Amos vehemently critiques religious practices that are disconnected from the oppressive social realities. He calls for “justice to roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24), a prophetic summons against the structural injustices affecting Israelite society.³ Isaiah emphasises that true repentance is not merely in ritual but in “defending the rights of the orphan and pleading the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).⁴ This call illustrates that love and forgiveness are not solely individualistic; rather, they have a collective and transformative impact on social structures.

The aim of this study is to explore the interconnections between love, forgiveness, and social justice in the Old Testament and examine their relevance in strengthening religious moderation within the context of Christianity. Love, as the primary reflection of YHWH’s character, is not only vertical but also horizontal—manifested in solidarity and empathy toward others.⁵ Divine forgiveness, which allows space for reconciliation and the restoration of relationships, serves as a foundational principle for building inclusive and peaceful communities. Together, these principles function as an ethical bridge between personal faith and social responsibility.

This research is significant in responding to global and national challenges related to intolerance, radicalism, and social inequality. Within the framework of religious moderation, which emphasises values of tolerance, respect for diversity, and the rejection of extremism, Old Testament teachings have considerable potential as both spiritual and social inspiration.⁶ In the

¹ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 13–16.

² Gary V. Smith, *The Prophets as Preachers: An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 47–52; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 289–295.

³ James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 103.

⁴ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 27–29.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 205–212.

⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Theology of Reconciliation: A Theological Essay on Paul and Politics in The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 199–204.

pluralistic context of Indonesia, the teachings of love and justice within Christian theology can strengthen the nation's values of diversity.⁷

Employing a historical-theological approach, this article analyses key texts from the books of prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, and examines the meanings of terms like *mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט) and *tsedaqah* (צְדָקָה) in the social context of ancient Israel.⁸ The goal is to translate these teachings into contemporary ethical praxis, particularly in the pursuit of building a harmonious and cross-faith understanding society. In an increasingly fragmented world, the principles of love and forgiveness can serve as the foundation for sustainable social reconciliation.

What distinguishes this study from previous theological explorations is its integrative emphasis on how the triadic relationship between love, forgiveness, and justice—as expressed in Old Testament theology—can be operationalised as a coherent ethical framework to support religious moderation in today's multi-faith and socially diverse contexts. This article thus offers a theological reframing that not only deepens doctrinal insight but also contributes to the praxis of faith in the public sphere.

Specifically, this article seeks to demonstrate that the values of love, forgiveness, and social justice in the Old Testament are not only a spiritual heritage for Christians but also possess universal significance that can strengthen the narrative of a peaceful, tolerant, and just life.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using content analysis in combination with a hermeneutic approach to examine Old Testament texts that encompass the theological themes of love (חֶסֶד / *hesed*), forgiveness (סְלִיחָה / *sālāh*), and social justice (מִשְׁפָּט-צְדָקָה / *mishpat-tsedaqah*). Content analysis was selected because it provides a systematic framework for identifying, classifying, and interpreting conceptual patterns in texts, including theological symbolism and the structures of meaning that emerge in the narratives and prophecies of Old Testament books.⁹

The primary data sources for this study consist of Hebrew Bible texts, specifically the *Nevi'im* (books of the prophets), such as Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and Hosea, which consistently address the themes of social justice and collective repentance as expressions of God's love and forgiveness. Secondary literature includes academic works by authoritative theologians and biblical scholars such as Moshe Weinfeld (1995), John Goldingay (2003), Walter Brueggemann (1997), and Christopher J.H. Wright (2004), who highlight the social and ethical dimensions of the prophetic texts in the Old Testament.¹⁰

⁷ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Substantif* (Bandung: Mizan, 2000).

⁸ Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 21–34.

⁹ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 23–29.

¹⁰ The books by these distinguished authors can be found in the footnotes citing their works and in the references.

The hermeneutic approach is used to interpret the texts contextually, considering the historical, cultural, and theological backgrounds of the texts being analysed.¹¹ In this case, the hermeneutic method aims not only to uncover the literal meaning of the texts but also to prioritise a critical understanding of how these meanings can be transformed into the context of contemporary religious life—particularly in building a theological foundation for religious moderation.

The analysis process involves stages of theme identification, meaning coding, and interpretative synthesis of the main theological ideas related to human interrelationships and universal moral values.¹² The social, political, and cultural aspects surrounding these texts are also considered in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the teachings of love, forgiveness, and social justice were realised in the religious practices and social life of ancient Israel.

