

## **Reimagining Islamic education: Critical perspectives inspired by Nurcholish Madjid**

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### **Abstract**

Islamic education in Indonesia has experienced significant transformations in response to evolving social, political, and cultural dynamics. Nurcholish Madjid's progressive and inclusive ideas offer a critical framework for rethinking Islamic education in the context of modern challenges. This study aims to analyze Madjid's concept of critical Islamic education, assess its relevance to Indonesia's contemporary Islamic education system, and explore its potential application in modern educational settings. Employing a qualitative methodology with a literature review approach, the research focuses on Madjid's writings and intellectual contributions. The findings reveal that Madjid envisions Islamic education as a means to cultivate not only religious devotion but also critical thinking and active participation in democratic society. He emphasizes pluralism and the integration of religious sciences with social sciences and humanities to foster comprehensive understanding, creativity, and innovation. Additionally, his approach highlights the importance of developing critical awareness to navigate social and political complexities. In conclusion, Madjid's concept of critical Islamic education provides a transformative paradigm that shifts the focus from quantity to quality. By embracing principles of democracy, pluralism, and humanistic values, Islamic education can nurture faithful, knowledgeable, and socially responsible individuals capable of contributing to a just and inclusive society.

**Keywords:** Critical Islamic education, Nurcholish Madjid's perspectives, pluralism in education, democratic society, humanistic values

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### **Introduction**

Islamic education in Indonesia has undergone significant transformations, evolving in tandem with the nation's social, political, and cultural developments. One of the most influential figures in shaping contemporary Islamic educational thought is Nurcholish Madjid, widely known as Cak Nur. His progressive and inclusive perspective has provided a pivotal framework for reimagining Islamic education, aligning it with the demands of modernity while preserving its core values.

Madjid introduced the concept of critical Islamic education, which not only focuses on imparting religious values but also aims to cultivate individuals who can think critically and participate actively in a democratic society. As Madjid (2000) asserts, education must address

the challenges of modernity and integrate the values of Islamicity, Indonesianness, and modernity (Abidin, 2014). Viewing education as an emancipatory tool, Madjid highlights its role in liberating individuals from ignorance and social stagnation (A. N. Madjid, 2021).

Central to Madjid's educational philosophy is pluralism, which he considers foundational for fostering an inclusive and harmonious society. He emphasizes that pluralist education should go beyond teaching tolerance, encouraging interactive dialogue among diverse groups to nurture mutual respect and understanding (Rosida et al., 2021; Setiawan, 2019). Additionally, democracy emerges as a key principle in his vision of Islamic education. According to Madjid, education should promote critical consciousness, empowering learners to engage in social and political life and strengthening values such as justice, freedom, and equality (Hawi, 2019; Aspandi, 2015).

Madjid also advocates a holistic approach to Islamic education, aiming to develop individuals' potential comprehensively. He proposes integrating religious sciences with social sciences and humanities to provide interdisciplinary insights, fostering creativity and innovation (Muhammad, 2010). Criticizing traditional dogmatic education systems, he calls for curriculum reforms and teaching methods that align with contemporary needs (Musyrifin, 2016). Furthermore, he emphasizes the integration of formal and non-formal education to ensure accessibility for all societal groups (Nafis, 2014).

Informed by principles from critical theory, particularly those of the Frankfurt School, Madjid views education as a transformative force for analyzing and addressing societal oppression and injustice (Luthfiyah, 2018). His vision of critical education extends beyond knowledge transmission to encompass social transformation (Purwanto, 2021).

This research aims to delve deeper into Madjid's concept of critical Islamic education, drawing on extensive literature and prior studies. By examining its relevance to Indonesia's current Islamic education system and exploring its potential implementation in modern educational contexts, this study seeks to highlight how Madjid's ideas can contribute to fostering a more just, democratic, and inclusive society.

## **Method**

This study employs a qualitative research method with a library research approach, focusing on Nurcholish Madjid's works as the primary data source. The qualitative approach is chosen to uncover insights and findings that cannot be quantified or analyzed through statistical methods. Instead, it aims to deeply explore and interpret the philosophical and conceptual frameworks underlying Madjid's thoughts on Critical Islamic Education.

