



Research Article

The Intellectual Transformation of Nurcholish Madjid: From Ideological Apologetics to Ethical Universalism

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Abstract

This study examines the intellectual evolution of Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005) through a two-phase analytical framework: the early apologetic-ideological period (1968–1986) and the mature ethical-universal period (1990–2004). Set against the political constraints of Indonesia's New Order and the Reformasi transition, the paper traces Madjid's movement from provocative polemics against political Islam toward an inclusive, hermeneutically grounded vision of Islam as a civic and democratic value system. Drawing on primary texts, historical correspondence, and institutional archives, this article demonstrates how Madjid redefined Indonesian Islam not as a state ideology but as an open source of public ethics for a modern pluralistic society. By synthesizing his theoretical shift alongside its institutional expression in the Paramadina Foundation, this study provides a unified perspective on how dialectical tensions in his early career consolidated into a lasting paradigm of civil Islam.

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INTRODUCTION

The intellectual trajectory of Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005), affectionately known as Cak Nur, offers a critical lens for understanding how Indonesian Islamic thought transcended formal political power following Sukarno's fall in 1968. Under the authoritarian New Order regime, formal expressions of political Islam—particularly the legacy of the Masyumi party—were systematically marginalized and viewed by the state security apparatus as threats to national stability (M. A. Abdullah, 2021; Brehm, 2022; Hasan, 1987; Rosidi, 2022; Yusuf Adan et al., 2023). In response to this repressive environment, a new generation of Muslim intellectuals sought to rearticulate Islam's societal role, striving to align religious faith with a modern, pluralistic state based on Pancasila. As a pivotal figure in this movement, Madjid departed from the imperative to establish an Islamic state or to formalize sharia (Aljunied, 2021; Kersten, 2009; Saputra et al., 2024; Tho Seeth, 2023). He posited that Islam must instead function as an open source of public ethics and civic value.

Madjid's introduction of "secularization" (*sekularisasi*) in his controversial 1970 lecture initially triggered fierce backlash from conservative figures and senior Masyumi leaders (Madjid, 1987). Nevertheless, this provocative entry point marked a decisive epistemological rupture in Indonesian Islamic discourse. Rather than denoting religious abandonment, the term catalyzed Madjid's intellectual evolution. Over time, his early apologetic-ideological reformism transformed into a mature neo-modernist framework centered on universal human values, theological reconstruction, and pluralistic ethics (Madjid, 1998; Rahman, 1982). This trajectory raises a fundamental historical question: How did Madjid's early confrontational polemics against political formalism systematically dialecticize into a consolidated framework of ethical universalism and civil Islam?

Existing scholarship has examined various facets of Madjid's thought, including state-religion dynamics (Effendy, 1998), liberal democratic discourses (Barton, 1999), responses to New Order modernization (Hasan, 1987), and broader neo-modernist themes (Ardiansyah & Alkosibati, 2024; Aziz, 1999; Nahdroh, 1999; Ridwan, 2002; Sufyanto, 2001). However, these studies frequently analyze his ideas in isolation—focusing either on his early political provocations or his later civil society initiatives. This article bridges these fragmented perspectives by proposing a unified two-phase

analytical model. By analyzing the dialectical continuity between his early polemics and mature scholarship, this paper highlights how initial ideological conflicts were methodologically transformed into enduring institutional and civic paradigms.

METHOD

This study employs a historical-critical method combined with contextual hermeneutic text analysis to trace the epistemological evolution of Nurcholish Madjid's thought between 1968 and 2004 (Burgos-Videla et al., [2025](#); Lesniewski et al., [2024](#)). Primary sources were selected and categorized across two distinct chronological phases: first, the Formative Apologetic-Ideological Phase (1968–1986). The primary texts include Madjid's seminal papers (e.g., *Modernisasi Adalah Rasionalisasi Bukan Baratisasi* [1968]), his foundational manifesto for the Islamic Students Association (*Nilai-Nilai Dasar Perjuangan*, NDP HMI), public lectures on secularization (1970), and his private political epistolary exchange with senior Masyumi leader Mohamad Roem (1972–1973, published in *Menyambung Mata Rantai yang Hilang*); second, the Mature Ethical-Universal Phase (1990–2004). Primary texts focus on his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago under Fazlur Rahman, his comprehensive essays collected in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, transcripts from the Paramadina Religious Study Club (*Klub Kajian Agama*, KKA), and political reform platforms issued during his 2003–2004 presidential bid under the Association for Rebuilding Indonesia (*Perkumpulan Membangun Kembali Indonesia*, PMKI).

