

NURCHOLIS MADJID'S THOUGHT ON ISLAMIC MODERNIZATION

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Abstract

Nurcholis madjid adalah seorang cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia yang semasa hidupnya, telah banyak memberikan sumbangan pemikiran tentang Islam di Indonesia. Walaupun pemikiran-pemikirannya tentang Islam banyak mendapat kritikan dari para cendekiawan yang tidak seide dengannya, ia tetap saja berupaya melakukan pencerahan terhadap masyarakat Muslim Indonesia. Salah satu pemikirannya yang sangat menonjol adalah tentang bagaimana Islam harus diinterpretasikan ulang untuk menghadapi modernisasi. Dalam konteks inilah, tulisan ini bermaksud mengungkap pemikiran-pemikiran Nurcholis tentang modernisasi Islam.

Introduction

There have been many studies conducted to reflect the thought of Muslim modernists on Islamic modernization which give so various nuances and emphasis that they encourage us to know and to understand their thoughts more comprehensively. It is not an exaggeration, of course, to say that the purpose of their thoughts is to respond to the socio-religious problems we are facing and those we will face in the future.

The term "Islamic modernization" refers to Islamic teachings presented by Muslim modernists to show that Islam was liberal, modern, simple and progressive. They presented Islamic teachings in such a way because they did not want Muslims to see Islam as irrelevant to modern Muslim and then abandon it under the impact of Western modernism and scientific thought which started to challenge

Islamic thought in the nineteenth century. Muslim modernists thought that if Islam were unable to provide solution to modern issues and problems, it would atrophy, and this development would give rise to disbelief and secularism among Muslims (Abu Bakr, t.th.: 65)

Based on that fact, Abu Bakr (t.th.:61) asserts that we may say that Muslim modernists presented their religious reformism and modernism because of the following reasons: (1) to persuade Muslims to accept Islamic teachings regarding reason, science, modern civilization and some western ideas and concepts; (2) to encourage Muslims to uphold Islamic belief and practices; and (3) to discourage Muslims from becoming Muslim secularists or Muslim conservatives.

Adams, who wrote about Islamic modernism in Egypt, defined the term “Muhammadan modernism” as a religious reformism dominated by theological considerations to free Islam from the rigidity of Islamic orthodoxy and to show Islam as a religion adaptable to the demands of modern life (Adams, 1968:1).

Based on that fact, when studying the thoughts of Muslim modernists in Indonesia, we can also see their theological responses to the socio-religious problems deeply felt by Muslim groups of Indonesia.

What encourages Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia to vocalize their thoughts on the need for modernization is that they assume that Islamic doctrines should—as had been done by the previous Muslim modernists-- be reformed; otherwise, they will not be able to survive and to solve the socio-religious problems in the present context.

In the context of Islamic modernization in Indonesia, as the most Muslim-populated country in Southeast Asia, for instance, a Muslim intellectual, Nurcholis Madjid, is no stranger to Muslim communities of Indonesia. He becomes popular among the Muslim communities of Indonesia not only for his thought on modernization but also for his two-time chairmanship of Islamic Student Association. In my view, however, it is the former that makes him more popular among the communities of Indonesia. Even, he is considered as a controversial Muslim intellectual for his attempts to do the so-called Islamic modernization.

For this reason, this paper tries to trace and to analyze Nurcholis Madjid’s thought on Islamic modernization in the context of socio-religious changes in Indonesia.

Nurcholis Madjid : A Brief Biography

Nurcholis Madjid was born in Jombang, East Java in 17th March, 1939. He was brought up in a religious family. After finishing his elementary study from “Sekolah Rakyat” (People’s Elementary School) and “Madrasah Ibtidaiyah” (Islamic Elementary School) in Jombang, he continued his study to “Pesantren Darul Ulum” Rejoso, Jombang (one of Islamic Boarding Schools in Jombang). He studied in this pesantren for two years, then he moved to “Kuliliyatul Muallimin al-Islamiyah” at Pesantren Darussalam, Gontor Ponorogo, East Java, and finished 1966. He taught in this pesantren for one and a half years. Afterwards, he continued his study to the Faculty of the Arabic Art and Islamic Civilization at IAIN (State-Institute for Islamic Studies) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, and finished in 1968. He was extremely active in university-student activity and was appointed the general chairman of Islamic University Student Association in the period of 1966-1969 and 1969-1971. He became the president of the Southeast Islamic-Student Association in the period of 1967-1969; General Secretary Assistant of IIFSO (International Islamic Federation of Student Organization) in the period of 1969-1971. Then he taught at IAIN (State-Institute for Islamic Studies) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (1972-1974); founded and presided over LKIS (one of institutions for Islamic studies in Jakarta (1974-1976). (Madjid, 1994: 6)

He went to America for his Doctorate degree in 1978 and finished his study in 1984, with dissertation entitled “Ibn Taymiyah on *Kalam* and Falsafah: Problem of Reason and Revelation in Islam”, from Chicago University, USA. He wrote tens of books and articles both in English journals and in Indonesian ones.