As a complement, this study also conducts a comparative analysis of contemporary literature discussing the concept of religious moderation in the context of pluralistic societies. By comparing the principles of the Old Testament with modern religious discourse, the aim is to uncover relevant connections between biblical faith values and efforts to build social harmony amidst religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity in Indonesia.¹³

Through this methodological approach, the study seeks not only to deepen academic understanding of Old Testament theology but also to provide practical contributions in formulating inclusive and moderate religious ethics, which can strengthen social cohesion and interfaith tolerance in multicultural societies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theological Foundations for Religious Moderation: Love, Forgiveness, and Social Justice in the Old Testament

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that examines the concepts of theology regarding love, forgiveness, and social justice in the Old Testament as normative and ethical foundations for strengthening religious moderation. This framework is developed through an interdisciplinary approach that combines theological analysis and hermeneutics of biblical texts, particularly the teachings of the prophets, while contextualising them with contemporary social needs that call for inclusive and tolerant religious attitudes. The primary focus is on how the fundamental values in the Old Testament can constructively contribute to building a peaceful and civil pluralistic society.

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 267.

¹² Helvi Elo and Satu Kyngäs, 'The Qualitative Content Analysis Process', *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62, no. 1 (2008):108.

¹³ Azyumardi Azra, *Indonesia, Islam, and Democracy: Dynamics in a Global Context* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2006), 103; Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, 35.

The concept of love in the Old Testament is primarily formulated through the Hebrew term *חֶסֶד* (*hesed*), which refers to steadfast love, mercy, and unconditional grace from God toward His people. This love not only reflects the character of God (Exod. 34:6), but also serves as an ethical principle that must be embodied in social relations. Goldingay emphasises that *חֶסֶד* (*hesed*) is not merely an emotion but a concrete action that reflects faithfulness to the covenant and commitment to the common good. This teaching encourages openness and respect for differences, making it a strong foundation for interfaith dialogue and communities that honour mutual respect.¹⁴

Forgiveness in the Old Testament is closely associated with God's action of restoring broken relationships. The Hebrew word commonly used to describe this concept is *סָלַח* (*sālah*), meaning to forgive or release from fault (Num. 14:19–20). This forgiveness is both transcendent and social, encompassing not only the vertical relationship between humans and God but also the horizontal relationships between people. Smedes asserts that true forgiveness enables reconciliation and the healing of social wounds. In the prophetic context, forgiveness is often linked with collective repentance and moral renewal within the community (Isa. 1:18; Mic. 7:18–19).¹⁵ Volf highlights the importance of forgiveness in building an inclusive society free from identity-based resentment.¹⁶

The Old Testament conveys an understanding of social justice through two key terms: *מִשְׁפָּט* (*mishpat*, "legal justice") and *צְדָקָה* (*tsedaqah*, "righteousness" or "moral justice"). *Mishpat* refers to the establishment of a just legal order and the enforcement of justice, while *tsedaqah* reflects a life lived in truth and faithfulness to God's will. These two concepts are inseparable from true worship and the ethical demands of social relationships (Amos 5:24; Isa. 1:17). Smith states that, in the prophetic tradition, social justice is a tangible form of religious obedience.¹⁷ Wright adds that the ethical dimension of justice in the Old Testament demands protection for vulnerable groups—such as the poor, orphans, widows, and strangers.¹⁸ Weinfeld argues that this social ethic forms the foundation for an egalitarian and coexistential societal structure.¹⁹

Religious moderation is a faith-based approach that rejects extremism and promotes balance, tolerance, and respect for diversity.²⁰ The values of love or *hesed* (*חֶסֶד*), forgiveness or *sālah* (*סָלַח*), and social justice or *mishpat–tsedaqah* (*מִשְׁפָּט–צְדָקָה*) in the Old Testament provide a strong theological and ethical foundation for supporting peaceful coexistence in a plural society.

¹⁴ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*, vol. 1, 234; Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 491.

¹⁵ Lewis B. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 42;

¹⁶ Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, 57.

¹⁷ Smith, *The Prophets as Preachers: An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophet*, 120.

¹⁸ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, 163.

¹⁹ Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, 75.

²⁰ Marde Christian Stenly Mawikere, Maison Imanuel Daud, Sudiria Hura, Grace Natalia Birahim, & Virginia Rebecca Tulung. "Religions, Religious Moderation and Community Development and the Role of Higher Education to Strengthen It." *International Journal of Education, Information Technology and Others (IJEIT)*, Agustus 2023, 6(3), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8351423>, 45.

In the context of Indonesia's multi-religious and multicultural society, these teachings are highly relevant for shaping moderate and dialogical religious attitudes.²¹ As Volf asserts, theology that is open to cross-religious understanding can serve as a transformative means to build a peaceful civilisation.²²

This study applies a hermeneutical approach to understand Old Testament texts contextually, taking into account the historical, sociological, and theological dynamics behind them. Hermeneutics, as Gadamer describes it, opens a space for dialogue between the world of the text and the world of the reader, enabling meaning to be drawn in a manner relevant to addressing the challenges of the present age.²³ Furthermore, content analysis is used as a qualitative method to trace linguistic, symbolic, and thematic patterns in the texts related to love, forgiveness, and social justice.²⁴ The synergy of these two approaches aims to integrate biblical insights with contemporary social and national realities, particularly in strengthening the discourse on religious moderation.