The analytical process followed three systematic steps. They are, first, external and Internal Source Critique: External critique verified the textual authenticity and chronological accuracy of archival correspondence and lecture transcripts. Internal critique evaluated conceptual coherence, tracking shifts in terminology, argumentative logic, and theological hermeneutics. Second, contextual Hermeneutics. Primary texts were contextualized within their socio-political milieus, specifically contrasting the authoritarian constraints of the New Order regime with the open democratic landscape of the post-1998 Reformasi era. Third, source Triangulation: Madjid's writings were cross-examined with contemporary counter-arguments from Masyumi elders (Mohammad Natsir, HAMKA), conservative Islamic media editorials (*Media Dakwah*), and critical assessments by contemporary intellectuals (e.g., Rasjidi, Adian Husaini, Daud Rasyid).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Phase of the Young Cak Nur (1968–1986): Ideological Apologetics

The initial period of Cak Nur's intellectual journey, often designated as the "Young Cak Nur" phase (Barton, [1999](#), p. 160), was driven by an urgent desire for internal Islamic reform. In his groundbreaking 1968 essay, *Modernization is Rationalization, not Westernization*, Madjid argued that secularization was essential to desacralize worldly socio-political structures and liberate Islamic doctrine from historical accretions (Madjid, [1987](#), p. 254; Pamuntjak-Djohan & Santoso, [2000](#)). However, his explicit deployment of the term "secularization" in 1970 sparked intense backlash from established Muslim leaders, notably former Masyumi figures Mohammad Natsir and HAMKA, who interpreted his proposition as an uncritical endorsement of Western secular philosophy (Nair, [2022](#); Rosidi, [2022](#)).

Rather than silencing him, this conflict granted Madjid the intellectual momentum to formulate a critique of political Islam. Distancing himself from institutional struggles, he declared that "Islam is not an ideology, but a source of values" (Munawar-Rachman, [2019](#)). This shift established his rejection of an Islamic state, contending that genuine reform required intellectual rationalization rather than legalistic formalization of sharia through state mechanisms. Muhammad Kamal Hassan observed that the Young Cak Nur's reformist movement represented one of the most radical developments in contemporary Indonesian Islamic thought (Hasan, [1987](#), p. 144). Reflecting on HAMKA's response to Madjid, Hassan noted;

HAMKA seems to lament the change in Nurcholish's thought. This change occurred due to the extraordinary flattery and welcome he received from his peers during his student days and the early days of his reform. According to HAMKA, these young admirers were uncritical supporters who inflated Nurcholish Madjid's ego and led him to turn his back on 'the elders' (Hasan, [1987](#), p. 154).

This reflection illustrates the generational rupture between senior Masyumi leaders, who viewed reform through the prism of institutional loyalty, and the younger generation seeking intellectual autonomy from established political dogmas. The Young Cak Nur posits that the progress of the Muslim community does not lie in the formalization of Sharia within the state apparatus. Instead, progress stems from the enhancement of rationality and knowledge. He critiques religious traditions that remain overly bound to law and symbolic *fiqh*, showing a tendency to overlook the substantial values inherent in Islam. In his early-1970s articles, he argued that modernization is not a threat to faith; rather, it deepens the ethical dimensions of Islam within social realities. As he stated, "modernization is rationalization, not westernization." Furthermore, the young Cak Nur rejected the notion of an Islamic state as an ideological formalization of Islam. He vehemently criticized leaders of Masyumi, such as Natsir and Roem, whom he believed continued to idealize a state model based on Sharia (Porter, [2004](#)).

HAMKA himself, in one of his writings, "The Disturbing Doctrine," indirectly addressed the apologetic accusations against The Young Cak Nur. He contended that the establishment of an Islamic state and the various movements advocating for the implementation of Sharia are not instances of apologetics, defensive posturing, or self-promotion driven by admiration for Western advancements. Instead, the phenomena of burgeoning Islamic movements in Muslim nations, such as the emergence of the Islamic State of Pakistan and the *Ikhwanul Muslimun*, are evidence that Islamic thinkers are reclaiming their identity after enduring nearly two centuries of internal pressure. With a hint of cynicism, HAMKA asserted that the apologetic critique was misguided, arguing that the true apologia should be directed toward those dazzled and impressed, often resorting to "flattery" toward Western intellectuals. He hoped that "in our country, individuals may liberate themselves from the outdated scholarly paradigms. They presume to know everything and engage in modern thinking, while in reality, they have fallen far behind it" (HAMKA, [1982](#)). HAMKA's response underscores how the older generation perceived the critique of ideological formalization not as progress, but as an apologetic surrender to Western intellectual hegemony.