### ***Research Procedures***

The research adopts a descriptive and analytical method to describe, analyze, and interpret Nurcholish Madjid's views in depth. Unlike hypothesis-testing research, this study emphasizes conceptual exploration and theoretical understanding. The research procedures consist of three main stages: (1) Data Collection Stage: Data is collected by systematically gathering information from credible sources. The primary focus is on Nurcholish Madjid's works, such as his books, articles, and essays, which are directly relevant to the topic. To provide a broader context and enrich the analysis, additional literature is consulted, including academic journals, books, and articles that discuss Madjid's contributions and critical Islamic education in general. (2) Data Display Stage: The collected data is organized systematically to facilitate further analysis. This involves presenting the information in descriptive narratives, charts, or thematic categorizations, enabling a coherent structure for analytical discussion. By organizing the data in this way, the research ensures clarity and focus in the interpretation process. (3) Data Analysis Stage:

The analysis stage involves an in-depth examination of the presented data. The data is scrutinized to identify key themes, principles, and frameworks in Madjid's views on Critical Islamic Education. Analytical techniques such as thematic analysis and comparative analysis are applied to synthesize the findings and draw meaningful conclusions. The analysis process is iterative, allowing for continuous refinement of interpretations as new insights emerge.

#### **Data Sources**

This research relies on two types of data sources: (1) Primary Data Sources: The primary data consists of Nurcholish Madjid's writings, including his books, articles, speeches, and essays that directly address the concept of Critical Islamic Education and its underlying principles. These works serve as the foundation for understanding Madjid's intellectual contributions. (2) Secondary Data Sources: Secondary sources include supporting literature that complements and enriches the analysis. These consist of academic journals, books, and articles discussing Madjid's educational philosophy, his contributions to Islamic thought, and broader discussions on Critical Islamic Education. Secondary sources are used to contextualize and critically examine Madjid's views within the broader academic discourse on Islamic education.

### **Result and Discussion**

#### **Biography of Nurcholish Madjid**

Nurcholish Madjid, whose nickname is Cak Nur, was born in the corner of a small village in Mojoanyar village, Jombang, East Java, precisely on March 17, 1939 AD and coincides with the 26th of Muharram 1358 H (Thaha, 2005). Actually, as a child, the eldest son of H. Abdul Madjid and Hj. Fathonah had the name Abdul Malik (Servant of the King), changing his name to Nurcholish Madjid when he was 6 years old. It is said that when he was still "small" he immediately doubled his education. In the morning he went to SR, and in the afternoon he studied at *Madrrasah al-Wathaniyah* (Gaus AF, 2010). Furthermore, he finished the People's School (SR) when he was 14 years old. Precisely in 1953, he was then enrolled by his father in the Rejoso Islamic Boarding School. Because it is located in Rejoso Village, Peterongan District. NU-based Islamic Boarding School which actually has the name Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School. Then Nurcholish entered the *Tsanawiyah* level school at the Islamic Junior High School (SMPI), Rejoso. In 1954.

In 1955 when he was 16 years old Nurcholish Madjid then moved and continued his education. That is at *Kulliyatul Mu'allimin Al-Islamiyah* (KMI) precisely at Pesantren Darus Salam or known as Pesantren Gontor, in Ponorogo. In this place he studied various basic sciences in Islamic teachings, especially his language skills, namely Arabic and English (Rahman, 2011). Meanwhile, Fachri Ali stated that his move from Pesantren Rejoso to Gontor also completed the process of his cultural and thought transition, because it is known that Gontor culturally and intellectually tends to be dominated by the influence of modern Islamic thought (Marwan, 2005).

After graduating from (KMI) Gontor, in 1960. In 1961 Nurcholish Madjid officially became a student of the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic Institute (IAIN), now the State Islamic University (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. by entering the Faculty of Adab, entering the Department of Arabic Literature and becoming the best graduate with a thesis entitled, "Al-Quran, 'Arabiyyun Lughotan Wa 'Alamiyyun Ma'nān" (The Qur'an is linguistically Arabic, in Meaning is Universal) in 1968, Nurcholish Madjid had the opportunity to continue his studies in Chicago (Idrus, 2004). After graduating from IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Nurcholish Madjid then studied political science and Islamic philosophy at the University of Chicago, 1978-1984, earning a Ph.D. in Islamic Philosophy (Islamic Thought, 1984). He graduated defending his

doctoral dissertation, entitled, "Ibn Taimiyaon Kalam and Falsafah: a Problem of Reason and Revelation in Islam." (Rahman, 2011).

