

The Relevance of Nurcholish Madjid's Hermeneutical Thought in Contemporary Indonesian Islamic Discourse

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the relevance of Nurcholish Madjid's hermeneutical thinking in the development of contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse. As one of the most influential Islamic reformers in Indonesia, Nurcholish Madjid offers a hermeneutical approach that emphasizes rationality, contextualization, and openness to universal values. His ideas regarding the importance of returning to the substance of Islamic teachings (*al-riju' ilā al-uṣūl*) and his rejection of the sacralization of culture form the basis for re-reading religious texts in a fresher way that is more relevant to the challenges of modernity. This study uses a qualitative method based on literature review and data analysis with a contextual hermeneutic approach. The results show that Cak Nur's hermeneutics remain relevant in responding to Islamic issues such as pluralism, religious moderation, democracy, and the relationship between religion and the state. His approach not only enriches the methodology of Islamic interpretation but also offers a theological foundation for strengthening an inclusive and progressive Islam in Indonesia. This relevance makes Cak Nur's thoughts an important reference in building a dialogical, critical, and contextual Islamic discourse amid the dynamics of Indonesian Muslim society today. This article contributes to the expansion of hermeneutics as an interpretive framework capable of critically and contextually bridging religious texts with social reality. This article broadens the understanding of Cak Nur's thinking not merely as intellectual discourse, but as an operational paradigm relevant to the development of dialogical and transformative Islamic discourse amid the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian Muslim society.

Keywords: *Islamic hermeneutics, Nurcholish Madjid, Contemporary Islam, Islamic thought, Indonesian Islamic discourse*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji relevansi pemikiran hermeneutika Nurcholish Madjid dalam perkembangan wacana keislaman Indonesia kontemporer. Sebagai salah satu tokoh pembaru Islam paling berpengaruh di Indonesia, Nurcholish Madjid menawarkan pendekatan hermeneutis yang menekankan rasionalitas, kontekstualisasi, dan keterbukaan terhadap nilai-nilai universal. Gagasannya mengenai pentingnya kembali pada substansi ajaran Islam (*al-riju' ilā al-uṣūl*) serta penolakannya terhadap sakralisasi budaya menjadi dasar untuk membaca ulang teks-teks keagamaan secara lebih segar dan relevan dengan tantangan modernitas. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi literatur, dan analisis data dengan pendekatan hermeneutika kontekstual. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hermeneutika Cak Nur tetap relevan dalam merespons isu-isu keislaman seperti pluralisme, moderasi beragama, demokrasi, dan relasi agama–negara. Pendekatannya tidak hanya memperkaya metodologi penafsiran Islam, tetapi juga menawarkan fondasi teologis bagi penguatan Islam yang inklusif dan berkemajuan di Indonesia. Relevansi tersebut menjadikan pemikiran Cak Nur sebagai salah satu rujukan penting dalam membangun wacana keislaman yang dialogis, kritis, dan kontekstual di tengah dinamika masyarakat Muslim Indonesia saat ini. Artikel ini berkontribusi terhadap perluasan hermeneutika sebagai kerangka interpretatif yang mampu menjembatani teks keagamaan dengan realitas sosial secara kritis dan kontekstual. Artikel ini memperluas pemahaman terhadap pemikiran Cak Nur tidak sekadar sebagai wacana intelektual, tetapi sebagai paradigma operasional yang relevan bagi pengembangan wacana

keislaman yang dialogis dan transformatif di tengah dinamika masyarakat Muslim Indonesia kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Hermeneutika Islam, Nurcholish Madjid, Islam kontemporer, Pemikiran Islam, Wacana keislaman Indonesia*

Introduction

The development of Islamic discourse in Indonesia in recent decades has been very dynamic.¹ Since the Reformation era, discussions about Islam have no longer revolved solely around doctrinal issues, but have expanded to include issues such as democracy, pluralism, text interpretation, and the relationship between religion and the state.² In the context of these changes, the thoughts of Nurcholish Madjid, better known as Cak Nur, have become one of the most important references. Many thinkers acknowledge that Cak Nur is a key figure who has opened up a new space for dialogue in understanding Islam in a more open, rational, and contextual way.³ His approach, which emphasizes the importance of the substance of Islamic teachings, has led him to be regarded as a reformer who is able to bridge traditional values and modernity.⁴

One of the most influential aspects of Cak Nur's thinking is the application of hermeneutics in understanding religious texts. Hermeneutics itself is basically the science of how humans understand texts, contexts, and the meaning behind a message.⁵ In Western tradition, hermeneutics developed in the study of language, philosophy, and Christian theology. However, in Islamic studies, hermeneutics is considered to be helpful in understanding how sacred texts, such as the Qur'an and hadith, can be interpreted according to the needs of the times without abandoning their basic principles.⁶ Therefore, hermeneutics is often understood as a bridge between normative religious texts and the ever-changing social reality.⁷

In the context of Islamic studies, thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, and later Cak Nur sought to develop hermeneutical methods for reinterpreting Islamic teachings. Fazlur Rahman, for example, emphasized the

¹ Azyumardi Azra, "Globalization of Indonesian Muslim Discourse: Contemporary Religio-Intellectual Connections Between Indonesia and the Middle East", in *Islam in the Era of Globalization* (Routledge: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 20.