The Theology of Love (*hesed*, חֶסֶד) in the Old Testament

The concept of love in the Old Testament is richly encapsulated in the Hebrew term *hesed* (חֶסֶד), a word whose semantic field encompasses steadfast love, mercy, generosity, and covenantal loyalty. It is inseparable from the relational framework of the *berit* (בְּרִית), the covenant between God and His people. Crucially, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) is not merely emotional or sentimental; it is an active, covenantal commitment embedded in the historical narrative of salvation. In essence, divine love is portrayed as dynamic and contextually grounded, demanding an ethical response from humanity.²⁵

Psalm 136 offers the most overt literary expression of this divine attribute, with the refrain *ki le'olām hasdō* (כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶד)—“for His steadfast love endures forever”—repeated twenty-six times. This repetition serves not only as a literary device but as a theological affirmation that God's enduring love is foundational to Israel's identity. Within its liturgical context, the psalm reinforces the community's trust in God's unwavering fidelity, particularly in moments of suffering and exile.²⁶

In Exodus 34:6–7, God's self-revelation to Moses embodies a balance of mercy and justice: “YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (יְהוָה, יְהוָה, אֱלֹהֵי רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן, אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֻנָה). This declaration illustrates that *hesed* is not indulgent of wrongdoing, but rather it opens space for restoration and repentance in broken relationships. God's love, thus, is not antithetical to justice; it is justice's compassionate counterpart.

²¹ Azra, *Indonesia, Islam, and Democracy: Dynamics in a Global Context*, 185.

²² Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, 225.

²³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., 306.

²⁴ Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed., 24.

²⁵ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2002), 45.

²⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 189.

As *hesed* (חֶסֶד) constitutes an essential dimension of God's nature, the people of Israel are likewise called to embody this steadfast love. Leviticus 19:34, for example, commands the Israelites to love the foreigner among them as themselves, recalling their own experience as strangers in Egypt. Here, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) extends beyond the vertical relationship between God and humanity to encompass horizontal relationships among human beings, particularly in relation to the marginalised—foreigners, widows, and orphans. This marks *hesed* (חֶסֶד) as a moral principle transcending ethnic or religious boundaries.

John Goldingay underscores that *hesed* (חֶסֶד) must serve as the foundational pattern of social relations among God's people. It dismantles social and religious exclusion, fostering a peaceful and equitable communal life.²⁷ Unlike transactional love, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) expects no reciprocation; it is rooted in God's unwavering character. As such, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) is a transformative form of love—capable of shaping societies marked by justice, humanity, and peace, which are the ultimate goals of a religion that espouses moderation.

Within the framework of religious moderation, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) may be understood as the ethical basis for interfaith dialogue. It necessitates openness, patience, and forgiveness. Accordingly, interreligious relations grounded in *hesed* (חֶסֶד) are likely to be more inclusive and less vulnerable to identity polarisation. This holds particular relevance in Indonesia's multicultural society, where diversity often presents a flashpoint for conflict. The theology of *hesed* (חֶסֶד) offers a normative orientation for Christians to serve as agents of love, bridge-builders between communities of differing faiths.

The social and religious implications of *hesed* (חֶסֶד) are far-reaching. It compels the faithful to construct social systems that not only respect diversity but also actively seek to restore broken relationships caused by prejudice, discrimination, or religious violence. Thus, the application of *hesed* (חֶסֶד) should transcend individual piety and become manifest in compassionate and just public policy.²⁸

Furthermore, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) provides a theological framework for responding to humanitarian and ecological crises. In prophetic texts such as Hosea and Micah, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) is often contrasted with hollow ritualism, presented instead as God's primary ethical demand: “*What does the LORD require of you but to act justly, to love hesed (חֶסֶד), and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8). This clarifies that *hesed* (חֶסֶד) is not passive sentiment, but an active commitment to justice and peace.

Therefore, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) in the Old Testament is not merely a reflection of God's character but a paradigm for ethical living amidst a pluralistic and often fragmented world. Viewed through the lens of religious moderation, the theology of *hesed* (חֶסֶד) contributes significantly to cultivating a more inclusive, respectful, and compassionately engaged interfaith existence. As such, it serves as a theological bridge between classical doctrine and the contemporary imperative for peaceful coexistence in diverse societies.

²⁷ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*, vol. 1, 128.

²⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 112.

