

Modern Interpretation of Islamic History in the Indonesian Context.

The Case of Nurcholish Madjid.

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Introduction

Nurcholish Madjid is a man in his early sixties. He was born and raised in the Eastern part of Java where traditional Islam has its stronghold, but since many years he is living and working in Jakarta. He has a solid and double education which means he is educated both in traditional Islamic schools and secular universities in Indonesia, as well as having a Ph.D in Islamic studies from the University of Chicago. Nurcholish, and other Muslims with a similar education, has been given the epithet intellectual *ulama*.¹ People with this kind of education can be seen as a growing force in the whole Islamic world today. Since 1986 Nurcholish runs *Paramadina*, an urban *dawa* or proselytising organisation, concentrating on education and publishing business. The organisation is based in Jakarta and its main target-group are middle- or upper-middle class Jakartans.² Nurcholish is a prolific writer and my material is huge. Hence the aim of my present paper is to describe the ideas of Nurcholish Madjid, his use of Islamic history and to analyse the development of neomodernistic ideas in general.

Islamic neomodernism in Indonesia

Since the end of the 1960s a new school of thought has grown among Indonesian Muslim intellectuals. From the beginning it was called "New Thinking in Islam" but today it is mostly referred to as Islamic neomodernism.³ Nurcholish was the first spokesman for these ideas and he

¹ Barton 1997:35

² Barton 1997:51

³ For a further discussion on neomodernism see Fazlur Rahman "Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge", *Islam: Challenges and Opportunities*, Edinburgh University Press, 1979, pp 315-330.

is still, among most Indonesian Muslims and academic scholars, seen as the most important one.⁴ The above mentioned double education is one of the premises for neomodernism and it can be seen as a synthesis of modern and traditional scholarship.⁵ The neomodernists promote ideas that might be called "modern" and they formulate these ideas by consulting not only the Quran and Sunna, but also traditional normative and intellectual sources. They actually accuse the Islamic modernists for neglecting this textual treasury of classical Islam as they themselves find it a valuable instrument in arriving at answers to questions and problems important in the Islamic world of today. They don't treat these classical authors as absolute authorities, according to Nurcholish no human being can ever say he has reached the truth, but as important efforts of each author to reach solutions to challenges in his respective context.⁶

I will first present the neomodernists overall key-ideas and then turn to Nurcholish's ideas specifically. Firstly, they propose the development of a contextualised *ijtihad* to reach a universal interpretation of Islam. Supposedly this interpretation takes the historical and cultural context of the Quran and Sunna into consideration as well as the context of modern societies.⁷ Secondly, if Islam can be adequately reformed, that is if it can respond positively to the challenge of modernity and rapid social change, then the future for Islam in the 21st century can be better than any other age in the past.⁸ Thirdly, substance or content of belief and practice is more important than its outer form. Fourthly, it is impossible for any person to be certain that he or she understands the will of God better than any other human being. Therefore Muslims must be tolerant toward each other and toward adherents of other faiths.⁹ Fifthly, the neomodernists find the current structure of the Indonesian state, based on the Five Principles of *Pancasila*, as the most appropriate model for Indonesias pluralistic society and accept it as permanent.¹⁰ The principles of *Pancasila* are: Belief in one supreme God or monotheism, a just and civilised humanism, unity of Indonesia, democracy and social justice. Finally, the

⁴ Uhlin 1995:135

⁵ Barton 1995b:7

⁶ Madjid 1994:110f; Madjid 1995:84f, 40f

⁷ Saeed 1997:284f; Fathimah 1999:106ff; Barton 1995b:11

⁸ Barton 1997:66

⁹ Barton 1995b:26f

¹⁰ Barton 1995b:421; Madjid 1994:57

neomodernists advocate a separation between "church" and state and their slogan is "Islam Yes - Islamic Parties No".¹¹

Neomodernism, although controversial from a theological point of view, has had the possibility to develop and openly involve in debate all the time during the thirty-two years of dictatorship under President Suharto. This in spite of the strictly controlled and repressive political climate that was a cornerstone of Suhartos rule, especially against political Islam. As the neomodernists themselves expressed opposition to Islamic political parties they were never a threat to the regime, at least not as long as Suharto himself hold on to this policy, and they were actually accused of being the regimes chief legitimators.¹² The neomodernists argued that their generation had experienced the failure of Islamic parties. This failure included not only election defeats and intellectual stagnation but also quarrels between and inside Islamic parties that made them even weaker. Or put another way, "the low politicization of Islam seemed only to have corrupted Islam's high political ideals".¹³ Instead the neomodernists promoted ideas that were against sectarian formations and aimed to strengthen the *umma* and Islam.¹⁴ In short neomodernism changed the Muslim focus in Indonesia from a political approach to a cultural one.¹⁵

The Ideas of Nurcholish Madjid

"Maintain that which is old and good, and embrace that which is new and better."

