

UWTSD

Muslim Politics (HPRS7017)

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4. A profile of a significant thinker associated with Muslim politics.

Introduction

Nurcholish Madjid was born in 1939 in the town of Jombang, East Java and died on 29 August 2005 at the age of 66.¹ He was known to be one of the most influential and leading progressive Muslim thinkers in Indonesia and in the wider global community. Madjid received his early education in *Pesantren Darus Salam*, a modernist *pesantren*, which grounded him in an Islamic education in Arabia and English.² Subsequently, he pursued his first degree at the Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN *Syarif Hidayatullah*).³ As a student, Madjid was an influential student activist, leading the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI—Muslim Students' Association) in the 1960s.⁴ Subsequently, he pursued his PhD in Islamic Studies in the University of Chicago in the United States under the tutelage of Fazlur Rahman, a renown Islamic scholar. Madjid received an education that combined both “traditionalist Islamic scholarship” with “critical modern thought.”⁵

Upon his return from his graduate studies, Madjid founded the Paramadina Foundation (*Yayasan Paramadina*) in Jakarta in 1986 as a think-tank for scholars to discuss about Islam.⁶ Today, the Paramadina Foundation runs a training school, a secondary school and a university which is popular among the urban Muslims.⁷ Not only was he a rector of Paramadina University, he was also a professor of Islamic studies at the IAIN

¹ Mun'im, Sirry, 'Secularization in the Mind of Muslim Reformists: A Case Study of Nurcholish Madjid and Fouad Zakaria,' *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 1.2 (2007), 323-355 (p. 326).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.

⁴ Saleh, Fauzan, *Modern Trends In Islamic Theological Discourse In 20th Century Indonesia: A Critical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 240.

⁵ Barton, Greg, Ihsan Yilmaz, and Nicholas Morieson, 'Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements And Contestations Of Islamic Religious Ideas In Indonesia,' *Religions* 12.8 (2021), 641 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080641>, p. 11.

⁶ Bakti, Andi Faisal, 'Nurcholish Madjid And The Paramadina Foundation,' IAS Newsletter #34, July 2004.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Jakarta.⁸ This paper will provide an overview of Madjid as a neo-modernist and his position and views with regards to democracy and pluralism and the issue of secularization and desacralization in Indonesia.

Nurcholish Madjid As A Neo-Modernist

Neo-Modernism is “characterized as a movement of thought combining progressive, liberal convictions alongside strong religious faith.”⁹ Majdid was well positioned to be an advocate of neo-modernism as he was schooled in both classical Islamic education as well as modern “Western analytical methods.”¹⁰ In Indonesia, the two most crucial elements in Islam is traditionalism and modernism. Often, these two elements are seen to be at odd with one another. According to Ali and Effendy, “the emergence of Neo-Modernism was basically meant to reduce the cleavage between these two elements of Indonesian Islam and to combine their respective merits to the benefit of Muslims.”¹¹ Madjid as a neo-modernist sought to show that it is possible for both elements to co-exist. In the 1970s, Madjid launched the “Renewal Movement of Religious Thought” (*Gerakan Pembaharuan Pemikiran Keagamaan*).¹² Through this movement, Madjid aimed to “employ ijtihad (or a rational approach to interpreting passages of scripture)” for the modern context while keeping true to the key tenets of Islam.¹³

As neo-modernists, between the 1980s to 2000s, Madjid worked hand in hand with Abdurrahman Wahid (Supreme Leader of the Nahdatul Ulama) to close the divide between the traditionalist and modernist Muslims in Indonesia and to improve the relationships between various parties such as between the secular intellectuals and Muslim intellectuals and the *santri* (orthodox Sunni Muslims) and *abangan* (Muslims following local traditions).¹⁴ Being non-sectarian, Madjid also played an important role in Indonesia’s transition to democracy after the fall of President Suharto in 1998 and

⁸ Saleh, p. 240.

⁹ Saleh, p. 244.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 241.

¹³ Barton, Yilmaz, and Morieson, p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6, 12.

pushed for democracy and helped to prevent Indonesia from falling into the hands of another authoritarian regime.¹⁵

Nurcholish Madjid As An Advocate For Pluralism and Democracy

Madjid did not support the formation of an Islamic state through Islamic political parties, but he also did not agree that Indonesia should be a secular state.¹⁶ Thus, Madjid promoted the concept of *Masyarakat Madani* (civil society) and popularised this term in Indonesia.¹⁷ *Masyarakat Madani* is “meant to be a contextualized, religious-based and nationalized civil society.”¹⁸ According to Bakti, “*Mandani* refers to the city of Muhammad (Medina City), the ideal Islamic city-state.”¹⁹ Using another semantically close word, “madina,” Madjid continues to develop his idea of the early Islamic society as a “pluralistic ideal society, exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad through his think-tank Paramadina.”²⁰ Through his understanding of the Qur’an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad Madjid arrived at several key conclusions. Pluralism was practised in the early Muslim communities and tolerated in Islam.

