

Inclusive Islamic Morality in Indonesia: An Analysis from the Perspective of Nurcholish Madjid

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Abstract: This study is motivated by the persistence of exclusivism, intolerance, and social fragmentation among religious communities in Indonesia, which reflects a significant gap between the inclusive moral principles of Islam and the socio-religious realities in society. The research aims to analyze the concept of inclusive Islamic morality from the perspective of Nurcholish Madjid and to explore its relevance in addressing contemporary challenges related to pluralism, religious harmony, and democratic citizenship. Employing a qualitative approach through library research, this study examines Madjid's major works on pluralism, secularization, Islamic reform, and the relationship between religion and the state. The findings reveal that Madjid's conception of inclusive Islamic morality is grounded in the principles of liberating monotheism, religious inclusivity, rationality, and openness to modernity. He emphasizes the purification of Islam from political instrumentalization and symbolic formalism so that Islamic ethics may function as universal public values. The results indicate that Madjid's ideas offer substantial conceptual resources for countering intolerance, identity-based radicalism, and sectarian politics in contemporary Indonesia. The study concludes that integrating these principles into religious education, public discourse, and socio-religious policy is essential for strengthening a culture of dialogue, respect for diversity, and democratic citizenship.

Keywords: Inclusive Islamic Morality, Nurcholish Madjid, Religious Pluralism

Abstrak: Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh masih berlanjutnya sikap eksklusif, intoleransi, dan fragmentasi sosial di antara komunitas keagamaan di Indonesia, yang mencerminkan adanya kesenjangan antara prinsip-prinsip moral Islam yang inklusif dan realitas sosial-keagamaan dalam masyarakat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis konsep moralitas Islam yang inklusif dari perspektif Nurcholish Madjid serta mengkaji relevansinya dalam menghadapi tantangan kontemporer terkait pluralisme, kerukunan beragama, dan kewargaan demokratis. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi pustaka, penelitian ini menelaah karya-karya utama Madjid mengenai pluralisme, sekularisasi, pembaruan Islam,

dan hubungan antara agama dan negara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa konsep moralitas Islam yang inklusif menurut Madjid berakar pada prinsip-prinsip tauhid yang memerdekakan, sikap keberagamaan yang inklusif, rasionalitas, dan keterbukaan terhadap modernitas. Ia menekankan pentingnya memurnikan ajaran Islam dari kepentingan politis dan formalisme simbolik agar etika Islam dapat berfungsi sebagai nilai publik yang universal. Temuan penelitian ini mengindikasikan bahwa gagasan-gagasan Madjid menawarkan landasan konseptual yang kuat untuk menghadapi intoleransi, radikalisme berbasis identitas, dan politik sektarian dalam konteks Indonesia kontemporer. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pengintegrasian prinsip-prinsip tersebut ke dalam pendidikan keagamaan, wacana publik, dan kebijakan sosial-keagamaan sangat penting untuk memperkuat budaya dialog, penghargaan terhadap keberagaman, dan kewargaan demokratis.

Kata Kunci: Moralitas Islam Inklusif, Nurcholish Madjid, Pluralisme Agama

Introduction

Islam, as one of the largest religions in the world, possesses a rich and diverse spiritual and intellectual heritage. Throughout its long history, Islam has developed through various interpretations and practices that reflect cultural and intellectual diversity (Kamil et al., 2023). Amid debates that often lead to extremism and misunderstanding, it is crucial to promote the principles of inclusiveness and moderation as the foundation for a more harmonious and just understanding of Islamic teachings (Ghozali et al., 2022).

Indonesia, with its abundant cultural diversity, represents a vivid example of pluralism (Ardiansyah & Alkosibati, 2024). With more than 1,300 ethnic groups and hundreds of regional languages spread across the archipelago, Indonesia is not only a place where local traditions and values are cultivated, but also a society where cultural differences coexist within a unified nation. This diversity extends beyond cultural aspects to perspectives, social practices, and belief systems, positioning Indonesia as a country that upholds cultural pluralism as a core principle of national life (Hoon, 2017; Aragon, 2022). Therefore, the central issue of this research is how Nurcholish Madjid's thought can provide a conceptual and practical framework for strengthening inclusive Islamic moderation to address intolerance, identity-based radicalism, and social disharmony in Indonesia (Sulbi, 2021).