² Andi Faisal Bakti, "Islam and Modernity: Nurcholish Madjid's Interpretation of Civil Society, Pluralism, Secularization, and Democracy", *Asian Journal of Social Science* 33, no. 3 (2025), 486-505. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853105775013634>

³ Bahtiar Effendy, *Islam dan Negara: Transformasi Pemikiran dan Praktik Politik Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1998), 12.

⁴ Greg Barton, "Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as intellectual Ulama: The meeting of Islamic traditionalism and modernism in neo-modernist thought", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8, no. 3 (1997), 323-350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596419708721130>

⁵ Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 13.

⁶ Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2010), 45.

⁷ Moh. Nor Ichwan, David Ming, Mokh Sya'roni, "Bridging Tradition and Modernity: Integrating Classical Interpretation and Modern Hermeneutics through Ijtihad in Qur'an Studies", *Pharos Journal of Theology* 106, no. 1 (2025), 1. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.2021>.

concept of double movement, which involves reading the historical context in which a verse was revealed and then relating it to the current context through the moral values it contains.⁸ Meanwhile, Arkoun underlined the importance of critical Islamic reasoning so that Muslims can free themselves from the constraints of frozen traditions.⁹ The ideas of these figures influenced Cak Nur's view of the relationship between texts, culture, and modern Muslim society.

For Cak Nur, the Qur'an is indeed absolute and sacred, but human understanding of the Qur'an is always relative because it is influenced by social and historical contexts.¹⁰ Therefore, sacred texts should not be understood rigidly or literally. In *Islam, Doctrine, and Civilization*, he states that “the Qur'an was revealed to guide humans in every space and time,”¹¹ which means that interpretation must always be in line with the needs of the times. It is this concept of hermeneutics that makes Cak Nur's thinking feel fresh and relevant to Indonesian Muslims living in a culturally diverse society.

In many of his writings, Cak Nur reminds us that one of the issues that often arises among Muslims is equating certain cultures with religious teachings.¹² He emphasizes that not all Arab traditions during the time of the Prophet were divine, but rather many were local customs. When culture is sacralized, religion becomes narrow and unable to answer modern problems.¹³ According to him, hermeneutics is an important tool for distinguishing between universal religious teachings and local cultures that are temporal in nature. This approach greatly helps people to be wiser in seeing differences while avoiding conflicts that often arise due to misunderstandings of texts and traditions.¹⁴

In the context of Indonesia's extreme plurality, Cak Nur's thinking also provides a theological basis for the importance of moderation and openness. He repeatedly stated that plurality is *sunnatullah*, something that cannot be rejected because it is part of God's will.¹⁵ This attitude has become a reference point for many contemporary thinkers in developing concepts of inclusive and tolerant Islam. In fact, in his essay on Islamic humanism, Cak Nur emphasizes that the Qur'an carries universal moral messages, such as justice, freedom, compassion, and respect for human dignity.¹⁶ In other words, Cak Nur's hermeneutics is not only a method of reading texts, but also an ethical foundation for building a peaceful social life.

⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6-7.

⁹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 21.

¹⁰ Nurcholish Madjid, “Pendekatan Kontekstual dalam Memahami Islam”, in *Kontekstualisasi Ajaran Islam* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1995), 5.

¹¹ Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam, Doktrin, dan Peradaban* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2000), 112.

¹² Madjid, 123-124.

¹³ Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan* (Bandung: Mizan, 1992), 35.

¹⁴ Nasitotul Janah, “Nurcholish Madjid dan Pemikirannya (Diantara Kontribusi dan Kontroversi),” *Cakrawala: Jurnal Studi Islam* 12, no. 1 (2017): 44-63. <https://doi.org/10.31603/cakrawala.v12i1.1655>

¹⁵ Nurcholish Madjid, *Pintu-pintu Menuju Tuhan* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1994), 41.

¹⁶ Nurcholish Madjid, “Islam dan Humanisme”, in *Kumpulan Esai Islam dan Humanisme* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2003), 19-21.

Apart from pluralism and culture, the relevance of Cak Nur's hermeneutics is also evident in the fields of democracy and politics. He is among those who argue that Islam is not incompatible with democracy, because the basic values of democracy, such as deliberation, justice, and respect for human rights, are also part of Islamic teachings.¹⁷ In his view, it is not democracy that is incompatible with Islam, but rather the practice of arbitrary power. This idea has become the basis for many academics and activists who seek to combine Islamic values with modern political systems.¹⁸

Several previous studies have also shown that Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking has had a strong influence on Islamic discourse in Indonesia. Ahmad Syafii Maarif emphasizes that Cak Nur provides a theological foundation for the modernization of Islamic thought in Indonesia, particularly in relation to issues of nationality and pluralism.¹⁹ Yudi Latif reveals that Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking has inspired a new generation of Muslim intellectuals, including those who are active on campuses and in Islamic organizations²⁰ Meanwhile, Fachrudin's study shows that Cak Nur's hermeneutical approach has played a role in the development of the Religious Moderation discourse, which is now a national program.²¹

Based on these findings, it can be asserted that Cak Nur's hermeneutics has made a significant contribution to shaping a more inclusive, open, and dialogical character of Indonesian Muslims. The hermeneutic approach he developed does not stop at the normative understanding of religious texts, but provides an epistemological framework that allows Islamic teachings to be read contextually and in a manner relevant to the social, political, and cultural realities of contemporary Indonesian society.