In a discussion at his home on 1 June 1972, Mohammad Natsir described,

Nurcholish Madjid as "like a child of his own." According to Hasan's account, Natsir longed for Nurcholish when he had not seen Him for a while. Much like HAMKA, Natsir recognized Nurcholish's significant potential, believing he would eventually emerge as a prominent figure in the Muslim community. However, he expressed disappointment over Nurcholish's recent advocacy for "reform ideas" in collaboration with leaders from the Indonesian Muslim Students Association (HMI). While Natsir was not overly disturbed by their attempts to separate from the older generation, he acknowledged that such a divide would naturally occur when "we, the older generation, are no longer around. His primary concern was their tendency to drift away from the "ideals of faith and the Muslim community (Hasan, [1987](#), pp. 155–156).

Natsir's paternal disappointment highlights the deep anxiety among senior leaders that depoliticizing Islam would undermine the political solidarity of the Indonesian Muslim ummah. In his correspondence with Roem, the Young Cak Nur characterized pursuing an Islamic state as a "psychological compensation for past political defeats" (Madjid, [1987](#), p. 255; Pamuntjak-Djohan & Santoso, [2000](#)). He expressed,

Some might say I have an obsession with Islam and Politics. This obsession has led me to want to reach out to Mr. Roem, as I feel connected to him on many related matters. This alignment is showcased in Mr. Roem's article, 'There Is No Islamic State,' published in *Panji Masyarakat* No. 386 on 11 February, which inspired me to write this letter" (Pamuntjak-Djohan & Santoso, [2000](#), p. 14).

Facing criticism for his stance, the Young Cak Nur encountered pressure from former mentors. His title, "Young Natsir," was revoked, and he was labeled a foreign agent undermining Islam (Hasan, [1987](#), p. 154). The strong reactions from senior Islamic political figures stemmed from their fears that The Young Cak Nur's ideas could disrupt traditional beliefs. Some even called him a "wayward intellectual" due to his willingness to critique his mentors. He was deemed too aligned with the New Order government for indirectly supporting the depoliticization of Islam. Nevertheless, the Young Cak Nur argued that this approach was vital for protecting Islam from political exploitation, asserting that

Islam would flourish if it were not tied to political parties, hence advocating for an “Islam yes, Islamic Party no” standpoint.

Despite ongoing criticism, the Young Cak Nur remained steadfast in his intellectual approach. He refused to abandon his use of the term secularization, viewing it as crucial for understanding the relationship between religion and the secular world in a balanced manner. In his letter to Mohamad Roem, he emphasized that without a healthy understanding of secularization, Islam would be perceived primarily as a tool of power rather than a source of moral guidance.

Cak Nur Muda remarked:

It is indeed regrettable that, in articulating these ideas, I employed contemporary terms such as secularization—a term which, etymologically speaking, remains unstable and continues to spark controversy to this day. For this reason, I have previously clarified that one of the intended meanings of secularization is to 'ground' religious teachings so that they become connected to real life and relevant within specific spatial and temporal contexts. The same applies to the term renewal, even though it refers solely to the renewal of thought, not to the renewal of religion itself, which would be impossible. Despite well-known hadith on *tajdid* (renewal), the term carries negative connotations for certain groups and, therefore, perhaps should be relinquished. It seems more appropriate to emphasize a scientific approach to understanding religion rather than the idea of renewal per se. Through such an approach, we hope to discern what constitutes 'authentic' Islam and what elements are, in fact, products of socio-historical development—after all, Islam has undergone historical evolution over fourteen centuries. Another shortcoming I must acknowledge here is the often-negative orientation of our approach, characterized by extensive critique yet lacking in constructive alternatives. Whether successful or not, our intention has always been to offer constructive criticism, which is necessary in any democratic and open society" (Pamuntjak-Djohan & Santoso, 2000, pp. 19-22.). Concerning these recent matters, I promised Ibu I would apologize to Pak Natsir. I fulfilled this promise in my 1976 letter, addressing various other issues (Pamuntjak-Djohan & Santoso, 2000, p. 72).

This admission marks a crucial tactical shift in Madjid's thought, acknowledging that provocative terminology had obscured his primary goal of connecting Islamic ethics to practical social realities. Roem's conciliatory reply demonstrated that while the older generation maintained their faith in party politics, they welcomed dialogue that preserved Islamic moral unity across generational divides. Mohamad Roem, representing the collective voice of Cak Nur Muda's mentors, responded:

Furthermore, the correspondence between you and me, with each of us writing two letters, has attracted considerable attention from a broader audience. Some have requested to borrow the letters for photocopying, while others received copies directly from me. Although the exchange between us was never intended for public dissemination, it has, in reality, been read with great interest by many of our colleagues. I felt a sense of gratitude upon receiving a letter from Brother Imaduddin, who expressed his pleasure that a dialogue between you and me had finally been initiated. In Islam, acknowledging one's mistakes is a commendable act. I am confident that those affected by your errors will forgive them, no matter how grave they may be. Have you and your colleagues not also made mistakes toward me? I have touched upon this point in our correspondence. When you wrote, 'Islam? Yes. Islamic political parties? No,' I had a spontaneous inner reaction—one that I neither wrote nor voiced to you at the time. My response was: 'Islam? Yes. And Islamic political parties? Also, yes.' In my own life, Islam is my guiding principle, while an Islamic political party is a platform through which I strive and contribute (Pamuntjak-Djohan & Santoso, 2000, pp. 95–96).