Referring to the Constitution of Madina as an example, Madjid argued that the Prophet Muhammad “was reported to have affirmed the rights of those communities to live together peacefully as a single ummah, and established the common platform approved by all participating groups.”²¹ To Madjid, Islam also promotes inclusivism, integration and mutual respect.²² Furthermore, according to the Qur’an (2:256; 10:99) Islam “acknowledges the rights of the other religions to exist as well as to be practiced.”²³ The Qur’an also shows that “all adherents of any religious system will be safe, insofar as they belief in God, the Day of Judgement, and strive to do good deeds (2:62; 5:26).”²⁴ Thus, Madjid advocated pluralism and tolerance in Indonesia and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

¹⁶ Ahmad Ali Nurdin, ‘Revisiting Discourse on Islam and State Relation in Indonesia: The View of Soekarno, Natsir and Nurcholish Madjid,’ *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 6.1 (2016), 63-92 (p. 67).

¹⁷ Andi Faisal Bakti, ‘Islam and Modernity: Nurcholish Madjid’s Interpretation of Civil Society, Pluralism, Secularization, and Democracy,’ *Asian Journal of Social Science* 33.3 (2005), 486-505 (p. 491).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 492-493.

²¹ Saleh, p. 267.

²² Bakti, ‘Islam and Modernity’, p. 493; Saleh, p. 265.

²³ Saleh, p. 270.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

subscribe to the concept of Pancasila. Madjid also argued that “democracy, too, is said to have Qur’anic precedents, implied in the terms *musyawarah* and *syura*, both meaning deliberation.”²⁵ Islamic democracy recognizes all voices, unlike Western democracy which ignores minority voices.²⁶ Citing the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Madjid argues that Prophet Muhammad practised democracy in that while he received divine revelation from Allah, he also conferred with his companions on worldly matters.²⁷ Thus, Madjid sought to show that pluralism and democracy is compatible with Islam by using the Qur’an as the source of authority and referring to the example of the city of Muhammad (Medina City), the ideal Islamic city-state.

Nurcholish Madjid On Secularization and Desacralization

Madjid was against the formation of an Islamic state in Indonesia. He argued that the concept of an Islamic state did not exist in Islam.²⁸ In 1970, during the Renewal Movement, Madjid boldly called for the secularization and the desacralization of Islamic “religious texts, symbols, and beliefs.”²⁹ He propagated “secularization” as “a necessary process that would enable the Islamic community to distinguish between transcendental and temporal values” and drop the idea of the formation of Islamic state from Indonesian politics.³⁰ With regards to the matters of “an Islamic state, Islamic political parties, or Islamic ideology,” Madjid argues that there is nothing sacred about them.³¹ By desacralizing all these things and purifying Islam of politics can Islam be truly liberated and reformed. The process of secularization will also cause Muslims to remember their “primary Islamic oath (syahadat) which states that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet.”³² Thus, nothing on earth is to be viewed as absolute including human beings’ “function as vicegerents of God (khalifat al-Allah fi al-ardh).”³³ To Madjid, secularization does not lead to secularism which is anti-religion

²⁵ Bakti, ‘Nurcholish Madjid’, p. 22.

²⁶ Bakti, ‘Islam and Modernity’, p. 494.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Barton, Yilmaz, and Morieson, p. 11.

³⁰ Ahmad Ali Nurdin, ‘Revisiting Discourse on Islam and State Relation in Indonesia: The View of Soekarno, Natsir and Nurcholish Madjid,’ *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 6.1 (2016), 63-92 (p. 84); Sirry, p. 343.

³¹ Nurdin, p. 86.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

but a liberating development to confront the “Islamists’ conception of an Islamic party and or Islamic state.”³⁴

Madjid’s emphasis on the needful process of secularization and desacralizing is to establish that for Islam to form the bedrock and character of the Indonesian society, it need not be through Islamic parties.³⁵ Madjid argued that Islam need not be represented by political parties in parliament and become politicised. Thus, his famous slogan was, ‘Islam Yes, Islam Party No’.³⁶ He urged Muslims to be committed to Islamic values and not to institutions such as Islamic parties.³⁷ He also sought to show that Islam as a religion can contribute to “modern, plural, and democratic society” through the inner transformation of individuals rather than strict imposition and adherence to the Shari’a law by the State.³⁸

Conclusion

When Nurcholish Madjid died in 2005, the Indonesian nation lost a “great teacher (guru bangsa).”³⁹ For three decades, Madjid spoke up boldly on the need to reform Islam in Indonesia because Islam was tainted with politics. He was not afraid to push through his position and views on pluralism and democracy, and secularization and desacralization even though they were controversial, and he faced criticisms. Madjid advocated a brand of Islam in Indonesia that was progressive, tolerant, inclusive, and accommodative but at the same time true to the core of the Islam tenets. For over three decades, Madjid’s publications and speeches continue to generate debates and discussions in Indonesia. Madjid represented for his time a new intellectual spirit and a spirit of progressive Islamic reform. Madjid’s life works has contribute tremendously to the growth of Islamic reform and intellectualism in Indonesia and beyond.

(Word Count: 1348)

³⁴ Sirry, p. 343.

³⁵ Barton, Yilmaz, and Morieson, p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁷ Sirry, Mun’im, ‘Secularization in the Mind of Muslim Reformists: A Case Study of Nurcholish Madjid and Fouad Zakaria,’ *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 1.2 (2007), 323-355 (p. 334).

³⁸ Barton, Yilmaz, and Morieson, p. 11.

³⁹ Sirry, p. 326.

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