The study of Cak Nur's hermeneutics is important because it cannot be separated from the strengthening of textualism, religious formalism, and the polarization of religious interpretation, which often leads to exclusivism and social conflict.²² In this context, Cak Nur's hermeneutics offers a constructive middle ground by emphasizing the importance of the dialectical relationship between text, historical context, and universal Islamic values. This approach allows religious teachings to retain their normative authority while remaining adaptable in the face of changing times.

¹⁷ Nurcholish Madjid, *Cita-cita Politik Islam Era Reformasi* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999), 45-47.

¹⁸ Nurul Annisa Hamudy, Moh Ilham A Hamudy, "Cak Nur on Politics: Indonesian Political Islam and the Role of Islamic Politics", *Al-Risalah: Forum Kajian Hukum Dan Sosial Kemasyarakatan* 20, no. 1 (2020), 97-113. <https://doi.org/10.30631/alrisalah.v20i1.554>

¹⁹ Ahmad Syafii Maarif, "Pemikiran Keislaman Nurcholish Madjid", *Jurnal Ulumul Qur'an* 15, no. 2 (2004), 33.

²⁰ Yudi Latif, *Inteligensia Muslim dan Wacana Kebangsaan* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2011), 77-79.

²¹ Fachrudin, "Moderasi Beragama dalam Perspektif Pemikiran Cak Nur," *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam Kontemporer* 4, no. 1 (2016), 44.

²² Amiruddin Amiruddin, Asir Asir, Achmad Abdillah, "Inclusive Islamic Morality in Indonesia: An Analysis from the Perspective of Nurcholish Madjid", *At-Tafkir* 18, no. 1 (2025): 68-80. <https://doi.org/10.32505/at.v18i1.12754>.

Cak Nur's hermeneutics are particularly relevant for study because they are not only based on classical Islamic scholarship but also engage critically with modern thought, democracy, pluralism, and nationalism. His hermeneutics emphasize that the substance of Islamic teachings lies in universal ethical and moral values such as justice, humanity, and benefit, not merely in symbolic or legalistic forms.²³

Unlike previous studies that generally place Cak Nur's thoughts in a historical or normative framework, this study offers a new reading with a novel emphasis on the hermeneutic dimension as the epistemological and practical foundation of religiosity. With this focus, this article not only expands the study of Cak Nur, but also presents a theoretical contribution to the development of Islamic hermeneutics studies in the Indonesian context. Thus, this article deserves further study both as an academic reference in the study of contemporary Islamic thought and as a conceptual basis for formulating a model of Islamic religiosity that is responsive to the dynamics of the times.

This research uses a qualitative method with a library research approach. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on the analysis and interpretation of Cak Nur's texts and literature related to hermeneutics in Islamic studies. Library research is considered appropriate for examining the conceptual, philosophical, and historical ideas of figures, especially in the context of contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse. The research data sources consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the works of Nurcholish Madjid, such as *Islam Doktrin dan Peradaban* (Islam Doctrine and Civilization) and *Islam, Kemodernan, dan Keindonesiaan* (Islam, Modernity, and Indonesianness), including related writings, lectures, and articles. Meanwhile, secondary sources include literature by modern Muslim thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, as well as books and scientific articles discussing Cak Nur's thoughts. Meanwhile, data collection was carried out using documentation techniques. The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis to identify themes and patterns in Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking using a contextual hermeneutical approach.

Literature Review

The literature review on the relevance of Nurcholish Madjid's hermeneutical thinking in contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse involves three important aspects. *First*, literature on hermeneutics in Islam shows that the methodology of interpreting sacred texts continues to evolve in line with social changes and intellectual progress. Figures such as Fazlur Rahman offer the *double movement* method, an approach that emphasizes the integration of the historical context of revelation with its application to contemporary

²³ Abdul Rozak, et al., "Political Thoughts and Socio-cultural Nationalism Ideologies of Nurcholish Madjid on Strengthening Democracy, Civil Societies and Civic Virtues in Indonesia", *Asian Social Science* 11, no. 27 (2015): 142-154. <http://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n27p142>

reality.²⁴ Rahman's approach has greatly influenced Muslim thinkers around the world, including Indonesia, particularly in emphasizing the universal moral dimension of the Qur'an. In addition, Muhammad Arkoun, through Applied Islamology, provides a critical hermeneutical framework that encourages a re-reading of Islamic texts using modern sciences such as linguistics, anthropology, and history.²⁵ Abu Zayd, a figure in textual hermeneutics, argues that religious texts have a historical dimension because they interact with human culture and language.²⁶ The thoughts of these three figures form an important foundation for understanding the development of hermeneutics in the Islamic world.

Second, Nurcholish Madjid's own works show that he not only adopted the concept of hermeneutics theoretically, but also integrated it into his reading of Islamic texts. In *Islam, Modernity, and Indonesianness*, he emphasizes that Islam must be understood through its essence, not merely through temporary symbols. Cak Nur views that many religious understandings that are considered final are actually products of history and culture, so they need to be reevaluated through a rational and contextual approach.²⁷ This view is in line with the principles of modern hermeneutics, which emphasize that texts always require reinterpretation in accordance with changing times. In *Islam Doktrin dan Peradaban* (Islamic Doctrine and Civilization), he asserts that reason and revelation are not two conflicting things, but rather complement each other in understanding God's message.²⁸ This approach reinforces the role of hermeneutics as a bridge between texts, history, and the realities of modern life.