The Late Phase of Cak Nur (1990–2004): Ethical-Universal Islam

In contrast to the polemics of his early period, Cak Nur's mature intellectual phase (1990–2004) was characterized by systematic, hermeneutically grounded scholarship. Developed during his doctoral studies under Fazlur Rahman at the University of Chicago, this phase shifted from criticizing political formalism to constructing a neo-modernist theology. By explicitly distinguishing normative Islam (timeless divine revelation) from historical Islam (contextual human interpretation), Madjid moved beyond slogans like "secularization" toward a framework of ethical universalism and inclusive spirituality (Hidayatullah, 2000; Rahman, 1982).

In this mature phase, Madjid conceptualized pluralism not as cultural relativism, but as a theological imperative (*sunnatullah*). He defined Islam in its literal sense—as wholehearted submission

to God—arguing that true faith transcends religious exclusivism (Munawar-Rachman, 2019). He grounded this vision nationally by drawing an explicit parallel between Pancasila and the historical Medina Charter (*Misaq al-Madinah*) (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 3446). Just as the Medina Charter established a civic community among diverse tribes, Pancasila provided a shared moral platform uniting diverse religious communities in a modern democratic state. This framework enabled Indonesian Muslims to embrace pluralism without sacrificing their religious identity, establishing the theoretical bedrock for "cultural Islam".

Table 1. Cak Nur dynamic's thought

Analytical Dimension	Early Phase: Ideological Apologetics (1968–1986)	Late Phase: Ethical Universalism (1990–2004)
Primary Focus	Deconstructing political formalism & Islamic state models.	Constructing inclusive theology & civil society ethics.
Key Terminology	"Secularization", "Rationalization", "Islam Yes, Islamic Party No".	"Ethical Universalism", "Kalimah Sawa'", "Civil Islam", "Pancasila as Medina Charter".
Hermeneutic Method	Provocative critique & desecralization of political structures.	Contextual Qur'anic exegesis, <i>masalah</i> , & historical-critical distinction.
Institutional Strategy	Student activism (HMI manifestos, NDP) & epistolary debates.	Paramadina Foundation, public lectures (KKA), PMKI civic platforms.
View of Pluralism	Functional necessity for national modernization.	Intrinsic theological imperative (<i>sunnatullah</i>) & civic mandate.

Source: Composed from Cak Nur's works

Cak Nur also emphasized the importance of universal ethics as a framework acceptable to a pluralistic society. In this phase, he became more composed and methodical, deliberately distancing himself from controversial terms such as "secularization." Despite ongoing criticism from groups like Media Dakwah and conservative figures such as Adian Husaini, Cak Nur remained steadfast in formulating Islam as a moral force in a pluralistic society rather than as an ideological-political project. One of the most significant controversies surrounding his ideas emerged in 1992 and persisted in subsequent years. This debate focused on defining Islam as an attitude of surrender to God (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 102) and the pursuit of common ground through the concept of *kalimah sawa'*

For Cak Nur, Islam was not merely a collection of doctrines or political symbols. It was a way of life—a wholehearted submission to the divine. He rejected exclusivist views that claimed absolute truth for a single religion. On the contrary, he believed other religions were also part of the divine order (*sunnatullah*). For this reason, he referred to Islam as an "open source of spirituality" (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 4198). He viewed religious diversity as a reality that is to be accepted, not denied. He consistently rejected interreligious confrontation in numerous lectures and writings, favoring a dialogical approach that fostered mutual understanding and enrichment. From this perspective, his conviction that Islam in Indonesia could become a civilizational force arose (Madjid, 2000a, 2000b). Indonesian Islam, he believed, could offer valuable contributions to both the Western and Arab worlds. Inclusivism thus became the cornerstone of Cak Nur's Islamic thought, strengthening his commitment to interfaith dialogue (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 3891).

Cak Nur's vision of pluralism was not confined to theoretical discourse; he also translated it into a national context. He interpreted Pancasila—the foundational ideology of Indonesia—as embodying universal values akin to those found in the Medina Charter (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 2077). For him, the Medina Charter was a historical document that governed peaceful coexistence among religious communities (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 3095). Through this lens, Cak Nur provided a theological foundation for Muslims in Indonesia to accept Pancasila. This foundation allowed Indonesia not to be an Islamic state per se, but one that embodied the ethical values of Islam. In his view, Pancasila represented the meeting point between religious and national values. In one of his essays, he described it as a convergence of the universal values of religion and nationalism. This perspective bolstered his concept of cultural Islam—an organic expression of faith that integrated seamlessly with national life without seeking dominance in a multicultural society (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 2015).