### ***Nurcholish Madjid's Concept of Islamic Education***

In Nurcholish Madjid's view, as an adherent of the Islamic way of life (when someone adheres to the religion "Islam" then automatically he will apply the Islamic way of thinking). For him too, modernization is an obligation and even modernization is part of the teachings and calls from God Almighty to humans. The basis of this statement is that God has created the universe and its contents with *al-Haq* (the truth). Therefore, that modernization is an effort in achieving rationalization to gain knowledge and the way of thinking maximally aimed at the happiness of mankind as *khalifah fil ard*, which is why he said that modernization is a fundamental command of God. It is further explained that modernization can also be said as thinking and working according to fitrah or *sunnatullah* (Divine Law) which is *haq* (because, nature is *haq*) (Saihu, 2021).

The principle in ideal Islamic Education for him can be measured from the education system, whether the system can form a liberal mindset; freeing the thinking of students, namely the quality of intellectualism, because it is one of the indications that can lead humans to two basic things that are interrelated, namely 1) Measuring the quality of self from conventional / traditional values and then updating it with the aim of finding new values that can better describe how the future is based on al-Sunnah. (2) Having a da'wah purpose with the intention of disseminating the value of Islamic teachings and the development of science and technology. This means that both must indeed have a balanced role between traditional and modern understanding. Because traditional is very important for the preservation of Islamic traditions, then it can also be used as a transfer of religious knowledge as well as the creation of the next generation of scholars. The modern role is to serve the people and as a center for developing the quality of human resources in the community (Musyrifin, 2016).

Nurcholish Madjid in Musyrifin (2016) formulates the objectives of Islamic Education divided into four things, namely: (1) The glory of responsibility as *khalifah* is given to humans because humans have a mind that can be used to seek knowledge and to be used in seeking the truth and doing good. (2) General goals, knowledge, wisdom and emotions are inseparable. They all have an influence on each other. For him, someone who has knowledge will not solely lead other humans to salvation. In fact, knowledge will be good if it is subject to human nature. Similarly, emotions will only be controlled when controlled by knowledge. Therefore, Nurcholish Madjid wants to convey that being guided by scientific discoveries is part of *sunnatullah*. (3) For Nurcholish Madjid, understanding the nature of himself as a human being and then contemplating what his purpose is in this world is very important. For him, faith is not only related to Allah. But also, to fellow human beings and realized in good deeds and morals, not just stuck in the heart. (4) The temporary goal of Islamic education according to him is as simple as when discussing the issue of teaching and learning models about religion in college, for him in college is no longer taught basic things about basic religious knowledge, because it has been passed since elementary, junior high and senior high school. According to him, higher education should have a vision to produce influential Muslim scientists, so that the learning material needs to be improved.

### ***Nurcholish Madjid's Concept of Critical Islamic Education***

To analyze the Concept of Critical Islamic Education in the Perspective of Nurcholish Madjid, we can start with several approaches, including: Critical-deconstructive approach and Humanistic-antopocentric approach. In addition, Nurcholish Madjid's thoughts that tend to be liberal such as his ideas on Secularization, Democracy and Pluralism can be said to be the

concept of Critical Islamic Education which is basically inseparable from the teachings of the Quran and Hadith.

Critical-deconstructive approach, for Nurcholish Madjid, truth is not something that is fixed and certain but truth is static and constantly changing, except for the truth in the Quran. Therefore, the interpretation of truth is a continuous search process, because it is not final. Factors in determining truth can be affected and influence each other as time and space pass. Therefore, it is not absolute and it is very possible that there is room for vacancies to be criticized again to find the truth again with a new meaning that is fresher and more advanced (Janah, 2017).

The Humanistic-anthropocentric approach of Nurcholish Madjid's thought always prioritizes the dignity of humanity. In the end, religion must defend humans by looking at their humanity rather than seeing what their religion is or who their god is. In his thinking, using a humanitarian perspective approach makes religion more grounded and easily accepted, not limited to doctrines. In another sense for him theocentrism must be harmonized with anthropocentrism. Man will achieve his perfect personality if he focuses his life relationship on God. The focus of this transcendental orientation can be said to be the frame of anthropocentrism (Idrus, 2004).

In defending human dignity, it is sometimes necessary to put aside religious matters because sometimes the two are often contradictory. In his view, humanity is universal, so that human beings are equal to each other, without differentiating between ethnicity, religion, race and culture. Actually, applying a humanitarian approach is in line with efforts to "liberate" humans, because basically religion was created for the benefit of humans and not for the benefit of religion itself. Indeed, humanity and divinity are like a coin whose two sides are different but united (Shofwan, 2022).