Forgiveness (סָלַח, *sālāḥ*) in the Old Testament

The concept of forgiveness within the Old Testament constitutes a foundational pillar of the theological relationship between God and His people. The Hebrew term *sālāḥ* (סָלַח), translated as “to forgive,” is used exclusively to denote divine action in response to human sin. This exclusivity underlines that forgiveness is a divine prerogative rather than a consequence of human endeavour. *Sālāḥ* signifies God’s initiative to restore a relationship ruptured by transgression against His will.²⁹

One of the most significant portrayals of divine forgiveness is found in the ritual of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*, יוֹם כִּפּוּר), as described in Leviticus 16. On this day, the high priest performs a symbolic rite to cleanse the people of Israel from their iniquities. Leviticus 16:30 affirms, “For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins.” Forgiveness, in this context, is not merely a legal declaration but a form of collective spiritual renewal.³⁰

The Psalms offer profound reflections on the compassionate nature of God’s forgiveness. Psalm 103:12 declares, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” This verse underscores the absolute and unconditional breadth of divine forgiveness. Notably, this act of pardon is inextricably linked to God’s steadfast love (*ḥesed*, חֶסֶד) and mercy.³¹

Repentance (*tēshuvāh*, תְּשׁוּבָה) is the human response to God’s offer of forgiveness. It is not confined to emotional regret but entails a comprehensive reorientation of one’s life. In Isaiah 1:18, God invites His people to reason together, promising that sins, though as scarlet, may become white as snow. This divine invitation reflects a mercy that transcends judgement, contingent upon genuine repentance.³²

Similarly, Joel 2:12–13 presents a prophetic summons to “rend your hearts and not your garments,” emphasising inward transformation over external religious formalities. This message highlights God’s desire for a contrite heart rather than superficial ritual. True repentance, therefore, emerges as the ethical foundation for cultivating a just and peaceful community.

The theology of forgiveness in the Old Testament cannot be divorced from the broader themes of reconciliation and messianic hope. Isaiah 53 introduces the figure of the “Suffering Servant,” who was “pierced for our transgressions” and “by whose wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). This narrative prefigures forgiveness through the suffering of a divine intermediary, later fulfilled in the redemptive work of Christ as interpreted by the New Testament.³³

Jeremiah 31:31–34 expands the vision of forgiveness within the context of a new covenant. God promises to inscribe His law upon the hearts of His people and “remember their

²⁹ Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984), 204.

³⁰ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 1148.

³¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute*, 316.

³² Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 142.

³³ J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 413.

sins no more.” This represents the apex of the promise of restoration, where forgiveness signifies not merely the removal of guilt but the transformation of spiritual identity. In this sense, forgiveness serves as a gateway to communal and spiritual renewal.

Behind the entire biblical narrative of forgiveness lies the supremacy of divine grace. The Hebrew word *hēn* (חֵן), translated as “favour” or “grace,” captures God’s sovereign initiative in choosing, saving, and sustaining His people despite their unworthiness. In Genesis 6:8, Noah “found favour in the eyes of the LORD,” a form of deliverance amid impending destruction. This indicates that grace often precedes human recognition of the need for repentance.³⁴

Psalms 51 functions as a liturgy of confession that underscores the role of divine mercy. In verse 3, David pleads, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.” His appeal rests not on merit, but entirely on God’s compassionate nature. This serves as a theological paradigm for understanding forgiveness as an act of divine benevolence rather than a human entitlement.³⁵

Within the context of religious moderation, the Old Testament concept of forgiveness holds contemporary significance. Pluralistic societies require a willingness to forgive and to rebuild intercommunal trust. The principles of *sālāh* (סָלַח), and *tēshuvāh*, תְּשׁוּבָה provide an ethical foundation for fostering a culture that resists hasty judgement and embraces reconciliation. Volf argues that forgiveness possesses a liberating power, breaking the cycles of violence and identity-based hatred.³⁶

Thus, the Old Testament does not merely present forgiveness as a spiritual ideal but as a transformative ethos for communal life. In modern societies vulnerable to polarisation and conflict, the theology of forgiveness offers a relational model that promotes healing and peace. Through this theological lens, Christians are called to contribute meaningfully to religious moderation, to build bridges, and to dismantle barriers between communities in the spirit of love and reconciliation.³⁷

Social Justice in the Old Testament

Social justice (*mishpat* - מִשְׁפָּט) and righteousness or covenantal fidelity (*tsedaqah* - צְדָקָה) represent fundamental theological constructs within the Tanakh. These are not merely legal principles; rather, they reflect the very character of God and serve as an ethical summons for His people to live in accordance with His divine will. Within the Tanakh, God is consistently portrayed as a just Judge and an advocate for the oppressed—such as the poor, widows, orphans, and sojourners (Psalm 9:9; Deuteronomy 32:4).³⁸ Social justice, as articulated in the Tanakh, is

³⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 98.

³⁵ M.E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Vol. 20, Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 73.

³⁶ Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, 111.

³⁷ Marde Christian Stenly Mawikere & Sudiria Hura, “Rekonsiliasi dalam Ajaran Kristen: Kontribusi terhadap Harmoni Multireligius dalam Kerangka Moderasi Beragama,” *Jurnal Teologi Berita Hidup* 6, no. 2 (Maret 2024). <https://doi.org/10.38189/jtbh.v6i2.575>.