Third, various relevant studies on the influence of Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking show that his ideas have had a major impact on the development of Islamic discourse in Indonesia. Azyumardi Azra, for example, refers to Cak Nur as an important figure who pioneered the modernization of Islamic thought during the New Order and Reformation eras.²⁹ He assesses that the substantialist approach developed by Cak Nur has opened up space for dialogue between Islam and modernity, including in the context of democracy, pluralism, and religious freedom. Another study by Budhy Munawar-Rachman emphasizes that Cak Nur succeeded in formulating a pluralistic Islamic paradigm capable of building harmonious relations between religion and Indonesia's multicultural social reality.³⁰ Meanwhile, M. Amin Abdullah highlights Cak Nur's contribution in introducing an integrative-interconnective paradigm in Islamic studies in Indonesia, where hermeneutics is the main tool for linking religious texts with the development of modern science.³¹

²⁴ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, 12-13.

²⁵ Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 20-25.

²⁶ Nasr Hamd Abu Zayd, *Tekstualitas Al-Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2001), 44-46.

²⁷ Madjid, *Islam Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan*, 33-35.

²⁸ Madjid, *Islam, Doktrin, dan Peradaban*, 123-124.

²⁹ Azyumardi Azra, *Pembaruan Islam: Paradigma, Sejarah dan Tokoh* (Bandung: Mizan Pustaka, 2004), 75-78.

³⁰ Budhy Munawar-Rachman, *Islam Pluralis: Wacana Kesetaraan Kaum Beriman* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2001), 89-95.

³¹ M. Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies di Perguruan Tinggi: Pendekatan Integratif-Interkonektif*, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006), 58-62.

From this literature, it can be concluded that Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking has a strong theoretical foundation and broad relevance in the Indonesian context. His involvement with modern ideas and critical approaches in Islamic studies has made Cak Nur one of the most influential figures of Islamic renewal in contemporary Indonesian history. Thus, this literature review not only presents theoretical developments but also provides a comprehensive overview of the strategic position of Cak Nur's thinking in the current discourse on Islam in Indonesia.

Results and Discussion

Biography of Intellectual Nurcholish Madjid

Nurcholish Madjid, better known as Cak Nur, was born in Mojoanyar Village, Jombang, East Java, on March 17, 1939. He grew up in a strong Islamic boarding school environment because his father, KH. Abdul Madjid, was a well-known cleric in the Jombang area. From an early age, Cak Nur was accustomed to studying religion, reciting the Quran, and reading classical Islamic texts at a small madrasah run by his family.³² This strong foundation in religious education would later become the basis for Cak Nur's Islamic thinking as an adult.

After completing his basic education, Cak Nur continued his studies at an Islamic boarding school and a formal school simultaneously. He spent his youth combining the traditions of Islamic boarding schools with modern education, something that was not very common at that time.³³ When he entered college, Cak Nur chose IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (now UIN Jakarta). It was on this campus that he began to interact with new ideas, reading works on philosophy, theology, and modern Islamic thought.³⁴

Cak Nur's name became widely known when he was active in student organizations. He was elected as Chairman of the Executive Board of the Islamic Student Association (HMI) for the 1966-1969 period, and was re-elected for a second term from 1969 to 1971.³⁵ During his leadership, HMI became a progressive Islamic student organization and opened dialogue with various schools of thought, including modernism and democracy. It was here that Cak Nur demonstrated his critical, tolerant, and open-minded intellectual character.³⁶

After several years of working in Indonesia, Cak Nur had the opportunity to continue his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, United States, under the guidance of Fazlur Rahman, a highly influential modern Islamic thinker.³⁷ In Chicago, Cak Nur deepened his studies of Islam, hermeneutics, and the philosophy of religion. His

³² Ahmad Syafi'i Mufid, *Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan Organisasi Keagamaan di Indonesia* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2006), 112.

³³ Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Substantif* (Bandung: Mizan, 2002), 54-56.

³⁴ Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam, Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan*, xvii-xviii.

³⁵ Deliar Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia, 1900-1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1980), 215.

³⁶ Effendy, *Islam dan Negara: Transformasi Pemikiran dan Praktik Politik Islam di Indonesia*, 102.

³⁷ Madjid, *Islam, Doktrin dan Peradaban*, xx-xxi.

intellectual journey in the West matured his thinking, particularly on issues of pluralism, the relationship between religion and the state, and the modernization of Islam.³⁸

After returning from America, Cak Nur became increasingly active in writing and lecturing. He was known as one of the most vocal Muslim figures calling for the renewal of Islamic thought in Indonesia. His well-known works include *Islam, Doctrine and Civilization*, *Islam, Religion of Humanity*, and *Islam, Modernity and Indonesianness*. In these books, Cak Nur often emphasized the importance of an open, rational, and humanistic attitude in understanding Islamic teachings.³⁹ He also founded the Paramadina Foundation, which later developed into Paramadina University, an educational institution that combines Islam, humanism, and modern scientific traditions.⁴⁰