### ***Democratic Islamic Education***

Nurcholish Madjid says that Islam and democracy are different. For him, Islam comes from God, while democracy is obtained through human thinking. Democracy does not necessarily materialize just like that, to achieve a quality democratic system must take a long journey. Therefore, the process that needs to be considered first is democratization. Nurcholish has another view regarding democratization, for him the democratization process will technically lead to a fair, clean and honest government. As for implementing it, it can be through alliances or the formation of a political coalition with people who pay attention to democracy, so that they will get an open attitude. Although openness of attitude is the goal, he still does not forget the highest essence of the goal itself, namely an attitude of mutual respect and tolerance, because for what if you have achieved openness but still cannot carry out the essence of the diversity of the Indonesian nation (Naim, 2015)

The following are the basic principles of Nurcholish Madjid's Democratic perspective to be applied in the world of education, namely: (1) *Shura* is a principle that is carried out jointly in deciding something (2) *Al-'is* means that when enforcing the law in state regulations it is done wisely and fairly. (3) *Al-Amanah* is a sense of trust in others (4) *Al-Mas'uliyah* is an attitude of responsibility. (5) *Al-Hurriyyah* is the right to human freedom, but as long as it is done in a wise and prudent way by considering *al-akhlaq al-karimah* as an effort to achieve *al-amr bi-'l-ma'ruf wa an-nahy 'an al-'munkar*, if that is done, then the government does not have the authority to silence it (Hawi, 2019)

In the view of Nurcholish Madjid in (Hawi, 2019), the goal of democratic education has three important interrelated components, namely: the existence of togetherness, will trigger a change, and improve the development of education. First, togetherness, in this sense is the need for teachers to provide and strive for every opportunity or opportunity for students to be able

to participate fully and together in the process of learning activities, from this process it will have a positive impact on students at least he can express his ideas, and there are no students who each other feel the most dominant alone, because in this togetherness students have the same rights in education. From this statement, there is no high and low, superior or inferior, stupid and smart, or other things that lead to arrogance, selfishness, or inferiority during the learning process.

Second, Change, Islamic education should continue to make changes towards a better quality of education. One indicator to achieve this change is based on shaping the character of students first, by equipping skills that will make students strong-positive. Another indicator that can create significant change is by applying revolutionary, free, progressive and quality knowledge. So that in the development of the realm of knowledge does not continue to maintain existing dogmas, but it is also necessary to have new horizons and ideas so that students are not frozen in stagnant space and time, so that they are expected to be more able to face the challenges of modernization and globalization, and are qualified in the field of science and technology.

Third, the development of education, according to him Islamic education needs to be present in people's lives, by paying attention to existing problems such as feuds between ethnicities, races, religions and cultures. At least when present in real community life, it is hoped that Islamic education can provide solutions, so that the problems found in the field can be minimized. Therefore, this is where the grand design is needed to build the quality of Islamic education that is sensitive to the problems found in society.

#### ***Pluralist-based Islamic Education***

According to Nurcholish Madjid, Pancasila is the basic framework of the Indonesian nation in forming a pluralist society. This basic foundation is the reason that every problem will be resolved quickly, because the Indonesian people have an ideology that has been determined together (Setiawan, 2019). Furthermore, he also said that Islam also teaches pluralism, it has been mentioned in the Qur'an that Islam also provides an understanding of religious plurality. In this teaching it is emphasized that all religions are given the freedom to develop, but it clearly has risks and these risks are returned to the adherents of each religion. This kind of thing can be interpreted as a hope for all existing religions to live in harmony, because in essence all religions have the same goal, namely: submitting oneself to God Almighty (N. Madjid, 2000).

While the internal pluralism of Islam itself in Madjid's view, since the Medina period, Islam has been formed as a diverse plural community ranging from tribes, ethnicities and groups. However, the plurality of Islam does not concern the matter of divinity and faith, it occurs naturally, the background of the differences that occur is their own personal problems, which have existed since the time of their ancestors. This difference makes it possible to deny the existence of unfavorable primordial remnants such as heredity, regionalism, and other socio-cultural factors (Abidin, 2014)

Based on this, the role of religious education is very important in eradicating religious exclusivity in Indonesia. Because education is the most effective place in an effort to implement changes in humanitarian and religious values to students. The problem of Islamic education has been caused by the fact that it is still too rigid and centralized. This statement was born because the Islamic education system still requires all to be uniform and dictates all needs in the teaching and learning process (Fihrisi, 2014). In Islamic education, humans are recognized as a whole and balanced. Therefore, Islamic education is expected to have a universal influence (Muhammad, 2010). That way it can lead someone to form a more "colorful" complex and open attitude. Nurcholish Madjid has a view that the value of pluralism is the basis of ontology

and axiology in developing the construction of Islamic education that can realize its goals. So that it becomes the main idea for all ideas about efforts to improve the quality of Islamic education with a broad meaning (Rosida et al., 2021)