Nonetheless, Cak Nur's inclusive and pluralist stance attracted harsh criticism from conservative Islamic factions. Throughout the 1990s, reactions to his ideas remained ambivalent. On the one hand, he was highly respected among young intellectuals and civil society groups. On the other

hand, conservative circles remained suspicious of his intentions and ideological orientation. Some accused him of endorsing Western agendas and of being overly accommodating of democratic values. However, Cak Nur's resilience in the face of these challenges, his unwavering commitment to his beliefs, and his clear articulation of his principles inspired many. He rejected these allegations, asserting that democracy was not a Western value but a principle inherent in Islamic *shura* (consultation) (Munawar-Rachman, [2019](#), p. 115).

Editorials in *Media Dakwah*—particularly in its May 2001, February 2002, and June 2003 issues—through figures like Hartono Ahmad Jaiz, openly rejected his ideas. In addition to *Media Dakwah*, two prominent hardline Muslim intellectuals, Adian Husaini (Husaini, [2002](#)) and also criticized Cak Nur's Islamic thought was Daud Rasyid (Rasyid, [2002](#), pp. 53–54, 79–80). Cak Nur knew preserving Islam's relevance required a methodological reorientation in interpreting religious texts. He introduced the concept of social hermeneutics in Islamic exegesis, particularly concerning the synthesis of culture, economy, and politics in Indonesia (Munawar-Rachman, [2019](#), p. 2697)). This approach emphasized situating Qur'anic verses within their social context and ethical objectives (Munawar-Rachman, [2019](#), p. 201). He also advocated for a contextual rather than a literal reading of the Qur'an (Munawar-Rachman, [2019](#), p. 1570). Through these contributions, he emerged as a pioneer of social exegesis in contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse. His frequent citations of the principle of *maslahah* (public interest) as a foundation for interpreting sharia further underlined his pragmatic approach (Munawar-Rachman, [2019](#), p. 929).

The influence of Cak Nur's thoughts became even more pronounced toward the end of his life, especially after the fall of Suharto's regime. He became a key reference point in national forums, particularly in discussions on Islam and democracy in Indonesia. His ideas, once met with skepticism, have become a beacon of hope for the future of Indonesian Islam. Numerous NGOs and Islamic research centers drew inspiration from his vision of an inclusive and tolerant Islam. The cultural Islamic discourse he pioneered in the 1980s eventually gained mainstream acceptance in the 2000s, marking a significant moment in Indonesia's social and political history. He concluded his intellectual journey by firmly positioning Islam as a cultural rather than a coercive force. Cak Nur recognized that Islamic reform was a long-term endeavor that required sustained educational and cultural efforts. In his final speeches, he frequently emphasized the need for Islam to serve as a source of mercy—uniting rather than dividing communities (Munawar-Rachman, [2019](#), p. 134). These legacy cements his status as a transformative figure in the intellectual history of Indonesian Islam. His ideas remain highly relevant amid the ongoing challenges of globalization, fundamentalism, and democratic crisis, offering a hopeful vision for the future.

The “Older Cak Nur” has actively fostered an intellectual space that transcends ideological barriers, exemplified by his work at the Paramadina Foundation. It served as an institutional embodiment of his ethical-universal vision. The Paramadina Foundation was established on 31 October 1986, in Jakarta. The name “Paramadina” carries dual meanings. First, it derives from the Sanskrit term “parama,” meaning “to prioritize,” and the Arabic word “dina,” which means “our religion.” Thus, Paramadina signifies the prioritization (or exaltation) of our religion (Islam). Second, Paramadina can be parsed into “Para” and “Madina(h).” “Para” means pro or supportive, while “Madina,” derived from Arabic, refers to a city. Additionally, “Madinah” shares meaning with “tamaddun,” which signifies civilization or refined character. Therefore, Paramadina serves as a gathering place and a realization of a civilized and cultured society (Rachman, [2010](#), p. 87; Siraj et al., [2020](#), pp. 13–14).

Paramadina functions as an independent, open, and cultural organization. Its mission is to unite educated Muslims in Indonesia to develop a cognitive framework that harmonizes Islamic values and ideals with modernity. In the dynamic context of Indonesian Muslim society, responding to global developments requires a creative minority, which is imperative for continued relevance. “In an increasingly modern world, and at a time when Muslims are in search of direction, what is needed is a small group, but one that is intellectually intensive. I aim to achieve that with the Paramadina Foundation,” Cak Nur stated (Madjid, [1998](#), p. 310). For him, Paramadina represents a long-term investment in humanity—a form of human investment—with the expectation of fostering democratization in Indonesia.