Although widely praised, Cak Nur was not immune to criticism. Some conservative groups considered his ideas “too liberal,” especially when he voiced the importance of pluralism, democracy, and the separation of political interests from religion. However, for many academics and young Indonesian Muslims, Cak Nur was seen as a bridge between Islamic tradition and modernity.⁴¹ Nurcholish Madjid passed away in Jakarta on August 29, 2005, at the age of 66. His passing left a great void, not only among academics, but also among the wider community who enjoyed his lectures and writings. To this day, Cak Nur's thoughts continue to be a reference in various discussions about Islam, modernity, pluralism, and democracy in Indonesia.⁴²

The Concept of Hermeneutics in the Thought of Nurcholish Madjid

The concept of hermeneutics in the thought of Nurcholish Madjid stems from his view that the Qur'an is a source of values that must be continuously revitalized through a dynamic and contextual process of understanding. For Cak Nur, sacred texts did not descend into a social vacuum, but are closely related to the historical reality of 7th-century Arab society. Therefore, Muslims must read both the text and its context. For him, hermeneutics is not merely a technical method of interpretation, but a way of thinking that combines revelation, reason, and social reality in a dialogical manner.⁴³ The meaning of verses is not static; what is eternal are the basic principles, while the practical interpretation can change according to the times. This makes him emphasize the importance of contextualization so that the values of the Qur'an remain relevant in responding to the challenges of modernity.

³⁸ Lahaji, Ahmad Faisal, “Caliphate no in Indonesia”: Nurcholish Madjid and Yudian Wahyudi critiques toward Islamic State discourse in Indonesian Islam”, *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 2 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2278207>.

³⁹ Madjid, *Islam, Doktrin dan Peradaban*, 210-215.

⁴⁰ Abdul Moqsih Ghazali, *Argumen Pluralisme Agama* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2004), 33-34.

⁴¹ Munawar-Rachman, *Islam Pluralis*, 89-92.

⁴² Azra, *Pembaruan Islam*, 301.

⁴³ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin dan Peradaban*, 134–137.

Within this hermeneutical framework, Cak Nur asserts the need to return to the substance of Islamic teachings, not merely symbols or formalities. He refers to the basic values of Islam, such as justice, humanity, and the spirit of rahmatan lil 'alamin, as emphasized in QS. al-Anbiya' [21]:107:⁴⁴

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

“And We have not sent you except as a mercy to all creation.”

According to him, a number of verses in the Qur'an are particular because they arose from a specific social context, so modern interpreters must be able to grasp their universal message.⁴⁵ It is this concept of historicity that makes him see the difference between eternal (universal) messages and cultural (temporal) expressions in religious texts. In addition, Cak Nur's hermeneutics places intellectual freedom as the foundation of the interpretation process. Muslims, according to him, should not be afraid to open up new spaces for ijtihad, because the Qur'an itself commands humans to think, as in QS. az-Zumar [39]: 9:

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

“Say: “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” Only those with understanding can accept lessons.”

His thinking was greatly influenced by the rational tradition of Islam, which he referred to as *“tauhid as a worldview,”* a perspective that frees humans from fanaticism and fosters openness to plurality.⁴⁶ He also rejected the claim of a single truth in understanding religion, because every interpretation is always influenced by the social and cultural situation and the interpreter's horizon of understanding.⁴⁷ This is what led him to propose an inclusive, moderate, and humanistic paradigm of understanding Islam.

Although Nurcholish Madjid did not explicitly formulate hermeneutics as a systematic theory or method of interpretation as developed by figures such as Gadamer or Ricoeur, the interpretive approach he used in reading Islamic texts shows consistent hermeneutical characteristics. This is evident in his emphasis on the historical context of revelation, the importance of rationality in understanding the normative message of Islam, and his efforts to bridge religious texts with an ever-changing social reality. In his various works, Cak Nur implicitly promotes a contextual and critical reading of texts, which is in line with the basic principles of modern hermeneutics in religious studies.

Thus, the use of the term “Cak Nur's hermeneutics” in this study is not intended to suggest that Cak Nur has a formal hermeneutical theory of his own, but rather as an analytical construct for reading the patterns, orientations, and interpretive frameworks he has developed. This approach allows for the mapping of Cak Nur's thinking within the

⁴⁴ Departemen Agama RI, *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahannya*, (Jakarta: Depag, 2007), 331.

⁴⁵ Madjid, *Pintu-Pintu Menuju Tuhan*, 56-59.

⁴⁶ Madjid, *Islam, Kemodernan, dan Keindonesiaan*, 212-215.

⁴⁷ Budhy Munawar-Rachman, *Argumen Islam untuk Liberalisme*, (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2010), 88-90.

landscape of contemporary Islamic hermeneutics, while also clarifying his epistemological position in responding to modern Islamic issues.

The Relevance of Nurcholis Madjid's Hermeneutics in Contemporary Indonesian Islamic Discourse

The relevance of Nurcholish Madjid's hermeneutical thinking in contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse is evident in its ability to respond to evolving social, political, and religious dynamics. In the midst of a pluralistic and multicultural Indonesian Muslim society, Cak Nur's hermeneutical approach provides a theological basis for an inclusive and rational way of practicing religion.⁴⁸ Through the idea of contextualizing the Qur'an, he emphasizes that Islamic values are universal and must be translated into social practices that promote justice, peace, and respect for human dignity.⁴⁹ This approach is relevant when some people still use a scriptural-literal perspective, which often closes the space for dialogue and creates social tension in religious life.