Nurcholish calls this a word of wisdom and it appears over and over again in his writings. In his struggle for rationality he his willing to discard or "sacrifice" all that is not appropriate for the needs of Muslims today.¹⁶ The most comprehensive survey on neomodernism this far has been

¹¹ Madjid 1987:205; Madjid 1995:126

¹² Barton 1995a:8; Uhlin 1995:136f

¹³ Hefner 2000:114f, see also Eickelman & Piscatori 1996:53

¹⁴ Madjid 1985:385; Barton 1994:147

¹⁵ Muzani 1994:128f

¹⁶ Madjid 1987:206

done by the Australian asianist Greg Barton and he says "It is important to remember that what is being criticised is not Islamic theology but Islamic culture".¹⁷

The distinction transcendent - immanent is a basic foundation in Nurcholish's reasoning. The most serious problem through Muslim history is that the border between these realms has broken down and that tradition from the mundane realm has been placed in the heavenly realm. Traditions are results of human action and belong to the immanent sphere. What belongs to the transcendent is God and Gods word in the Quran, nothing else. The most urgent task for Muslims today is to desacralise tradition, or in other words to put it back in its proper place, and by this carry out the kernel of Islam, *tawhid*.¹⁸ When tradition is back in its proper realm again it should be subjected to a never-ending process of *ijtihad*. In line with Nurcholish's reasoning it is forbidden for humans to change or interpret anything in the transcendent realm (*ibadat*), but it is a duty for humans to change that which needs to be changed in the immanent realm. To put it different, *ijtihad* is an obligation for Muslims but only in the sphere of the worldly (*muamalat*).¹⁹ To make *ijtihad* and succeed gives according to Nurcholish double merit but to try and fail gives merit anyway, the most important is to try.²⁰

Arabic Islamic concepts in the Indonesian context

"Unity In Diversity" is the motto of the Indonesian state, pluralistic in every sense of the word. Nurcholish Madjid seems to personify this motto, both by his personal appearance and by his interpretation of Islam focused on tolerance, pluralism and inclusivism. In this reasoning he makes comparisons between the Five Principles of *Pancasila* and the so-called Medina charter. He also refers to the co-existence of Muslims, Jews and Christians during Umayyad reign in Andalusia and the example of Caliph Umar in Aelia charter for Jerusalem as historic models useful for the formation of contemporary Indonesian society. Ibn Taymiyya, the fourteenth-

¹⁷ Barton 1995b:419

¹⁸ Madjid 1995:62, 189f; Fathimah 1999:86f

¹⁹ Madjid 1995:59-62

²⁰ Madjid 1995:63f; Madjid 1984:104f

century reformer, is another important source of inspiration for this inclusive interpretation of Islam.²¹

Inspired by Adam Malik, a former Indonesian vice president, Nurcholish views *Pancasila* as a basis for developing a social climate that promotes religious tolerance and pluralism in Indonesia. According to Malik the so-called "Constitution of Medina", created by the Prophet, and *Pancasila* are similar in spirit. This "constitution" proclaimed that all citizens, whether Muslims or Jews, were one nation or *umma* and that they all had the same rights and duties. Malik interpretes this as "a formula for a state based of the idea of social and religious pluralism".²² According to Nurcholish this document has been further developed by the second caliph Umar in his Aelia charter for Jerusalem and Syria and not least by the Umayyad caliphs in Spain. The caliphs in Andalusia has been praised by Ibn Taymiyya as true followers of the Medina school, the most valid.²³

Nurcholish further stresses the importance of finding similarities and continuities between religions. All Abrahamic religions originate from the same God and it is not surprising to find similarities in their respective sources. Nor is it surprising to find differences, as the respective prophets and messengers all act in response to the demands and challenges of their own time and space.²⁴ Also Hindus, Buddhists and followers of Chinese religions has some kind of Holy books containing the fundamental doctrines on the unity of God, *tawhid*, or monotheism. But it is true that they have deviated from true monotheism and that formulations in their Holy books, as well as in the Christian and Jewish sources, have changed through history. According to Ibn Taymiyya Allah has sent down the Quran to support and protect the messages in the already existing Holy books, although their messages can be changed or totally removed in accordance with the Quran. This depends on the changing demands in time and space and not on the validity of the earlier revealed sources.²⁵ In conclusion, according to Nurcholish's inclusive understanding, there is no fundamental difference between the messages of the world's great religions.