In the modern era, religions have sought to adapt to contemporary developments, particularly those influenced by Western civilization. This adaptation demonstrates the connection between religious teachings and modernity, serving as a response to pressing issues faced by religious communities. One manifestation of this effort is the religious reform movement, which has significantly influenced major religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the Western context, this movement is known as Modernism, which reflects the spirit of the era and carries important conceptual implications for religious discourse (Azra, 2019).

Religion plays a vital role in human life, serving as a benchmark for achieving a purposeful, peaceful, and dignified society (Nandhikkara, 2015). The integration of religious values into individual lives is essential and must be pursued through education. According to Nurcholish Madjid, religious values are fundamental and must be instilled in children, forming the core of religious education. These values include Faith, Sharia, and Moral principles (Naz et al., 2018).

In a religious context, Modernism can be understood as a mode of thought based on the belief that scientific development and cultural dynamics require a reinterpretation of classical teachings. This reinterpretation ensures that religious values remain relevant and compatible with contemporary philosophical and scientific paradigms. Modernism thus represents an intellectual movement aimed at harmonizing religious principles with the values of modern Western civilization, including its thought patterns, social systems, and other aspects of life (Naz et al., 2018 ; Utomo et al., 2022).

Inclusive Islam refers to an open attitude that accepts and respects the teachings of other religions, while maintaining full submission to Allah SWT. This inclusive attitude aligns with religious pluralism and must be strengthened as a commitment to the reality of religious diversity in Indonesia (Chaves & Gorski, 2001). Engagement with religious others requires openness, learning, and respect while upholding full commitment to one's own faith. Inclusivity does not compel followers of other religions to embrace Islam; rather, it fosters coexistence between religion and freedom (Alwi Shihab, 1998:43).

Moderation in Islam entails adopting a balanced and non-extremist approach to religious teachings, interpreting texts within their context, and adhering to principles of justice, peace, and humanity (Zulkarnain & Muhazir, 2025). It encourages Muslims to engage positively with the world, allowing for adaptation and renewal in accordance with contemporary demands, without compromising the essence of Islam. In Indonesia, Islam has developed within a diverse cultural and social context, reflecting moderate, inclusive, and tolerant values that have evolved alongside local traditions and a sense of nationalism. Islamic modernism in Indonesia is flexible, adapting to social realities while preserving core teachings (Ahmad, 2011). Practices such as *tahlilan*, *yasinan*, and the Prophet's birthday celebrations exemplify the integration of Islamic values with local culture (Muji & Mahfurin, 2025).

Historically, claims of Islam's superiority over other religions, whether based on scripture, Hadith, or interpretation, have sometimes shifted from substantive to hegemonic, forming the basis for exclusive groups. For example, Quranic verse Ali 'Imran (3:19) is often cited to assert Islam as the only acceptable religion. However, it is essential to emphasize that openness does not compel others to convert, but encourages coexistence between religion and freedom (Sadiyah & Assidiqi, 2023).

According to Nurcholish Madjid, also known as Cak Nur, religious leaders must act as a safeguard for the community, preserving the essence of religion while presenting it in a modern and accessible way (Madjid, 2019b). Religion should remain

relevant, digestible, and engaging, ensuring that followers are not alienated by rigid doctrinal interpretations. True devotion requires both strong faith and humanist values, allowing Muslims to think openly, fostering a religion that is friendly, egalitarian, and realistic (Madjid, 2019).

This study systematically combines the concept of Islamic moderation with Nurcholish Madjid's thought. While previous studies have explored his ideas on pluralism, neo-modernism, or inclusive theology, few have examined how his thought serves as a conceptual framework for inclusive Islamic moderation in contemporary Indonesia. This research integrates the concept of *wasathiyah* (Islamic moderation) with Cak Nur's model of inclusivism.