Today, he is the rector of Paramadina University, a member of National Committee of Human Rights, and professor of Postgraduate Program of IAIN (State-Institute for Islamic Studies) Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta.

The Ideology and Method of Islamic Modernization

To bring us to the understanding of Islamic modernization ever launched by Nurcholis Madjid, in the following, I would like to bring forward the ideology and method of Islamic modernization.

Some scholars have listed the ideology and method Muslim modernists as follows:

First, Islamic modernists asserted the need to revive Muslim communities through a process of a reinterpretation or reformulation of their Islamic heritage in the light of the contemporary world (Esposito 1963; 80).

Second, they endeavored to discover the spirit or objectives of the Qur'anic teachings rather than to hold mechanically to its literal meaning.

Third, they reopened the question of the relationship of faith and reason, and asked whether reason had limits or could sit in judgment on faith.

Fourth, they created positive links between the thought of the Koran and modern thought at certain key points, resulting in the integration of modern institution with the moral-social orientation of the Koran. Their purpose was to show the compatibility (and thus acceptability) of Islam with modern ideas and institutions, whether they be reason, science and technology or democracy, constitutionalism, and representative government (Rahman, 1981:27-28).

Fifth, they prepared to accept values and norms from outside the *Koran* and the *Sunna* and often originating in non-Muslim cultures. They argued for the accepted values as being either not incompatible with or even expression of the true values of Islam. In the liberal period up to World War II, Muslim modernists vindicated the tolerance, liberality, and Islamic humanity (Waardenburg, 1985:30). They also advocated Islamic positivism (Rahman, 1981: 25).

The ideology and method of Muslim modernists set out above, as said by Ibrahim Abu Bakr, were explicit and were exemplified in their thoughts on education, religion, and politics in Islam (Abu Bakr, : 61).

Islamic Modernization in the Eyes of Nurcholis Madjid

In 1960's decades, modernization served as a new issue in the context of socio-political changes in Indonesia. Communities and governments in other countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia had been previously familiar with and accepted the thought of

modernization. Indonesia, however, could be said as “the last passenger” in this area that took the theme of modernization (Rahardjo, 1994:17). As an alternative of the theme “revolution” adhered to in the Old Order Era, the majority of Indonesian community felt it difficult to find another choice, especially when they were faced with the issues nationalism, tradition and dominant religious doctrines. Nevertheless, we often found assumption among the thinkers that in the idea of modernization, there was European benefit and East-American ethnocentrism, either from political, economic or from cultural point of view (Rahardjo, 1994:16)

Referring to that condition, since 1968, young generations in Islamic movements had been extremely busy at discussing the problem of modernization. It could be seen then, for example, from the articles published by students' newspaper such as *Mahasiswa Indonesia*, *Mimbar Demokrasi*, *Gema Mahasiswa*, *Harian Kami*, *Harian Masa Kini* published in Yogyakarta and many other campus publications. Even Nurcholis Madjid's articles had been published in *Daily Masa Kini* on every Sunday, *Weekly Mahasiswa Indonesia* and *Mimbar Demokrasi*.

In 1968, Nurcholis Madjid who was already appointed the general chairman of HMI (Islamic University Students Association), 1966-1969 period, wrote an article under the title “*Modernisasi ialah Rasionalisasi, bukan Westernisasi*” (Modernization is Rationalization rather than Westernization). As a Muslim scholar, educated in the field of Islamic sciences supported by broad knowledge on general sciences written in foreign languages, such as Arabic and English, he tried to answer the question of modernization from Islamic perspective. He said:

“We completely maintain that modernization is rationalization upheld by moral dimensions based on principle of belief in the One God. However, we also completely reject the conception that modernization is westernization, because we reject westernism. Westernism is a total of life, in which the dominant factor herein is secularism with all its branches.” (Rahardjo in Nurcholis, 1994: 18).