²¹ Madjid 1995:64f

²² Madjid 1994:64; Madjid 1995:75f

²³ Madjid 1995:64 and 146. For Aelia charter see Encyclopaedia of Islam New Ed. vol. X page 819, "Pact or Covenant of Umar" on rights and obligations of both Muslims and the other inhabitants in Jerusalem.

²⁴ Madjid 1995:138f

²⁵ Madjid 1994:74f; Madjid 1995:140ff

These are some of his arguments to promote a tolerant and pluralistic atmosphere in Indonesia, as already noted a country that is pluralistic in every sense of the word. And Nurcholish carries this reasoning even further and wants to see Indonesia as "a laboratory for developing modern religious tolerance and pluralism". He also says that Indonesia, as the most populous among Muslim nations, provides a good opportunity to create a positive and constructive dialogue between Islam and the demands of this age.²⁶

Nurcholish's central concepts

A central concept is *musyawarah* or *shûrâ* in Arabic.²⁷ From an etymological point of view Nurcholish translates the word as "to mutually give each other signals or indications" on what is right or wrong. Basically man is good but because of his or hers inherited weakness there is a possibility that human beings are wrong. Therefore, the duty to listen to others opinion is as important as the right to speak oneself. In short *musyawarah* is an expression of the open-minded attitude that according to Nurcholish is strongly recommended in Islamic doctrine. And most important, Gods mercy on all human beings is an absolute prerequisite of *musyawarah*.²⁸ He cites the Quran, Alu 'Imrân/3:159; "It is because of Gods mercy, that you Muhammad has to be kind-hearted towards them (your followers). [...] and consult them in (all) matters" (my translation from Indonesian).²⁹

The probably most important concept in Nurcholish's argumentation is the Indonesian word *peradaban* which means civilisation or culture. Etymologically he derives it from the Arabic word *mâdinah* which means civilised place, even more concrete he alludes to Muhammads time as both religious and political leader in Medina. He further states that the modern technical term "civil society", with the Indonesian translation "a civilised and well-organised society based on respect", is in the same spirit as *mâdinah*. He is therefore an untiring proponent of *peradaban* in Indonesia.³⁰ According to his closest followers Nurcholish's

²⁶ Madjid 1994:76f

²⁷ Madjid 1995:198

²⁸ Madjid 1994:67f; Madjid 1995:194ff

²⁹ Madjid 1995:195

³⁰ Madjid 1995:187

”Magnum opus” is the six hundred pages long ”Islam Doctrine and Civilisation” (*Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban*).³¹

An obvious weakness in his thoughts though is that he very seldom or never addresses gender issues. I don’t know of course, but I would be very surprised, if his view on gender issues wasn’t in line with the rest of his ideas. But as a close ally of his a bit embarrassed said to me ”it is a too controversial issue”.³² This is an interesting point that needs further attention, especially as most of the participants in *Paramadinas* courses are women. And not least because women have been at the forefront of the Islamic resurgence that has swept over Indonesia the last twenty years. As an interesting example I can mention that women often constitute more than fifty percent of the pilgrims making *hajj* to Mecca.³³

A concept of growing importance in Nurcholish’s perception of Islam is *taqwa*, which most often signifies ”god-consciousness”, ”god-fearing” and, by extension, ”piety”.³⁴ In Nurcholish’s view *taqwa* is a deep awareness of Gods eternal presence in our lives, His direct and constant supervision and His judgement of our behaviour. So, according to Nurcholish, after having attained this awareness our primary intention are to reach Allah’s approval and avoid His anger, in all our actions of life. Until at last we find guidance to a noble character.³⁵ In this process he advocate *dhikr* as the most important element of *taqwa* or rather as means of assistance to instil this understanding of *taqwa*.³⁶ *Dhikr* is here to be understood in a wide sense as remembrance of Allah, and not as the specific method of Sufi ritual.³⁷ People living in accordance with these guidelines have certain characteristics in common. Firstly, they have an open-minded attitude and promote religious tolerance and pluralism. Secondly, they are aware of their personal responsibility towards God. Thirdly, they accept *taqwa* as the base for a true and correct life.³⁸ Fourthly, they follow the cosmic law in order to attain justice. Nurcholish stresses that aspiration for justice is not really included in *taqwa* but it resembles *taqwa* and is therefore relevant to mention here.³⁹ In conclusion he views *taqwa* as a kind of moral concept for man.