In the context of nationalism, Cak Nur's hermeneutics make an important contribution to strengthening the harmonious relationship between Islam and the state.⁵⁰ For him, the value of tawhid encourages openness and recognition of plurality, which is in line with the basic principles of Indonesia as a pluralistic state.⁵¹ His famous idea of “*Islam yes, Islamic parties no*” is a constructive criticism of the politicization of religion, as well as a call for Islamic values to be present in public life not through exclusive political symbols, but in the form of social and moral ethics.⁵² This idea is particularly relevant when identity politics, social polarization, and extremism are strengthening in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

Furthermore, the relevance of Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking is evident in modern Islamic scholarship, particularly in encouraging *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and intellectual renewal. When Muslims are confronted with contemporary issues such as human rights, gender equality, the environment, technology, and digitalization, rigid patterns of interpretation are no longer adequate. Cak Nur's hermeneutics, which emphasize the historicity of texts, rationality, and the exploration of universal messages, provide a methodological foundation for the development of progressive Islam that can engage in dialogue with science and global values without losing its Islamic identity.⁵³ This

⁴⁸ Abdul Khobir, et al., “Multicultural Islamic Education: Gus Dur and Cak Nur Perspectives”, *Social Sciences and Education Research Review* 8, no. 2 (2021), 119-139.

⁴⁹ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin dan Peradaban*, 178-182.

⁵⁰ Ahmad Ali Nurdin, “Revisiting discourse on Islam and state relation in Indonesia: the view of Soekarno, Natsir and Nurcholish Madjid”, *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 6, no. 1 (2016), 63-92. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v6i1.63-92>

⁵¹ Madjid, *Islam, Kemodernan, dan Keindonesiaan*, 295-300.

⁵² M. Dawam Rahardjo, *Nurcholish Madjid dan Islam Kemodernan*, (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1998), 45-47.

⁵³ Budhy Munawar-Rachman, *Ensiklopedi Nurcholish Madjid: Pemikiran Islam di Kanvas Peradaban*, (Jakarta: Democracy Project, 2019), 233-238.

is what makes his ideas continue to be used in academic discussions and public policy related to religious moderation, pluralism, and the reform of Islamic thought.⁵⁴

Overall, the relevance of Nurcholish Madjid's hermeneutical thinking lies in its ability to guide Indonesian Muslims towards a mature, moderate, and transformative way of practicing religion. His hermeneutical approach, which balances fidelity to the revealed text with openness to social reality, makes his thinking not only academically important, but also a practical guide for religious life in Indonesia. Thus, Cak Nur's hermeneutics become a roadmap for the development of a humanistic, pluralistic, and progress-oriented Islam in Indonesia.⁵⁵

Challenges in Applying Cak Nur's Hermeneutics Today

The application of Cak Nur's hermeneutics in the context of Islam in Indonesia today faces a number of serious challenges. One of the main challenges is the strengthening of conservatism and religious literalism, which tend to reject a contextual approach to the Qur'an. On social media and in public spaces, various groups have emerged that promote literal interpretations and consider hermeneutical ideas that emphasize the historicity of the text and the universal message of the Qur'an as a threat to the purity of Islamic teachings.⁵⁶ As a result, discussions on Islamic intellectual renewal often become trapped in polarization and stigma, leading to Cak Nur's ideas being misrepresented as a form of "liberalism," when in fact he sought to revive the moral essence of the Qur'an in accordance with the needs of the times.

The next challenge is the low level of critical religious literacy among the public. Hermeneutics requires the ability to read texts deeply, understand the history of revelation, and master classical and modern Islamic scholarship. However, religious education in Indonesia tends to focus on memorization and ritual aspects, so that people are not accustomed to using an analytical approach in understanding sacred texts.⁵⁷ The lack of academic spaces that seriously teach reformist thinking, including Cak Nur's thinking, has resulted in the younger generation being unfamiliar with his intellectual contributions to the modernization of Islam in Indonesia. This has led to Cak Nur's hermeneutics often being rejected without comprehensive scientific assessment.

In addition, the development of digital technology presents new challenges that are no less important. Social media algorithms reinforce religious content that is simple, emotional, and populist rather than deep intellectual ideas.⁵⁸ As a result, hermeneutical

⁵⁴ Syukron Jamal, "Islamic Modernization, Identity Politics and Religious Conservatism in Indonesia (Reflections on the Renewal of Nurcholish Madjid's Islamic Thought)", *Integration: Journal of Social Sciences and Culture* (2024): 182-191.

⁵⁵ Azyumardi Azra, *Transformasi Politik Islam*, (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2006), 112-115.

⁵⁶ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin dan Peradaban*, 205-210.

⁵⁷ Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi*, (Jakarta: Kencana, 2012), 77-81.

⁵⁸ Merlyna Lim, "Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (2013), 638-640.

ideas that require depth of analysis and rational reflection are not given much space. This phenomenon has given rise to what scholars refer to as the “digital simplification of religion,” which is the tendency to understand Islam instantly without considering the complexity of the text, history, and context.⁵⁹ This condition directly hinders public acceptance of Cak Nur's hermeneutic approach, which demands critical and multidisciplinary reading.