It is true that the term “secularization” introduced by Nurcholis Madjid invited many reactions and criticisms from other Muslim

intellectuals in Indonesia. Therefore, in some occasions, he frequently tried to clarify the very difference of “secularism” and “secularization”. Further, he said:

“Secularization is not intended as the application of secularism because the latter is a name of ideology, a closed world view similar to religion. In this case, secularization is every from of “deliberating development”. The process of liberalization is needed because Islamic communities, as a result of their own historical experiences, are unable to distinguish the Islamic and transcendental values from the temporal ones (Hasan, 1980: 73,78).

It was the term “secularization” that brought about strong criticism. Moreover, with that term, Nurcholis Madjid had been accused of having being a secularist. One of the Muslim intellectuals, who --at the time-- got involved in criticizing against Nurcholis Madjid’s secularization, was Dr. Kamal Hasan, who accused him of being “a secular modernist” (Hasan, 1980:118).

According to Nurcholis Madjid, modernization, meaning rationalization to achieve effectiveness in thinking and working maximally for prosperity of human beings as a whole, is God’s basic commandment. Modernization means to think and work in terms of *fitrah* (nature) and *sunnatullah* (God’s law), and God’s law has been reflected in natural law. Therefore, to be modern, human beings have to understand the law prevailing in nature. Human understanding about natural law brings about science and science is achieved by human beings through their reasons, so that to be modern means to be “scientific” and “rational”. However, because of their limited abilities, human beings cannot understand the whole natural law in one time, but little by little and from time to time. Accordingly, to be modern also means to be progressive and dynamic. Thus, to be modern means to abolish the so-called *status quo*. In other words, to be modern is to deconstruct old-false traditions irrelevant to the facts existing in natural law, irrational and unscientific though in other side, there is a must to accept, to continue and to develop the previous generation’s heritage containing truth. Even though to be modern is an absolute must, modernity is relative since it is tied up by time and space. Something deemed to be modern will be old (not modern

anymore) in the future, while something absolutely modern is that is absolutely true, namely the One God. Therefore, modernity is a process of finding relative truth to that of finding absolute truth, namely Allah (Madjid, : 172-174)

Based on the above Nurcholis Madjid's thought, we can understand that nobody can claim human truth to be an absolute one, then keeps it away from criticisms and deconstructions.

His Thought on Religious Pluralism

In modern era, the issue of pluralism can be said as the agenda of humanity that must be responded prudently and constructively. It is based on the fact that pluralism serves as unavoidable sociological reality. In this relation, pluralism is put on a greater emphasis on the problems of religions and how to understand them. The former tends to be interpreted (or at least analogized) as belief, while the latter tends to be analogized as the problem of theology.

It is in this framework that the idea of pluralism launched by Nurcholis Madjid seems to give a greater emphasis on the two aspects mentioned above. The idea of pluralism, as a matter of fact, has been reflected in the early of his Islamic modernization. (Madjid, : 204) In many occasions, either in his articles or in his preaches, he frequently reminds of the necessity of pluralistic attitude in socio-religious life for achieving "enlightening life".

In declaring his Islamic modernization on pluralism, he often quotes some verses of the Holy Qur'an such as:

"To each among you have We prescribed a Law and a Open Way. If God had so willed He would have made you a single people but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you; so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute." (The Holy Qur'an: 5: 48).

The above verse, according to him, contains guidance to apply the so-called "internal relativism". Thus, by this, a tolerant attitude and self-controlling will arise not to look down upon anybody else, and let alone to blame them.

In other words, one must have inner-attitude in theological interaction. He also has to keep in his heart ‘healthy skepticism’, or reserve attitude in his mind, and be ready to admit the truth of the others when they are true, and admit himself wrong when he is really wrong. It is also said in the Holy Qur’an that:

“The same religion He has established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah—the which We have sent by inspiration to thee—and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus; namely that ye should remain steadfast in religion and make no divisions therein; to those who worship other things than God hard is the (way) to which thou callest them. God chooses to Himself those whom He pleases and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him)”. (The Holy Qur’an: 42: 13).

In interpreting the above verse, Nurcholis Madjid explained that in nature, the advent of the prophets is to support, to re-straighten, and to complete the teachings of the previous prophets. The verse also reflects that basically, in our present life, we are invited to apply the so-called ‘*kalimatun sawa*’ (the same commitment not to worship god except Allah).

Further, one’s or group’s different understanding of a religion will have logical consequence on the rise of different understanding in responding to and understanding the teachings of the religion. Islam, from the beginning, has been denoting that differences of understanding are natural and even are considered as *rahmat* (affection).