The study contributes by offering a new understanding of inclusive Islamic moderation through Madjid's neo-modernist thought, emphasizing rationality, openness, and respect for plurality. It strengthens the theory of Islamic moderation by positioning Madjid's ideas as a relevant conceptual foundation to address rising intolerance and religious polarization in Indonesia. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative, literature-based approach, while practically providing recommendations for religious education, public discourse, and socio-religious policies to foster dialogue and tolerance in Indonesia's multicultural society.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research (Safarudin et al., 2023) design using a library-based approach to examine the concept of inclusive Islamic morality in the thought of Nurcholish Madjid (Daruhadi & Sopiati, 2024). The research relies primarily on Madjid's major writings, including his works on pluralism, Islamic renewal, secularization, and the relationship between religion and the state, which serve as the main sources for understanding his moral and theological framework. These primary texts are supported by secondary literature such as scholarly articles, books, and academic analyses discussing Madjid's contributions to Islamic discourse, Indonesian religious pluralism, and democratic development (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019).

The collected materials are analyzed through content analysis and hermeneutical interpretation to identify key themes related to inclusive morality, such as liberating monotheism, rationality, openness to modernity, and the rejection of political instrumentalization of religion (Zed, 2008). The interpretive process situates these themes within the broader socio-religious context of Indonesia, particularly in relation to challenges of intolerance, identity-based radicalism, and social fragmentation. Through this methodological approach, the study aims to develop a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of how Madjid's ideas may contribute to strengthening religious harmony and democratic citizenship in contemporary Indonesia (Haryono et al., 2024).

Results and Discussion

Nurcholish Madjid's Early Life and Intellectual Development: Foundations of Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia

Nurcholish Madjid, familiarly known as “Cak Nur” by friends, relatives, and both supporters and critics of his thought, was born in Mojoanyar, Jombang, East Java, on March 17, 1939 (26 Muharram 1358 H). He was born into a family with strong Islamic boarding school traditions. His father, Abdul Madjid, was a *kiai* (Islamic scholar) who graduated from the Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School in Jombang, a leading Islamic educational institution founded and managed by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). His mother, Halima, was the daughter of Kiai Abdullah Sadjad from Kediri, who was known as a close friend of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari (Posangi, 1907).

Nurcholish Madjid began his formal education at the Elementary School (*Sekolah Rakyat*, SR) in Mojoanyar in the morning and attended the Islamic Elementary School (*Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*) in the afternoon. He then continued his studies at the Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Jombang, followed by the Darussalam Gontor Modern Islamic Boarding School in Ponorogo. After completing his studies at Gontor in 1960, he pursued higher education at the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic Institute (IAIN) in Jakarta. It was in Jakarta that his Islamic thought began to develop more profoundly, particularly through interactions with prominent Islamic intellectuals such as Mohammad Natsir and Hamka (Hawi, 2019).

In addition, his active involvement in the Islamic Students Association (*Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam*, HMI) greatly influenced the direction of his intellectual activities. He served as General Chairman of the HMI Executive Board for two consecutive terms, from 1966 to 1968 and 1968 to 1970. During this period, ideas of Islamic reform began to emerge and attract widespread attention within the Indonesian Muslim community. One of the most controversial ideas to arise was the slogan “*Islam Yes, Islamic Party No*,” which critiqued the politicization of religion and affirmed the separation between religious values and practical political interests (Madjid, 2019a).

In 1978, after completing his studies at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Nurcholish Madjid received a scholarship from the Ford Foundation to pursue postgraduate studies at the University of Chicago, United States. There, he earned his doctorate with *cum laude* honors in 1984. His dissertation, entitled “*Ibn Taimiyah on Kalam and Falsafah: Problem of Reason and Revelation in Islam*,” critically examined the relationship between reason and revelation within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Thanks to his significant contributions to Islamic thought, Nurcholish Madjid was later invited as a guest lecturer at several leading universities worldwide, including the University of Montreal and McGill University in Canada (Posangi, 1907).