The next challenge is institutional. Religious institutions, Islamic community organizations, and educational institutions have responded in various ways to the renewal of religious understanding. Some institutions support the development of a moderate and open Islam, but others continue to uphold a normative-literal paradigm that leaves little room for a hermeneutic approach.⁶⁰ At the policy level, religious moderation programs have developed, but they have not yet fully touched on the epistemological basis of thought, namely how to read religious texts critically, contextually, and scientifically. Without reforming educational and religious institutions, Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking will continue to be considered an exclusive intellectual discourse.⁶¹

Despite these considerable challenges, Cak Nur's hermeneutics are increasingly relevant in the context of contemporary Indonesian religion and society. Amidst the strengthening of political polarization of identity, intolerance, and simplification of religion in the digital space, Cak Nur's thinking offers a moderate and humanistic framework for the development of Indonesian Islam.⁶² In order for this hermeneutics to continue to be used as a reference for the advancement of civilization, systematic efforts are needed to transform it into the realm of education, public discourse, and religious praxis.⁶³

Concretely, the application of Cak Nur's hermeneutics requires strengthening religious literacy that emphasizes contextual, historical, and ethical understanding of religious texts. Islamic educational institutions need to play an active role in rebuilding the traditions of *ijtihad*, intellectual dialogue, and critical reading that is open to developments in science and social reality. In addition, mainstreaming Cak Nur's thinking in the public sphere, including the media and digital platforms, can be a strategy to counter exclusive and reductionist religious narratives.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Plural Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2020), 142-145.

⁶⁰ Syafiq Hasyim, *Islam Nusantara and the Reconfiguration of Indonesian Islam*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2021), 93-97.

⁶¹ Lis Safitri, Fadlil Munawwar Manshur, Husni Thooyar, “Nurcholish Madjid on Indonesian Islamic Education: A Hermeneutical Study”, *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 22, no. 2 (2022): 244-259, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v22i2.5749>

⁶² Budhy Munawar-Rachman, *Reinventing Nurcholish Madjid*, (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2010), 188-193.

⁶³ Jun Wang, “Reformation hermeneutics and the spirit of humanism”, *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2024), a9783. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i3.9783>.

⁶⁴ Miftahuddin Miftahuddin, “The Ideal Islamic Education in The Indonesian Context: The Islamic Thought of Nurcholish Madjid”, *Proceedings of the International Joint Conference on Arts and Humanities 2024 (IJCAH 2024)* (February 2025).

By strengthening this epistemological basis, Cak Nur's hermeneutics not only functions as academic discourse, but also as a practical guide in building a mature, rational, and welfare-oriented diversity. It is at this point that Cak Nur's thinking has the potential to contribute significantly in promoting an inclusive and competitive Indonesian Islam in facing the challenges of global civilization.

Analysis of Nurcholish Madjid's Hermeneutics

Nurcholish Madjid's (Cak Nur) hermeneutic thinking has had a very strong influence on the development of contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia. On many occasions, Cak Nur emphasized that Islam must be understood contextually, openly, and in a way that allows it to interact with the developments of the times. According to him, the basic messages of Islam are universal values, while its social and religious forms can change in accordance with the dynamics of society. Therefore, Cak Nur views hermeneutics as an important bridge between text and reality, so that Muslims are not only fixated on textual understanding, but also grasp the moral meaning and ethical purpose of the verses of the Qur'an that were revealed in a specific social context during the time of the Prophet.⁶⁵

In the context of contemporary Indonesia, this hermeneutic perspective is very important given the diverse, democratic, and challenging new social reality. For example, issues of nationality, tolerance, religious moderation, and the relationship between religion and the state often require a more flexible religious explanation that is still rooted in the sacred text.⁶⁶ Cak Nur explains that the basic spirit of the Qur'an is always in line with the principles of "virtue, justice, and benefit," so that Muslims need to read the text with these basic objectives in mind, not merely its literal meaning.⁶⁷ This understanding helps avoid religious rigidity and provides space for a more dialogical interpretation that is friendly to Indonesia's pluralistic reality.⁶⁸

For example, Cak Nur often refers to QS. al-Anbiya' [21]: 107: "*And We have not sent you (Muhammad) except as a mercy to all creation.*" This verse is understood not only normatively, but also contextually, that all expressions of religion should reflect the values of mercy, tolerance, and respect for humanity.⁶⁹ From a hermeneutical perspective, this verse does not stop at the text, but encourages Muslims to display social behavior that spreads compassion, including in the life of the state and society.

⁶⁵ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin dan Peradaban*, 85.

⁶⁶ Kurnia Muhajarah, Moh. Erfan Soebahar, "Fiqh of tolerance and religious moderation: a study towards Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand", *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2303817>; Rohmat Mulyana, "Religious moderation in Islamic religious education textbook and implementation in Indonesia", *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (2023), a8592. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8592>.

⁶⁷ Madjid, 112.

⁶⁸ Hendrikus Maku, et al., "Cak Nur Pluralism: Criticism of The Phenomenon Religious Intolerance in Indonesia", *International Journal Of Humanities Education And Social Sciences (IJHESS)* 3, no. 4 (2024): 1913-1924.

⁶⁹ Madjid, *Pintu-Pintu Menuju Tuhan*, 44.

The relevance of Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking is also evident in issues of democracy. He asserts that democratic values such as deliberation, justice, and equality are values that are in line with Islamic teachings. To strengthen his argument, Cak Nur often interprets the verse QS. asy-Syura [42]: 38:

وَأْمُرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ

“And their affairs (are decided) by mutual consultation among them.”