³⁸ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*, 302.

deeply contextual, governing the manner in which the people of God are to engage with others in society. Thus, the entirety of the Tanakh affirms that authentic worship must be integrally linked to the practice of justice and compassion toward fellow human beings (Deuteronomy 10:18–19; Leviticus 19:15, 33–34).³⁹

In the Torah, God introduces Himself as the Liberator and Defender of the vulnerable. In Exodus 3:7–10, God declares that He has heard the cries of His oppressed people in Egypt and will deliver them from bondage. The laws given at Sinai do not merely govern vertical relations between humanity and God, but also horizontal interactions among human beings. Legislation found in passages such as Exodus 22:21–27, Leviticus 19:9–18, and Deuteronomy 24:17–22 emphasises the imperative of just treatment for the poor, widows, orphans, and resident aliens. For instance, Exodus 22:21 enjoins, “You shall not wrong or oppress a foreigner (*ger* - גֵּר), for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt”.⁴⁰ Israel is thus reminded of its own history of alienation, which should engender greater empathy for the stranger in their midst.

This emphasis on social justice reveals the holistic nature of God’s covenant, which encompasses not only the vertical dimension of relationship with God but also the social and communal responsibilities of His people. The legal framework of the Torah aims to cultivate a just and humane society reflective of God’s will.

Moreover, the Torah contains structural provisions intended to mitigate economic and social inequalities. Noteworthy among these are the Sabbath laws (*Shabbat* - שַׁבָּת), the Year of Jubilee (*Yovel* - יוֹבֵל), and prohibitions against excessive interest. Exodus 23:10–11 commands that the land be left fallow every seventh year, while Leviticus 25 mandates the return of ancestral lands during the Jubilee year.⁴¹ These principles aim to forestall the concentration of wealth and to offer the impoverished a means of restoration.

Such legal ordinances demonstrate that social justice is not an optional policy but a constitutive element of life within the covenant community. In societies marked by inequality, these provisions urge the maintenance of balance and the prevention of exploitation.

The prophets of the *Nevi'im* (נְבִיאִים) serve as the moral conscience of Israel, denouncing both social and religious deviations. They strongly reject any bifurcation between worship and justice. For example, the prophet Amos calls for justice to roll down “like waters” (Amos 5:24), and vehemently opposes legal corruption and economic exploitation.⁴² In Amos 2:6–8, he accuses Israel of oppressing the poor and violating the rights of the vulnerable. In this context, *mishpat* - מִשְׁפָּט is not merely the implementation of judicial procedures but involves ensuring equitable treatment and attending to the needs of the defenceless.

The prophet Micah situates justice as a central dimension of relational piety. Micah 6:8 famously proclaims, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD

³⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 140.

⁴⁰ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, vol. 5, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 48.

⁴¹ Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 81–82.

⁴² Wolff, Hans Walter. *Amos the Prophet: The Man and His Background* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 50–55.

require of you? To do justice (*mishpat* - מִשְׁפָּט), to love mercy (*hesed* - חֶסֶד), and to walk humbly with your God.” Here, justice (*mishpat* - מִשְׁפָּט) is conceived as an active engagement in restoring broken social relationships, underlining the Tanakh’s conviction that social justice pertains to fostering just and compassionate human interactions, not solely to legal conformity.

The prophets further affirm that God Himself is the source and standard of justice. In Isaiah 61:8, the Lord declares, “For I, the LORD, love justice (*tsedaqah* - צְדָקָה) and hate robbery and wrongdoing”.⁴³ Divine partiality toward the poor and oppressed is manifest in prophetic oracles depicting God as a Judge who despises injustice and commands its rectification among His people. Isaiah 11:1–5 envisions a future reign of perfect justice, ushered in by the Davidic Messiah.

The Psalter frequently portrays God as the defender of the downtrodden. Psalm 72:1–4 envisions the ideal monarch as one who governs with *mishpat* - מִשְׁפָּט and *tsedaqah* - צְדָקָה, liberating the oppressed, providing for the hungry, and protecting the rights of the marginalised.⁴⁴ Likewise, Psalm 82:2–4 exhorts leaders to defend the poor and care for the afflicted. Psalm 89:14 declares, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne”, affirming that justice is not merely a moral ideal but a cornerstone of divine governance.⁴⁵

The Book of Proverbs associates justice with wisdom (*hokhmah* - חֵכֶמָה). Proverbs 29:7 states, “The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern”. Proverbs teaches that those who live wisely are attentive to justice and committed to the wellbeing of the vulnerable. It also condemns the exploitation of the impoverished, as in Proverbs 22:22–23: “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court.”

The books of Job and Ecclesiastes pose theological challenges to the idea of justice in a broken world. Job questions the justice of God amidst immense suffering despite his personal righteousness (Job 10:3; 13:23–24). Similarly, Ecclesiastes or Kohelet (קֹהֵלֶת) observes the prevalence of injustice (Ecclesiastes 3:16–17), yet both ultimately affirm that God will judge the world with justice (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Job 19:25–27).