Inclusive Islamic Modernity in Indonesia: The Perspective of Nurcholis Madjid

Muslims must master and apply fundamental ideas as a form of intellectual and moral responsibility in addressing various contemporary challenges, particularly those related to humanitarian values and social justice. In this context, the Muslim community should recognize that the advent of modernity does not diminish the relevance of Islam; rather, it reinforces Islam's role as a religion that upholds principles of social justice. While modernity in the Western world is often accompanied by conflicts involving religious symbols, Islam has the potential to emerge as a constructive moral force (F. Rahman, 1969).

During World War II, Muslim thought was still heavily influenced by classical theological paradigms, limiting its ability to respond effectively to global social changes. Over time, however, Islam began to critically reflect on modern humanitarian issues, striving to reconstruct its social role amid the values crisis facing contemporary society. This demonstrates Islam's capacity as a dynamic and adaptive religion, continuing to uphold universal humanitarian values as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad SAW, in order to promote a more just, humane, and civilized social order (Madjid, 2019).

This reality portrays Islam as “an inclusive, dynamic, and contextually relevant religion.” Islam must be understood as a religion committed to social justice, rather than one disengaged from societal responsibility. Islamic thought grows stronger, more convincing, and wiser in responding to social changes, applying justice to support universal humanitarian values. Nurcholish Madjid also asserts that “truth is not confined to the Islamic community, but can also emerge from other communities,” emphasizing that inclusivity is central to developing Islamic thought and promoting the values of goodness and justice for all humanity. Consequently, Islamic teachings are capable of comprehensively understanding and addressing human life challenges (Safitri et al., 2022).

In the context of modernity, Muslim communities should embrace humanitarian values, open-mindedness, and justice. This demonstrates the continued relevance of Islamic thought, which can inform modern social frameworks, such as the concept of Pancasila as the ideological and philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state, promoting social justice (Munawar-Rachman, 2022). Muslims are logically called to take the initiative in strengthening and upholding humanitarian values in accordance with Islamic teachings, providing a foundation for social justice and universal human solidarity (An, 2013).

In today's world, marked by moral crises, declining political ethics, and social inequality—even in Muslim-majority societies—Islamic teachings must actively engage with contemporary realities, particularly in Indonesia. Nurcholish Madjid emphasized that modernity in science and thought should not weaken Islam's vitality in responding to contemporary challenges. If Muslims lose their creative and reflective capacity, it signifies a failure to fulfill their historical and spiritual role as witnesses to divine truth.

Without this engagement, Islamic teachings risk appearing disoriented within the global context (Iswanto & Mawardi, 2024).

In such circumstances, Islamic values should not decline but be revitalized through reinforcing fundamental principles of faith and a balanced commitment to humanity and justice. Madjid emphasized that Islam's primary mission is to achieve substantive, rather than merely symbolic, victories for universal humanitarian values. A just attitude is a continuation of faith and can be interpreted as God's "mandate" for humanity, guiding acts of power to be wise and just. Authority, according to Madjid, is an inevitable human responsibility to maintain social order, which should reflect public obedience without contradicting common morality. Power must be exercised democratically, reflecting the will of the majority, thereby demonstrating justice as a divine mandate (Madjid, 2019a).

Transcendent Islamic values remain relevant in modernity. Madjid's thinking aligns with Muhammad Iqbal's, encouraging Muslims not to remain confined within modern thought but to transcend its limitations, ensuring that the direction and goals of Islamic thought remain visionary. A strategic step toward this goal is the reconstruction of Islamic thought through contextual reinterpretation of teachings, enabling more appropriate and relevant responses to social realities (Muhammad Iqbal, 2002:11).