After understanding the above explanation, Islamic education tends to prioritize the individual's relationship with his or her god rather than focusing on the individual's relationship with other individuals. This reveals differences in basic assumptions and philosophies regarding how to obtain this salvation. Islamic education seems natural if students are not sensitive to the suffering, difficulties and fate, experienced by others, to achieve Islamic education that prioritizes pluralism in addition to being concerned with changes in the material, but also must be transformed during the teaching and learning process. The old approach must be changed with a new style that is more constructive and flowing while still not forgetting the essence of learning, namely by not ignoring the differences of students. Therefore, the pattern of uniformity must be abandoned in order to maintain the uniqueness of each learner, and let them grow with their own character. The approaches to forming a pluralist education pattern according to the view of (Fihrisi, 2014) are as follows.

First, the historical approach, the teaching and learning process in Islamic education educators must convey the material thoroughly to its roots: related to the content, *asbabun nuzul/asbabul wurud*, when, where and the wisdom of the verse or hadith. This historical approach is a crew step to open up differences in opinion, so that they can be implemented openly. And what needs to be prioritized is that history is presented as a fact, not merely something that must be followed and justified. If it is good, then say good, and if it is bad then say bad, this is an open, brave attitude and tests the honesty of an educator. Then students should be given the freedom to fully assess, there should be no intervention from educators because the educator's job here is limited to conveying information.

Second, the sociological approach, this approach is based on the attitudes and environment of society, by paying attention to the social symptoms that occur. It is hoped that Islamic education is able to reflect on the mistakes that have occurred in the past, so as to provide a new idea construction, and contextualize it in the Islamic education system. This in Islamic terms can be said as a form of *ijtihad* (renewal or innovation). If this is implemented, of course the materials in Islamic education will be progressive and have a strong argumentative basis because what is taught is based on the development of the surrounding community environment, which can be felt together by students and educators.

Third, the cultural approach, this approach aims to provide students with an understanding of what is actually a tradition and which one is pure. This issue is motivated by the overlapping and too difficult to distinguish between Islam and traditions in Islam. In this approach, it can encourage students to be able to sort and choose which ones are called Islamic teachings and traditions in Islam, therefore students are expected to have an attitude of respect for different traditions and have empathy to maintain good traditions and determine attitudes based on wisdom if there are traditions that do not need to be followed continuously.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored Nurcholish Madjid's perspectives on Critical Islamic Education, emphasizing his conceptualization of Islamic education as a dynamic, critical, and inclusive process. By examining Madjid's philosophical frameworks, the study highlights the integration of traditional Islamic values with modern thought, the deconstruction of absolute truths, and the promotion of human dignity within the educational context. His work encourages a form of education that is not only grounded in religious principles but also open to modernization, democratic values, and a pluralistic society. This conclusion underscores the importance of

balancing tradition with modernity to cultivate intellectual and moral development among students in Islamic educational institutions.

Madjid's educational philosophy provides a profound critique of static, dogmatic interpretations of Islamic teachings. He advocates for an education that empowers students to engage critically with knowledge, encourages a progressive outlook, and fosters a sense of social responsibility. His concept of Critical Islamic Education serves as a tool for reconciling Islamic thought with the demands of a modern, democratic, and pluralistic world, making it relevant in contemporary educational discourse.

While this study has provided valuable insights into Nurcholish Madjid's thoughts on Critical Islamic Education, it is not without limitations. First, the research primarily relies on qualitative data from Madjid's own works, which may not fully capture the nuances of his ideas as interpreted by other scholars or practitioners. The study's scope was also limited to library research, meaning that empirical data from educational settings that have implemented Madjid's ideas were not explored. Additionally, the study focused mainly on Madjid's theoretical contributions, without delving deeply into practical applications in educational institutions, which may affect the broader understanding of the feasibility and impact of his educational philosophy.

Future research could expand on this study by examining how Madjid's concepts of Critical Islamic Education have been implemented in various educational settings, particularly in Islamic schools and universities. Empirical studies that assess the impact of these educational practices on students' intellectual and moral development would provide valuable insights into the practical implications of his philosophy. Additionally, comparative studies between Madjid's approach and other contemporary Islamic educators could highlight commonalities and differences, further enriching the discourse on modern Islamic education. Researchers could also explore the challenges faced by educators when integrating Madjid's ideas on democracy, pluralism, and critical thinking into the curriculum, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between educational theory and practice.

### **Conflict of interests**

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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