Social justice in the Tanakh holds significant relevance for pluralistic societies such as Indonesia. The principles of *mishpat* - מִשְׁפָּט and *tsedaqah* - צְדָקָה advocate for social responsibility and the protection of minority groups. In this context, social justice fosters religious moderation by promoting mutual respect, the safeguarding of human rights, and the pursuit of an inclusive and equitable society.

The Tanakh correlates social justice with the vision of *shalom* שְׁלוֹמ—a peace encompassing wellbeing, harmony, and the restoration of right relationships between humanity and God. Isaiah 32:17 affirms, “The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever”.⁴⁶ Thus, the justice envisaged in the Tanakh transcends legalism; it aspires to a reconciled communal life characterised by equity and peace.

⁴³ John Goldingay. *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 87–89.

⁴⁴ Sweeney, Marvin A. *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 127–129.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 253.

⁴⁶ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel*, 489.

In the realm of interfaith dialogue, social justice provides a shared ethical ground upon which to cultivate human solidarity. The Tanakh insists that just dealings with others constitute an essential expression of fidelity to God (Deuteronomy 10:18–19; Leviticus 19:34). This theological vision endorses a moderate posture that values interreligious cooperation in the service of justice and peace.

In conclusion, social justice in the Tanakh is a deeply embedded and enduring theme. It is not a mere legal directive but the very outworking of God's just nature and a summons for His people to embody that justice in community. These principles possess profound potential to contribute to religious moderation and to inspire concrete action toward the advancement of peace, equity, and the common good.

Covenantal Ethics and Social Harmony: Old Testament Theology as a Christian Contribution to Religious Moderation

Old Testament theology presents fundamental values that are highly relevant in the context of religious moderation, offering significant contributions to fostering harmony in a pluralistic society. Within the Old Testament teachings, three key themes—love, forgiveness, and social justice—integrate to form the moral and ethical foundation that shapes the relationship between humanity and God, as well as among individuals. These values also reflect the character of God as the source of all goodness, leading to tangible actions in the social life of His people.

Love in the Old Testament is represented by the Hebrew term *hesed* (חֶסֶד), which encompasses the meanings of loyal love, mercy, and God's unconditional grace towards His people. This love is not merely an emotional sentiment; it is a concrete action that reflects faithfulness in God's covenant with His people. In numerous prophetic books, *hesed* (חֶסֶד) serves as the basis for all relationships established with others. This love speaks not only of the vertical relationship between God and His people but also motivates individuals to love one another, particularly the most vulnerable in society. For example, in the book of Micah (Mic. 6:8), the people are urged to "walk humbly with God" and act justly towards their neighbours. The love in Old Testament theology demands the embodiment of empathy and social solidarity, playing a pivotal role in creating peace and harmony in diverse communities.

In the context of religious moderation, this value of love invites Christians to cultivate an inclusive attitude towards others, prioritising mutual respect and empathy with those of different faiths and cultures. Love becomes a bridge between differences, facilitating interfaith dialogue that is marked by understanding and building trust among religious communities. Through love, Christian teachings can strengthen the harmony in Indonesia's multireligious society.

The concept of forgiveness in the Old Testament is closely tied to God's actions in restoring broken relationships. The Hebrew term *sālah* (סָלַח) depicts the process of forgiveness, where God takes action to remove the faults of His people, offering them the opportunity to repent and begin a renewed relationship with Him. This forgiveness also holds significant social dimensions, where individuals are called to forgive one another, both individually and collectively, as part of the restoration of social relationships and communities. Forgiveness, in the

prophetic context, does not only mean pardoning personal wrongs, but also encompasses moral and social restoration involving the community.⁴⁷

The importance of forgiveness can also be applied in the context of religious moderation. In Indonesian society, often marked by interreligious tensions, forgiveness becomes an essential first step in creating space for reconciliation. This principle calls for religious communities to release hatred and resentment, focusing instead on healing damaged relationships, both on individual and social levels. Through forgiveness, Christians can become agents of peace, advocating for tolerance, reducing tensions, and rebuilding relationships between various religious groups.

Social justice in the Old Testament is expressed through two main concepts: *mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט), meaning legal justice, and *tsedaqah* (צְדָקָה), meaning righteousness or moral justice. *Mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט) refers to the action of upholding just laws and ensuring that the rights of all people, especially the oppressed, are respected. *Tsedaqah* (צְדָקָה) relates to living in truth and faithfulness to God, reflected in actions that promote the common good. Prophets such as Amos and Isaiah emphasise that justice is not only about legal matters but also about social ethics, which must involve protecting vulnerable groups such as orphans, widows, and foreigners.