Islamic thought should contribute positively to the future of human civilization, transcending the ideals of other modern civilizations while remaining authentic to monotheistic principles. Nurcholish Madjid consistently emphasized the importance of intellectual contributions from Muslims to address humanitarian issues. He viewed Islam as upholding openness, rationality, tolerance, and egalitarian principles in human interactions, forming the foundation for a just, orderly, and civilized society. Modern values within Islam do not conflict with its core teachings; rather, they provide a potential force for addressing humanitarian challenges across time and space due to Islam's adaptive and responsive character (M. T. Rahman & Mimbar, 2018).

Pancasila plays a central role as a unifying framework that promotes social justice in Indonesia, demonstrating that Islamic teachings align with tolerance, openness, and acceptance of differences. According to Madjid, the principle of divinity in Pancasila fosters egalitarian humanitarian values, recognizing all humans as equal and dignified before God. This understanding encourages proactive engagement in building a more advanced and civilized religious and national life (Rosdiana, 2022).

This embodies Islamic modernity: a contextual, relevant religious understanding capable of addressing social inequalities. Conversely, exclusivist approaches to religion can generate conflict within both religious and national spheres, threatening social integration. Therefore, Islam must be emphasized as an inclusive religion that upholds universal human values. Islam has the potential to drive the pursuit of humanity in Indonesia. Civilization theory posits that ethical values are fundamental to civilizational development. When "civilizational Islam" becomes

central, it should engage in dialogue and convergence with other civilizations, fostering unity and collaboration rather than conflict (Sari, 2023).

Inclusive Islamic Modernity, in the perspective of Nurcholish Madjid, represents an intellectual framework that affirms Islam—as a religion grounded in the principle of tawhid as inherently capable of responding and contributing constructively to the dynamics of modernity, societal pluralism, and contemporary intellectual developments (Majid, 1995). For Madjid, modernity is not a threat to religious life but a historical opportunity to purify Islam from symbolic and political burdens that obscure its ethical role in the public sphere. In his view, modernity provides a rational and moral foundation that enables Muslims to reassess their relationship with tradition, knowledge, social diversity, and the governance of civic life. It is within this context that Madjid advances his central idea of tawhid as a liberating principle: the oneness of God is not merely a theological affirmation but an emancipatory doctrine that frees human beings from the misuse of religion, from symbolic cults, from constraining social structures, and from political practices that instrumentalize religion for domination. By positioning tawhid as the moral foundation of Islamic modernity, Madjid directs Muslims toward the ethical purpose of religion namely the creation of a civilized, just, open society capable of living harmoniously within diversity (Madjid, 2019).

Furthermore, inclusivity stands as a defining characteristic of Islamic modernity in Madjid's thought. This inclusivity is not limited to a tolerant attitude but reflects an ontological recognition that diversity is an intrinsic part of divine order. Accordingly, a plural society like Indonesia requires a religious understanding that acknowledges cross-religious moral values as the basis for shared public life (Majid, 1997). Madjid contends that Islam cannot flourish under conditions of exclusivism, as an exclusive outlook only produces identity conflict, prejudice, and social alienation. Through the concept of inclusivity, he emphasizes the need for Muslims to respect religious, ethnic, and political differences as social realities that must be approached with maturity. Inclusivity, in this sense, does not imply relativism; rather, it expresses theological confidence that Islamic truths do not need to be imposed through political mechanisms or symbolic superiority. For Madjid, when Islam presents its moral principles openly and universally, it becomes a cultural force that strengthens social cohesion instead of fueling segregation (Majid, 2002).

Another significant component of Inclusive Islamic Modernity is the reaffirmation of rationality (Iqbal & Fauzi, 2025). Madjid argues that Islam is fully compatible with rational and scientific modes of thought, as the Qur'an itself encourages the use of reason, critical reflection, and the pursuit of knowledge. He critiques the tendency among some Muslims to become trapped in symbolic ritualism or narrow textualism, leading them to reject social change that could actually benefit humanity (Mahfud, 2025). Rationality in Madjid's conception is not secular rationalism that marginalizes religion, but an intellectual approach that harmonizes faith and reason. In this way, Muslims are encouraged to connect their religious convictions with methodological thinking that is open to critique, scientific verification, and cross-

cultural dialogue (Bunta et al., 2025). Rationality becomes a bridge for understanding modernity without abandoning Islam's spiritual roots, while at the same time serving as an ethical tool for addressing contemporary challenges such as intolerance, radicalism, and social inequality (Zuhriyah, 2012).