According to him, this verse should be understood as a normative spirit regarding the need for a participatory and non-authoritarian social system.⁷⁰ With hermeneutics, this verse is not only a moral principle, but can also be translated into modern political systems such as constitutional democracy.

Cak Nur's thinking is also very relevant to the discourse of pluralism, especially in Indonesian society, which is diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity, and culture.⁷¹ He emphasizes that Islam recognizes human diversity as part of God's will. He often uses verse Q.S. Al-Hujurat 49: 13 as a basis:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

“O mankind, We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.”

From a hermeneutical perspective, this verse shows the importance of building respectful social relationships, rather than imposing uniformity. Therefore, Cak Nur's thinking became a strong foundation for the emergence of an inclusive Islamic discourse that rejects all forms of violence and discrimination in the name of religion.⁷²

In addition, Cak Nur's hermeneutics help respond to modern religious issues, such as extremism and radicalism. He sees that most radical groups understand texts partially and ahistorically. By proposing a hermeneutic reading, Cak Nur invites Muslims to understand the context in which the verses were revealed, the conditions of society at that time, and the moral objectives of Sharia law.⁷³ This approach emphasizes the importance of deep interpretation, not instant interpretation, and not getting caught up in narrow literalism. In this context, Cak Nur's thinking is very relevant to efforts at deradicalization, modern Islamic education, and the development of a peaceful Islamic discourse.

Cak Nur's ability to combine text, context, and universal values makes him a key reference in contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia. His thinking opens up opportunities for Indonesian Muslims to understand religious teachings in a more mature,

⁷⁰ Nurcholish Madjid, *Tradisi Islam: Peran dan Fungsinya dalam Pembangunan di Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1997), hlm. 57.

⁷¹ Marcus Mietzner, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 1 (2020): 58-84. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26937784>.

⁷² Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam Agama Kemanusiaan*, (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1995), 29.

⁷³ Effendy, *Islam dan Negara: Transformasi Pemikiran dan Praktik Politik Islam di Indonesia*, 143.

rational, and relevant way to the challenges of the times. Ultimately, Cak Nur's hermeneutics not only helps to understand the verses, but also helps Muslims to position themselves in a more harmonious and democratic social life.⁷⁴

I critically appreciate Cak Nur's ability to integrate religious texts, historical-social contexts, and universal values as an epistemological whole. This approach demonstrates intellectual maturity in understanding religion not merely as a collection of textual norms, but as a source of public ethics that is alive and dynamic. This appreciation is based on the belief that Cak Nur's framework of thinking offers a constructive alternative amid the tendency toward narrow and literalistic interpretations of religion.⁷⁵ Thus, I consider that Cak Nur's hermeneutics should be preserved and developed as an important reference in contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia. This thinking not only opens up space for rational and contextual religiosity, but also makes a real contribution to shaping an inclusive, harmonious religious attitude that is in line with democratic principles.

Conclusion

Nurcholish Madjid's hermeneutical thinking has a very strong relevance in shaping the direction of contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse. Through a contextual and historical approach to understanding the Qur'an, Cak Nur succeeded in reviving the idea that Islam is an open, rational teaching that is in harmony with the times. His hermeneutics emphasize the need to distinguish the universal message and moral values of the Qur'an from temporal cultural expressions, so that Muslims can apply religious teachings in a more substantive, inclusive, and humanistic manner. Amidst the dynamics of Indonesia's pluralistic society, his thinking has become an important foundation for strengthening religious moderation, interfaith dialogue, and the development of a civilized social life.

The relevance of this thinking is increasingly apparent as Indonesia faces challenges in the form of rising conservatism, political polarization of identity, and the simplification of religion in the digital space. Amidst this trend, Cak Nur's hermeneutics offers a methodological approach that bridges the gap between sacred texts and modern reality and builds a tradition of critical *ijtihad*. By placing *tauhid* as the foundation of liberation ethics, Cak Nur's thinking provides insight that religious diversity should encourage openness, respect for diversity, and commitment to social progress.

This study has implications for strengthening the paradigm of moderate, contextual, and inclusive Islam in Indonesia. Cak Nur's hermeneutics can be used as a methodological reference in responding to contemporary issues such as pluralism, identity politics, and religious conservatism, as well as encouraging Islamic practices oriented towards ethical

⁷⁴ Komaruddin Hidayat, Ahmad Gaus AF, *Ensiklopedi Nurcholish Madjid*, (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2013), 201–205.

⁷⁵ Zaprulkhan, Zainul Abas, and Hakan Gulerce, “Integrating Islam with Humanity and Indonesian Identity: Perspectives of Nurcholish Madjid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif”, *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 15, no. 1, (2025), 335-51. <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.151.19>

values, humanity, and social welfare. Theoretically, this study contributes to the enrichment of the discourse on Indonesian Islamic hermeneutics by affirming Cak Nur's position as a model of contextual hermeneutics that bridges Islamic texts, contexts, and universal values. This study is also limited to an analysis of Cak Nur's hermeneutical thinking in relation to his ideas in social or institutional practice. Therefore, there is still ample room for further research, both in terms of analyzing his thinking and conducting comparative studies with other Indonesian figures.

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