Paramadina's programs initially commenced with a routine religious study session held on the third Friday of each month, known as the Religious Study Club (Klub Kajian Agama, KKA). This study session deviates from conventional religious gatherings typically found in mosques. The discussions cover worship and political, economic, and cultural issues related to Islamic teachings. The KKA often convenes in luxurious hotels or the Universitas Paramadina Mulya Jakarta auditorium, employing a discussion-based format. In addition to the KKA, Paramadina organizes Academic Circles and Student Circles through course packages. These courses include four modules: Introduction to Islamic Studies, *Insan Kamil*, the Biography of Muhammad the Messenger of Allah, and Introduction to the Study of the Quran (Editor, 1991). Moreover, Paramadina's commitment to human investment is further demonstrated by the Rahma Institution, which sells affordable meals, and by the establishment of SMU Madania and Universitas Paramadina Mulya, both of which offer educational opportunities typically accessible only to the upper-middle class or elite segments of society. Despite appearing elitist, Cak Nur responds,

It is indeed possible for such an impression to arise. However, this elitism is not an ideology but rather our methodology. The underlying principle is that society always forms a cone, with all segments requiring outreach. Historically, outreach has primarily targeted lower-middle-class demographics, leaving certain segments of society neglected. Therefore, addressing their needs, in our view, is a communal obligation (*fardu kifayah*), meaning there must be someone who undertakes this responsibility" (Madjid, 1998, p. 328).

During the Reform Movement of 1998, Cak Nur's name again became a topic of discussion in Indonesian society. He was among those who met with President Suharto at the time to urge his resignation, as the public had lost faith in the New Order's leadership. His presence during this critical moment demonstrated his commitment to the necessity of change. Through his writings in the *Fatsoen* column of *Tabloid Tekad*, he articulated numerous ideas concerning the formulation and perspectives on political, state, and religious reform, contributing meaningfully to the trajectory of the Reform era. As an intellectual with a relatively strong base of supporters, Cak Nur stepped forward as a presidential candidate in the post-Reform period. For him, Indonesia's ideal leader after Suharto's era should embody the principle of *primus inter pares* (the first among equals), meaning a leader who is not above the people but their representative and servant (Madjid, 1998, p. 12). These ideas further solidified his role as an influential Muslim intellectual in Indonesia and bolstered his confidence to participate as a candidate in the 2004 presidential election. He argued that the emergence of alternative presidential candidates outside Suharto's mold was a fundamental demand of the Reform movement (Madjid, 1998, pp. 73–74).

Cak Nur proposed ten key steps for Indonesia's improvement to support his presidential candidacy: Establishing good governance at all levels of state administration; Upholding the rule of law consistently and decisively; Implementing national reconciliation; Initiating economic reform by prioritizing grassroots productive development; Strengthening democratic institutions, including civil liberties—particularly press and academic freedom—and ensuring a clear division of authority among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; Enhancing national resilience and security by reinforcing the dignity, personnel, and institutions of the military (TNI) and police (Polri) within a democratic framework; Preserving national territorial integrity through cultural approaches, affirming diversity and unity, and promoting autonomous development; Equalizing and improving the quality of education across the archipelago; Achieving social justice for all citizens is a fundamental state objective; Taking an active role in global peacebuilding efforts. During the Golkar Party's Party's convention, Cak Nur formally presented these ten platforms (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 4887).

The public enthusiastically supported his candidacy and saw him as relatively untainted by corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN). However, the disparity between his values and the pragmatic stance of Golkar's elite ultimately led to his withdrawal as the party's presidential candidate. Nevertheless, Cak Nur remained committed to his candidacy by establishing the Association for the Rebuilding of Indonesia (Perkumpulan Membangun Kembali Indonesia, PMKI). Founded on 21 May 2003, this organization aimed to promote and advocate for its ten platforms to revitalize Indonesia. PMKI had representatives in 22 provinces across the country, with core activities including the study and dissemination of Cak Nur's platforms, as well as political education for citizens to encourage active

participation, emphasizing moral considerations in the process of national leadership transition (Nafis, [2014](#), pp. 202–206).

Dialectical Interaction: From Conflict to Consolidation

The evolution of Nurcholish Madjid's thought demonstrates a dialectical progression from early polemical confrontation to mature institutional consolidation. His early critiques of political formalism in the 1970s created necessary friction, forcing Indonesian Islamic discourse to confront the limitations of state-centric legalism. Through epistolary exchanges with senior leaders like Mohamad Roem, Madjid refined his methodology, shifting from provocative terminology ("secularization") to constructive concepts such as "desacralization of politics" and "civil Islam".