Social justice in Old Testament theology provides an important contribution to religious moderation, as it demands attention to social welfare, the reduction of inequalities, and the maintenance of social integrity. In Indonesia's pluralistic context, this principle calls Christians to defend the rights of minorities and advocate for justice for the oppressed, including issues such as religious discrimination, human rights, and social equality. By applying these teachings of justice, Christians can become agents of social change, promoting a more just, peaceful, and harmonious society.

In Christian tradition, the promised Messiah in the Old Testament is none other than Jesus Christ, who came to fulfil the prophecies concerning love, forgiveness, and social justice. Jesus, as the Messiah, taught a love that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries, declaring that love for God and for one's neighbour is the greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37–40). Through His life, Jesus exemplified true forgiveness, even in the most difficult moments, such as when He prayed for those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). As the Messiah, Jesus also emphasised the importance of social justice, condemning oppression and injustice faced by the marginalised, and calling people to fight for the rights of the disenfranchised (Matt. 25:31–46). In the context of religious moderation, the role and implications of the work of Jesus Christ as the Messiah and the only Saviour provide a bridge connecting Christians with the values of love, forgiveness, and social justice that are essential for building a peaceful and just society and strengthening interfaith dialogue.⁴⁸

The integration of the values of love, forgiveness, and social justice in the lives of Christians is not only a moral obligation but also a calling to build an inclusive and peaceful

⁴⁷ McKenzie, John L. *A Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 130–132.

⁴⁸ Mawikere M. C. S. & Hura S., "Rekonsiliasi dalam Ajaran Kristen: Kontribusi terhadap Harmoni Multireligius dalam Kerangka Moderasi Beragama,".

society. In the context of religious moderation, these teachings provide a foundation for Christians to establish harmonious relationships with those of other faiths, appreciating differences, and working together for the common good.

The Old Testament teachings, with their emphasis on inclusive love, transformative forgiveness, and equitable social justice, provide a highly relevant spiritual model for addressing the challenges of religious pluralism in Indonesia. Through moderate and balanced theology, Christians can be part of the collective effort to build a society that is not only socially peaceful but also filled with mutual respect and understanding among religious communities.⁴⁹

Thus, the theology of love, forgiveness, and social justice in the Old Testament plays a crucial role in strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia, not only among Christians but also as a universal contribution to fostering harmonious and mutually beneficial interfaith relationships. These principles invite us to prioritise the common good, build a just and inclusive society, and encourage dialogue that is marked by tolerance amidst religious and cultural diversity.

At the heart of Old Testament theology lies a covenantal ethic that intertwines divine commandments with human responsibility—a sacred framework that not only governs personal devotion but also cultivates social cohesion and justice. This covenantal ethic, grounded in divine love, restorative forgiveness, and transformative justice, provides a profound theological foundation for peacebuilding and moral integrity within pluralistic societies. Yet, its full significance is ultimately realised in the person and work of Jesus Christ—the promised Messiah foretold in the *Tanakh* and revealed in the New Testament. As the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, Jesus Christ embodies the covenantal ideals in their fullest form: He is the perfect expression of God's *hesed* (steadfast love), the agent of divine *sālah* (forgiveness), and the champion of *tsedaqah* and *mishpat* (righteousness and justice). His life, death, and resurrection decisively manifest God's redemptive purpose and inaugurate the new covenant, through which humanity is reconciled to God.

The distinctive contribution of this research lies in its novel theological synthesis that interprets Old Testament ethics through a Christocentric lens, demonstrating that love, forgiveness, and social justice are not only historical moral imperatives but also dynamic instruments for advancing religious moderation in contemporary pluralistic societies. This theological reframing presents Old Testament teachings not as static doctrines, but as active catalysts for Christian engagement in interreligious dialogue and societal transformation.

Therefore, the theology of the Old Testament must be understood in its Christocentric fulfilment—pointing unequivocally to Jesus Christ as the one and only Saviour. In Him, the ethical imperatives of the covenant become not only possible but imperative for Christian living. As followers of Christ, Christians are not merely called to uphold values of tolerance and harmony; they are commissioned to embody the reconciling power of the Gospel in a divided

⁴⁹ Marde Christian Stenly Mawikere, Sudiria Hura & Virginia Rebeca Tulung, "Dinamika Agama dan Potensi Konflik dalam Riset Clifford Geertz: Urgensi Moderasi Beragama dan Relevansi dengan Teologi Kristen," *Jurnal Manna Rafflesia* 10, no. 2 (April 2024), https://doi.org/10.38091/man_raf.v10i2.364.

world. Old Testament theology, when seen through the lens of its fulfilment in Christ, becomes a dynamic and living testimony—guiding Christian engagement in interfaith dialogue, societal healing, and the advancement of genuine religious moderation anchored in the truth of the Gospel.