³¹ Madjid 1992

³² Interview with Budhy Munawar-Rahman in Jakarta 150101.

³³ Kull 1996:38

³⁴ Esposito 1995:189

³⁵ Madjid 2000:xiv and 7

³⁶ Madjid 2000:11

³⁷ Madjid 2000:14f; Madjid 1993:14

³⁸ Madjid 2000:4ff

³⁹ Madjid 1995:184; Madjid 2000:17

In need of spiritualism

As a compliment to his moral and political ideas Nurcholish has since the mid 1980s stressed the importance of spirituality and this stress has been further accentuated during the last five-ten years. For example his latest book contains a collection of *khutbas* held at his organisation *Paramadina*. Regularly *khutbas* is a new phenomenon at *Paramadina* and something I will pay further attention to in my study.⁴⁰

There is according to Nurcholish an ever-increasing search for spirituality among people suffering from the human loneliness frequently occurring in industrialised societies. Nurcholish is not in opposition to the process of modernisation and industrialisation, but this in Indonesian society very rapid process, has caused social change of enormous proportions. He is well aware of the new human needs that might follow such a development and the importance of finding solutions to meet these needs. What he is strongly against though are new sects and fundamentalist interpretations of religion. They might offer a fast but also a false relief for the spiritual needs and are to be seen as palliative or relieving but not curing. Sects and fundamentalism are in his opinion results of a "spiritual flight" from formal or organised religion because of its lack of potential to satisfy such needs. As he views both fundamentalism and most sects as intolerant and authoritarian other solutions must be found.⁴¹

A possible solution is to "rediscover all dimensions of Islam". Most important is to develop the spiritual dimension and love of God in order to counteract the view of religion as formalistic and ritualistic. For example to experience prayer as a unification with Allah, almsgiving as a unification of mankind and *hajj* as a unification of the *umma*. In other words substance or content of belief and practice is more important than its outer form, which is actually one of the basic ideas of neomodernism. Other important activities are to revive the critical spirit of Islam through *ijtihad* and to radically transform the Islamic education in order to end the domination of dry scriptural formalism. Important is also to increase each individuals own responsibility towards God and refuse "clerical" authority. And lastly to put an end to the

⁴⁰ Fieldwork at Paramadina January 2001.

⁴¹ Madjid 1995:86f; 128-132

isolationist mentality of the *umma* and start to co-operate with all groups of humanity. To be able to carry out this rediscovery of Islamic dimensions an intellectual enrichment is needed. In this endeavour the previous mentioned textual treasure of classical Islam plays a central role. But the reading of these sources has to be critical and take into account the factor of time and space. That is not to treat these sources as truth and absolute authority but as endeavours and responses to challenges of their respective context.⁴²

As mentioned before Nurcholish has a deep appreciation for Ibn Taymiyya, not only because of his inclusive ideas on Islam, but also for his view on Sufism and spiritualism. Nurcholish makes a distinction between "old Sufism" and "new Sufism". "Old Sufism" is characterised as popular, "non-orthodox", passive, isolative and non social-minded. "New Sufism" is in many ways the opposite; it is restrained by *shari'a* and therefore more "orthodox", it is active, social-minded and its adherents search scriptural knowledge. Both Ibn Taymiyya and Nurcholish are severe critics of "old Sufism". But Ibn Taimiyya is also, according to Nurcholish, one of the pioneers of "new Sufism", or with another word social spiritualism. This social-minded and intellectual Sufism is in accordance with "genuine" Islam and can be of great benefit for Muslims today.⁴³

Since the early 1990s urban Sufism has become a reality in major cities all around Indonesia. This indicates a revival of interest in Sufi teachings and practices among Indonesian Muslims. This also implies that "Sufism has changed from being rural and counter culture in nature, (.....) into a well-disposed spirituality among the cosmopolitans".⁴⁴ To situate Nurcholish in this Sufi resurgence is of crucial importance for my study.