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Nurcholish Madjid engaged in intense intellectual conflicts with his ideological mentors, Mohammad Natsir and HAMKA. These conflicts originated from profound disagreements over the role of Islam in the state (Pamuntjak-Djohan & Santoso, [2000](#)). His mentors rejected Madjid's reformist approach, which they perceived as overly aggressive. However, through an eight-month correspondence with Mohamad Roem, Madjid recognized that his confrontational stance had provoked unnecessary resistance. This exchange served as a productive space for reconciliation, smoothing tensions with the older generation of Muslim leaders. The conflict between Madjid and Natsir was not merely ideological but also personal and generational. Madjid believed that the older generation of political Islam had failed to grasp the demands of modernity, remaining overly attached to the formalism of an Islamic state. Conversely, Natsir viewed Madjid's ideas as excessively fluid, threatening the foundational principles of the Islamic struggle since the colonial era. These tensions were reflected in their lengthy epistolary debates mediated by Mohamad Roem, which ultimately became a crucial space for negotiation. From this process, Madjid began refining his rhetorical approach while remaining steadfast in the substance of his reformist thought.

The impact of Madjid's ideas was profound and institutional, particularly in the ideological transformation of the Islamic Students Association (HMI) through his formulation of the Basic Values of Struggle (Nilai-Nilai Dasar Perjuangan, NDP), as well as the establishment of Paramadina Foundation, which served as an incubator for cultural Islamic thought. The NDP remains HMI's ideological reference to this day (Ali, [1998](#), p. xxii). Ahmad Wahib, a close associate of Madjid and a former HMI leader in Central Java, noted in his diary:

It must be remembered that at the time, the dominant thinking within HMI's central board starkly contrasted with the emerging ideas in Central Java and Yogyakarta. Nurcholish himself still understood Islam as a political system... The official reading material within HMI until 1969 was 'Modernization is rationalization, not Westernization.' Djohan and Manshur mocked all of this as 'Nurcholism.' Since the 1966 Solo Congress, Manshur had warned that 'Nurcholism' was replacing the teachings of the Pemimpin Besar Revolusi (Great Leader of the Revolution) (Effendi & Natsir, [1981](#), p. 156).

Fachry Ali, upon joining the HMI Ciputat branch, recounted his fascination with Madjid's intellectual style:

Here, I must candidly admit my admiration for this figure. In that setting, Cak Nur fluently cited Qur'anic verses and connected Islamic issues to the broader world with 'remarkably incisive' analytical prowess. Three key points must be emphasized. First was my fascination with Cak Nur: How could someone from IAIN [State Islamic Institute], a religious school often dismissed as provincial, possess such extensive knowledge of non-religious subjects? Second, his influence reshaped my perspective on my family's religious outlook, prompting me to challenge my father's thinking—he idolized Rasyidi—culminating in a heated 1974 debate that ended only when my mother pulled me away. Third and crucially, it solidified our collective resolve in Ciputat to advance the 'Nurcholish Madjid movement' (Ali, [1998](#), pp. xxxii–iii).

At the media level, Tempo magazine significantly amplifies Madjid's ideas (Ridwan, [2002](#)). However, the magazine's extensive coverage of his thought—framed within the narrative of Indonesia's Islamic revival—drew criticism from Muslim intellectuals such as Amien Rais and Hasbullah Bakry (Madjid, [1986](#)).

Humbly, Cak Nur articulated his objection as follows:

I respect their statement of objection, whatever its motives and background may be. Beyond its validity, this objection provides a stronger rationale for clarifying the core issue. In truth, if scrutinized very carefully, such an objection is unnecessary. When *Tempo* asked whether all [these developments] were the result of my efforts, I replied, 'I would very much like to claim this as my achievement.' My response was intended as a conditional statement, equivalent to the English expression, 'I wish I could claim...' As a conditional phrase, it inherently implies impossibility—specifically, the impossibility of attributing the Islamic revival solely to my efforts (Madjid, 1986).

Furthermore, Nurcholish Madjid inspired the formation of the Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal, JIL), though he did not lead it directly. JIL represented an extension of the reformist ideas he had championed since the 1970s (Husaini, 2002; Rachman, 2010). The emergence of JIL, spearheaded by Ulil Abshar Abdallah, cannot be disentangled from the intellectual influence of Nurcholish Madjid. JIL served as a practical application of Madjid's reformist thought from the 1970s, which advocated for the necessity of a liberal reformist movement (Madjid, 1987, p. 211). Although Cak Nur did not formally participate in JIL's activities, his moral support and contributions to the movement were undeniably significant. These intellectual networks and institutions facilitated the translation of his ideas into social and educational praxis, fostering civil society.