Those are some arguments of Nurcholis Madjid in trying to publish his thought on the necessity of building up religious communities on the basis of pluralism to achieve the so-called *universal brotherhood*.

His Thought on Civil Society

The theme “civil society” in the last decades became Nurcholis Madjid’s main concern in the process of democratization in Indonesia. In discussing civil society, he often refers his concept to what the Prophet Muhammad had done during his rule in *Madinah*. According

to him, individual can survive only under a system of law by which both the ruler and the ruled are obliged. Such a system of fundamental laws, whether written or embodied in tradition, is known as a constitution. According to him, the idea of written constitution found effective expression for the first time in the Constitution of Madinah, the document that the Holy Prophet made as treaty between the *Muhajirun* (the Muslim immigrants from Mecca) and *Ansar* (the Muslim natives of Yathrib), the Jews and some other Arab tribes. The spirit of document is the very spirit of *madinah*, “city”, which is etimologically derived from the same root as the verb “*dana-yadinu*”, meaning “to obey”, just as religion is “*din*”, meaning “the doctrine of obedience to God”, which is also “*islam*”. Therefore, “*madinah*” conceptually means “a place where people live together in a settled community, obeying the rule of law, that is “state”, “polity” or “*civita*”, similar to its Hebrew cognate “*medinat*” (thus the official Hebrew name of the State of Israel), “*Medinat Yishrael*”).

The Holy Prophet changed the name of his migration town “Yathrib” into “Madinah”, alluding to the spirit of civilized community dwelling in a place, obeying the law and honoring “social contracts” between the citizens, such contracts that should be considered as of the same power and authority as the contracts or covenants between man and God in the sacred teachings. Thus the word “*madinah*” connotes the idea of the life pattern of “*al-hadarah*”—civilization—as a settled community rather than roaming the desert as nomads, the life pattern of “*al-badawah*”—“bedouinness”. Related to this conception, as he said, is the assertion in the Qur’an that among the practices of unbelief in God is disobeying the rule and breaking the law as indicated by the life pattern of the Bedouins.

“The Arabs of the desert are the worst in unbelief and hypocrisy and most fitted to be in ignorance of the command which God bath sent down to his apostle; but God is All-Knowing All-Wise. (The Holy Qur’an: 9: 97)

Therefore, to be more specific, he said that the religion of Islam with its *shari’ah* demands its followers to sincerely adhere the law, just as the ancient Israel were to strictly observe the Torah of Moses and the Talmud. From this, we can understand that the idea of

law-abiding citizenship and respect for “contracts” (*al-uqud* such as rules made on the basis of mutual agreement among people through the true deliberation (*mushawarah*) is affirmed in the Holy Book in many places related to many occasions; one of them reads:

“Fulfill the covenant of God when ye have entered into it and break not your oath after ye have confirmed them; indeed ye have made God your surety; for God knoweth all that ye do (The Holy Qur’an: 16: 91).

Thus, the holy Prophet Muhammad laid down the foundation of the establishment of law-abiding citizenship in “Virtuous City” (*al-Madinat al-Fadilah*), a community of people that in modern era would be called in Arabic, “*al-mujtama’ al-madani*, an idea that resembles very much such a currently held idea of “civil society” or more aptly, “civilized society” (*al-mujtama’ al-mutamaddin*). (Madjid, 1994: 10).

His Thought on Politics

In the field of politics, though Nurcholis Madjid does not get involved actively in political practice, he remains to get involved in discussing relationship between Islam and politics in Indonesia. Therefore, it is not surprising anymore if he also has a great concern on the political reality in Indonesia. Concerning “Islamic State”, for instance, he said that the rise of issue on “Islamic State” is based on apologetic attitude towards modern Western ideologies such as democracy, socialism, communism, etc. Those ideologies are, according to him, often total in the sense that they cover all aspects of life, particularly political, economic, social, and cultural aspects. The apology on those modern ideologies arises ideological-political appreciation on Islam, and thus brings to an ideal of “Islamic State”.(Madjid,1970 :253) One of his thoughts on Islam and politics in Indonesia is his very popular jargon “*Islam, Yes, Partai Islam, No*” (Islam, Yes, Islamic Party, No) (Madjid, 1970: 3). This statement, of course, brings about implication on political constellation in Indonesia, particularly on those who often antagonize Islam against state (Abdullah, 2000:5-6). What Nurcholis Madjid wants with his popular jargon as mentioned above is that he intends to declare that relationship between religion and politics in Islam is already clear.