Conclusion and analysis

In conclusion it is of course justified to ask whether neomodernism is a product of Suhartos reign or not. What is out of doubt is that the development of neomodernistic ideas has benefited from the strategy on political Islam carried out by the Suharto regime. This strategy not only provided

⁴² Madjid 1995:156f

⁴³ Madjid 1993:1-13; Munawar-Rachman 1998:51f

⁴⁴ Darmadi 2001:207

the neomodernists with the possibility to freedom of thought but also freedom to express these thoughts. But it is not fair to see it as solely a product of political circumstances. It is also according to Barton "a sincere theological response by Islamic intellectuals to the changing social environment in Indonesia, and a product of their educational and other experiences".⁴⁵

Neomodernists are a group of Muslim intellectuals that have a double education. This education is one of the premises for the emergence and development of a neomodernistic interpretation of Islam. Methodologically they advocate a contextualised *ijtihad* by consulting not only the Quran and Sunna but also traditional normative and intellectual sources. They stress the importance of not regarding these traditional sources as absolute authorities but as efforts to reach solutions in their respective context. The conceptualisation of Islamic history in the contemporary Indonesian context is also an important feature of neomodernism. And the distinction between the transcendent and immanent spheres of life is another crucial part of neomodernist thought. Very generalised, their interpretation of Islam is tolerant, inclusive and in favour of religious pluralism. They stress the importance of substance of belief rather than its outer form and they are positive to a separation of "church" and state. By following *taqwa*, in a wider understanding of the word, Nurcholish urge the individual to strive for a noble character and an awareness of the personal responsibility towards God. Due to the rapid social change in Indonesia Nurcholish lift forward the increasing personal need for spiritualism. He advocates new-Sufism as one possible cure for this need. Especially the form of new-Sufism pioneered by Ibn Taymiyya. The neomodernists are insistent critics of fundamentalism and sects although in some respects these phenomena are responses to the same need.

A line of thought can be distinguished in neomodernism, from ideas on nation-building, morally inspired politics, personal piety and individual responsibility to spiritualism and new-Sufism. By following this development it is obvious that Bartons observation of neomodernism as a theological response to "a changing social environment" is correct. But we can't ignore the importance of the political climate in Indonesia as a precondition for these thoughts to develop. Consequently a new political situation can change or end this development.

As a heuristic instrument the sociologist of religion Peter Beyer's book "Religion and Globalization" provides one possible way to analyse Nurcholish's understanding and

⁴⁵ Barton 1995b:12. See also Rahman 1982:125, on the importance of freedom of thought and the possibility to express these thoughts.

interpretation of Islam and his concern for a future role for religion. Beyer has an interesting discussion on *religious function* versus *religious performance*.⁴⁶ Briefly these are responses, or alternative strategies for action, from religious leaders and "functionaries" on the present situation in society caused by secularisation, privatisation and globalisation, or in other words change. Religious function refers to "pure" religious action: the cure for souls, the search for enlightenment or salvation and so on. Religious performance is the strategy that uses religion to solve problems that are for example social, political or economical and not religious in the sense of "personal piety". According to Beyer there are two versions of religious performance, one "liberal" and one "conservative". Representatives for the "liberal" one are advocates of ecumenism, inclusivism and tolerance towards plurality regarding religious function, respecting the individual choice. They also view religion as a moral or ethical guideline able to solve social problems. Advocates for the "conservative" version accentuate the need of putting holism above pluralism and exclusion above inclusion. They stress the authority of one specific religious tradition over all other spheres of society. They also demand that religious norm should be enforced by law.⁴⁷ Nurcholish makes no distinction between individual worship and socio-ethical awareness. Through his agenda, on issues such as pluralism, tolerance and inclusivism he provides Muslims with a theological base to solve social problems resulting from the modernisation process of the contemporary Indonesian society. The conservative version are the choice of Nurcholish's "opponents" the fundamentalists or islamists. What is interesting though is that despite their different choice of strategy both Nurcholish and the islamists use Ibn Taymiyya as one of their main sources of inspiration. Although they have the problems in common they arrive at completely different solutions. Is this a deliberate strategy from Nurcholish's point of view or just a coincidence?

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⁴⁶ Beyer 1994

⁴⁷ Beyer 1994:70-71, 79-93; Svensson 2000:24-25

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