While Christianity offers a profound and constructive theological contribution to the promotion of religious moderation, it does not—and must not—dilute its core conviction that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone. The unwavering belief in the uniqueness of Christ as the sole Redeemer and Saviour of humanity and the world remains central to Christian faith and identity. Yet, this exclusive claim is not antithetical to the Christian commitment to love, peace, and justice. Rather, it is precisely this redemptive grace, as revealed across both the Old and New Testaments, that compels Christians to practise compassion, to forgive without reservation, and to pursue justice for all. Christian faithfulness to the Gospel does not manifest in religious arrogance or fanaticism, but in the active embodiment of divine mercy and truth in a pluralistic world. Thus, a robust Christ-centred theology not only upholds the supremacy of Christ but also affirms the ethical imperative to engage respectfully, lovingly, and justly with all members of society, regardless of creed or background.

CONCLUSION

The theology of the Old Testament vividly portrays love, forgiveness, and social justice as foundational values that not only define the relationship between God and His people but also undergird the social ethics governing human interaction. Love, expressed through the concept of *hesed*; forgiveness, through *sālah*; and social justice, through *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*, collectively serve as the ethical framework for a Christian understanding oriented towards the common good. These values transcend their historical relevance in ancient Israel and remain profoundly significant in shaping a harmonious and inclusive society in the modern world—particularly within Indonesia’s pluralistic context.

The principle of love in the Old Testament exhorts the faithful to extend their devotion not only to God but also to fellow human beings, with a strong emphasis on empathy and social solidarity. This love calls for a compassionate response towards the weak and marginalised, as exemplified in the prophetic teachings of Micah (Mic. 6:8). It serves as a vital bridge in interreligious life, fostering dialogue grounded in mutual understanding and respect. Within the Indonesian setting, love provides a robust foundation for nurturing harmony and reinforcing unity amidst diversity.

Forgiveness, as depicted in the Old Testament, is not confined to the divine-human relationship but extends to interpersonal reconciliation. The forgiveness extended by God is neither limited nor conditional; rather, it embodies a redemptive initiative aimed at restoring both vertical and horizontal relationships. In a world often beset by social and religious tensions, forgiveness becomes an indispensable first step towards reconciliation. Christians in Indonesia are thus called to embody this principle by relinquishing vengeance and focusing on the pursuit of peace and communal healing.

Social justice, articulated through *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*, underscores the necessity of upholding equitable legal standards and leading a moral life in fidelity to God’s will. The prophets,

notably Amos and Isaiah, issued unambiguous calls for justice—championing the cause of the vulnerable, including the poor, the orphaned, and widows. Within the framework of religious moderation, such justice challenges Christians to advocate for the rights of the marginalised and to confront systemic injustices in society.

The Old Testament teachings on love, forgiveness, and social justice find their ultimate fulfilment in the messianic prophecy of Jesus Christ, who is proclaimed in the New Testament as the sole Lord and Saviour of humanity and the world. These theological tenets contribute meaningfully to the advancement of religious moderation. In a plural society often overshadowed by interreligious strain, these principles serve as bridges—facilitating respectful engagement and cooperative coexistence. Religious moderation, grounded in tolerance and appreciation of difference, becomes essential in the pursuit of a peaceful society, devoid of extremism and violence. Nevertheless, Christians steadfastly uphold their faith in Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, who brings peace and restoration not only to humankind but also to the entirety of creation.

Moreover, the Old Testament theology of love, forgiveness, and social justice instructs Christians to prioritise communal welfare over personal interest. In daily life, Christians are encouraged to embody these values by advocating for justice, attending to marginalised groups, and promoting an inclusive society. These teachings extend beyond individual piety, shaping broader social relations and contributing to a shared life amidst diversity.

This Old Testament theology, rooted in the imperatives of love, forgiveness, and social justice, reminds Christians of their broader social responsibility. In an increasingly polarised world, these values are crucial to fostering a spirit of religious moderation and easing interfaith tensions. They offer a robust ethical foundation for Christian engagement in the pursuit of peace, the maintenance of social justice, and the cultivation of societal harmony.

Ultimately, the teachings of the Old Testament on love, forgiveness, and social justice are not merely spiritual inheritances for Christians, but possess a universal dimension, addressing global challenges such as radicalisation and intolerance. These principles may serve as a vital contribution to the shaping of a more just, peaceful, and respectful global civilisation, offering profound inspiration for people of faith worldwide to live more harmoniously.

The novelty of this research lies in its Christocentric theological synthesis that repositions Old Testament ethics not as static doctrines bound to a single tradition, but as dynamic imperatives fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ and applicable to modern contexts of religious pluralism. This study demonstrates that Christian commitment to religious moderation—expressed through inclusive love, restorative forgiveness, and transformative justice—need not undermine the exclusive salvific claim that Jesus Christ is the only way and goal of redemption. Rather, this foundational belief, far from leading to fanaticism, enables Christians to engage confidently and compassionately in a diverse world, embodying the very grace revealed throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

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