Among Madjid's widely discussed ideas is the concept of "secularization," which is often misunderstood as secularism (Djazuli & Rifqi, 2025). Madjid clarifies that secularization does not mean removing religion from public life; rather, it refers to the desanctification of worldly affairs so that religion is not reduced to political identity. For him, when profane matters—such as political power, parties, or state institutions—are treated as sacred, religion loses its moral dignity and becomes an instrument of authority. Secularization, as Madjid defines it, is a process of restoring religion to its original functions: an ethical, spiritual, and cultural guide shaping the character of society, rather than a tool for political competition. Through this lens, Madjid offers a paradigm of Islamic modernity that balances personal faith, social ethics, and democratic systems that protect the freedom and equality of citizens (Madjid, 2019b).

Madjid's thinking on Inclusive Islamic Modernity has strong relevance for contemporary Indonesia. Amid rising intolerance, identity-based polarization, and the spread of exclusivist religious ideologies, his ideas provide intellectual resources for strengthening social cohesion (Sabani, 2025). He demonstrates that Islamic values, when interpreted inclusively, serve as a foundation for democratic culture. In his view, democracy is not foreign to Islam, as principles such as consultation, justice, humanity, and social responsibility are deeply rooted in Islamic tradition. What contradicts Islam, according to Madjid, is not democracy but authoritarianism and the exploitation of religion for political gain. Thus, Madjid's concept of Islamic modernity encourages Muslims to embrace democracy, human rights, scientific advancement, and global cultural exchange without losing their spiritual identity (Madjid, 2019).

Ultimately, Inclusive Islamic Modernity in Nurcholish Madjid's perspective is a creative synthesis between Islamic tradition and the universal values of modernity (Maksum & Wiratama, 2025). Modernity is not perceived as a threat but as an ethical arena in which Islam can offer moral contributions to a plural society. His concept positions Islam as a liberating force, a source of public ethics, and a pillar of a tolerant, rational, democratic culture. Through an inclusive, rational, and civilization-oriented approach, Madjid provides a strong philosophical foundation for building an Indonesian society that is more dialogical, respectful of diversity, and morally grounded (Taji-Farouki, 2004).

Nurcholish Madjid's ideas imply that an inclusive, open, and humanitarian-oriented Islam can promote social justice and prosperity in modern society. This requires leaders to act with integrity and responsibility, ensuring that policies and actions reflect Islamic principles of justice and humanity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that inclusive Islamic moderation, according to Nurcholish Madjid, is grounded in fundamental principles emphasizing the universality of Islamic teachings, namely liberating monotheism, rationality, openness to modernity, and respect for cultural and religious diversity. Madjid's thought highlights that Islam functions not only as a religious system but also as a public ethic that promotes peace, dialogue, social justice, and universal humanity. In the Indonesian context, this concept of Islamic moderation has proven highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges, including rising intolerance, religious polarization, and identity-based radicalism.

The findings confirm that Nurcholish Madjid has made a substantial contribution to formulating the concept of inclusive Islamic moderation that resonates with the pluralistic character of Indonesian society. His perspective provides a strategic foundation for fostering a more inclusive, tolerant, and civilized society. If implemented consistently, this approach has the potential to serve as a model for strengthening social cohesion, religious harmony, and national integration in Indonesia.

However, this study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly in terms of analytical scope and depth. Therefore, constructive criticism and suggestions from readers and future researchers are welcomed, as they can further enrich and deepen the study of Nurcholish Madjid's thought. This will help ensure that the discourse on inclusive Islamic moderation continues to develop comprehensively and remains relevant for addressing contemporary social and religious challenges.

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