Nurcholish Madjid's contributions extended beyond academic discourse to the construction of an alternative Islamic narrative in Indonesia. He presented Islam not as an exclusive political doctrine but as a source of ethical values capable of addressing humanitarian and national challenges (Munawar-Rachman, 2019, p. 4147). Through intellectual and cultural channels, Madjid advanced a new paradigm of Islam that was locally relevant and globally resonant—a significant achievement in contemporary Indonesian Islamic thought (M. A. Abdullah, 2021; Ardiansyah & Alkosibati, 2024).

As the primary institutional vehicle, the Paramadina Waqf Foundation (Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina) became the locus for Nurcholish Madjid's systematic dissemination of cultural Islamic thought (Siraj et al., 2020). Through public lectures, book publications, and discussion forums, Paramadina emerged as a hub for progressive Islamic intellectualism, openly engaging with discourses on pluralism, democracy, and human rights. Young intellectuals such as Ulil Abshar Abdalla, Budhy Munawar-Rachman, and Yudi Latif further developed Madjid's ideas. Though not formally leading JIL, Nurcholish Madjid remained its central inspiration, amplifying his influence in national Islamic discourse.

Nurcholish Madjid's concept of civil Islam in Indonesia was not just a theoretical construct but a practical solution to a pressing issue. He distinguished between personal religiosity and state governance, arguing that Islam's role in the state should manifest through values and public ethics rather than as an imposed legal system. This perspective gained traction after the experiences of *Demokrasi Terpimpin* (Guided Democracy) and the New Order's Pancasila Democracy when Islamist groups sought to enforce sharia-based regional regulations (*Perda Syariat*). Madjid opposed this trend, viewing it as detrimental to national integration and a catalyst for sectarian tensions. Therefore, his concept of civil Islam was not just a theoretical framework but a practical solution to these societal challenges. For him, democracy and pluralism were essential platforms for interfaith coexistence.

Tensions with Islamist groups persisted throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, with organizations like *Media Dakwah* and the Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah labeling Madjid as a 'misleading liberal.' These groups disagreed with Madjid's views and accused him of promoting a liberal interpretation of Islam. Nevertheless, he never retaliated, opting for constructive, educative responses through writings and lectures. This demonstrated his intellectual maturity and commitment to dialogical ethics, setting him apart from reactive political Islam. Madjid's increasingly moderate and inclusive communication strategy was a notable shift during this period. He avoided controversial terms like 'secularization,' replacing them with 'desacralization of politics' or 'reformulating religion-state relations.' This approach preserved the substance of his ideas while reducing psychological resistance among the Muslim public. His emphasis on ethical, unifying religious language opened new avenues for dialogue—a strategy that proved effective in reshaping public perception.

A symbolic reconciliation between Madjid and senior Islamic figures materialized late in his life. In various Islamic forums, he gradually gained recognition as a legitimate thinker, though he was still critiqued. This reaffirmation was a significant recognition of his contributions to Islamic thought

in Indonesia. He was even granted space in national religious events previously dominated by formalist Islamist groups. His intellectual maturity ensured that his voice was heard across ideological spectrums, illustrating how intellectual dialectics could yield tension and consolidation within a broader Islamic spirit (T. Abdullah, [1966](#)).

The dialectical interaction between Cak Nur's early apologetic reformism and his later ethical universalism produced a profound consolidation in Indonesian Islamic thought. Early political conflicts with Masyumi elders forced a tactical refinement from provocative rhetoric ("secularization") to constructive concepts ("desacralization of politics" and "civil Islam"). Institutionally, this evolution transformed youth movements—most notably HMI through the *Nilai-Nilai Dasar Perjuangan* (NDP)—and laid the groundwork for progressive networks such as JIL and Paramadina (Ali, [1998](#); Husaini, [2002](#)). Despite persistent criticism from conservative media like *Media Dakwah*, Madjid's persistent advocacy successfully re-centered Indonesian Islam from formalist state-building to cultural and civic enrichment. Ultimately, his intellectual trajectory demonstrates how dialectical tension between generational viewpoints can yield a durable synthesis, positioning Islam as a vital moral force in a democratic state.

CONCLUSION

Nurcholish Madjid's intellectual trajectory provides a transformative blueprint for contemporary Islamic thought. By evolving from an early apologetic critic of state formalism into a proponent of universal ethics, Madjid successfully redefined the role of religion in modern Indonesia. His lasting historical contribution lies in repositioning Islam not as a formal political ideology or state apparatus, but as an open, rational, and civic moral force. Through cultural institutionalization and hermeneutic renewal, his thought demonstrates that Islamic values can invigorate democratic life, pluralism, and national cohesion. Future research can build on this foundation by undertaking comparative studies between Madjid and other neo-modernist thinkers across the Muslim world, as well as examining how his concept of civil Islam continues to inform public policy, educational reform, and interfaith dialogue in contemporary democracies.

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