Both of them have reciprocal relationship, though in the side of technical and practical approaches, they can be separated. Religion is the authority of shahib *al-syari'ah*, namely the Prophet, through revelation he received from God, while the problem of politics is human authority, especially as far as it is concerned with technical-structural and procedural matters. Therefore, in this context, the role of *ijtihad* will be very great.

In addition, we also can infer from Nurcholis Madjid's jargon that he actually wants to abolish the bad image that Islam is terrorist, extremist, and rebellious. Again, from Islamic perspective, we can also understand that Islam is principles of social life so that Muslims can develop their social system by their innovation or imitation from other systems. His purpose is not to sacralize what to be desacralized, and this is one of his modernization projects. However, it does not mean that no criticism arises against him. Even, many sides consider him as "the political agent of the New Order Regime". (Azizy,2000:3). Nurcholis Madjid's jargon above seems to be still survival in Reformation Order, where Islamic political parties did not achieve the most vote in general election conducted in Indonesia one year ago (1999). Even, the great Muslim intellectuals of Indonesia, Amin Rais (the central chairman of the National Trustworthy Party) and Abdrur Rahman Wahid (the decralator of the Nation Awakening Party) tended not to rise the issues of Islam in their campaigns. In other words, their main concern lies on Islam as a principle of social system rather than on Islam as a symbol and formal religion. It is in this framework that we also can understand that Nurcholis Madjid's view on Islam lies on its substance rather than on its symbol.

Analysis on His Thought on Modernization

To analyze Nurcholis Madjid's thought on Islamic modernization, we need to understand the social setting in which he lives. It is popularly known that Nurcholis Madjid was brought up and educated in religious family. However, he has not only broad Islamic sciences but also profane ones. In my view, the combination of these two kinds of sciences is very conducive for his attempts to conduct his modernization projects. It can be seen from his term of modernization. Take as an example, "secularization". It derives from western tradition, but Nurcholis Madjid tries to give it a new meaning, "to

sanctify what to be sanctified” and “not to sanctify what to be de-sanctified” instead of its original meaning that develops in western society.

The movement of Islamic modernization launched by Nurcholis Madjid is simple enough and not controversial, namely building ethical base and moral direction for “national development” and “democratization” of social and political systems. In other words, the core of his Islamic modernization lies on value formation, namely the necessity of norm guidance as a reference for social life. Therefore, the role of religion in the field of policy formation or political practice, let alone religion-state alliance is not stressed by him. Even, he considers Muslim actors’ emphasis on the use religion politically and ideologically serves as the effect of colonialism and that of style of political parties in 1950’s decades.

To realize Nurcholis Madjid’s thought, however, brings about a very important question on how to prepare human resources who have perception and spirit of “relative truth”. It is in this context, one or a group of people may not claim to have achieved “the final truth”. Based on “truth claim” often criticized by him, we can understand that there is no “final truth” among human beings because under no circumstances will “truth claim” bring about exclusive and extreme attitudes that certainly will destruct social cooperation among people.

For this reason, commitment to rational and critical approaches to this kind of truth has often been put forward by him like in its relationship with the theme “secularization”, “modernization” and “rationalization”.

Based on the normative view from Islamic tradition as described above, Nurcholis Madjid tries to find out Islamic answer to the problem of modernity. In solving the problem of modernity, he differs from most of fundamentalist Muslims who oppose modernity or accept it apologetically without consideration of tradition. Nurcholis Madjid is a neo-modernist who accepts modernity based on long tradition from Islamic intellectuality.

Conclusion

Based on the previous discussion, I would like to conclude that “modernization” in Nurcholis Madjid’s mind is rationalization, scientification, and dynamization rather than westernism.

The idea of pluralism wanted by Nurcholis Madjid, particularly in the context of Indonesia, is global ethics that wish to accept and to admit the existences of others with extreme various concepts and ideas. It is true that his idea of pluralism has brought about controversies, but it is something natural for initial step to try to build up the so-called *universal brotherhood*. Concerning civil society, Nurcholis Madjid always appreciates the model of rule led by the Holy Prophet in *Madinah* in which he alluded the spirit of civilized community dwelt in a place, obeyed the law and honored “social contracts” among the citizens and covenants between man and God in the sacred teachings.

In the theories of politics, Nurcholis Madjid appreciates the previous modernists such as Muhammad Abduh and Husein Heikal who argues that Islam is only the principles of social life so that Muslims could develop their social systems by their innovation or imitation from other systems, including western system.

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