Abdullah Saeed


Secondary sources:


Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelago nation with the largest population of Muslims in the world, but with significant minorities of adherents of other religions, including Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. It is nevertheless not an Islamic state, and all citizens are equal before the law. It represents a confluence of diverse peoples and cultural traditions brought together by the arbitrary boundaries of the former Dutch East Indies. The Islamic traditions represented within it range from the radical to the latitudinarian. In the early years of the Republic, proclaimed in 1945, the issue of the ideological basis of the state was deeply divisive. There were regional revolts in favour of an Islamic state, and the principal Islamic parties had the achievement of Indonesia as an Islamic state as their long term objective. The ethnic and religious pluralism of Indonesia however gave cause for caution, particularly since there were from time to time sectarian clashes between Muslims and the Christian minorities in certain areas.

The continuing complexity of the situation prompted many Muslims to think about the nature of the state and the position of minorities in a way that went beyond the classical formulations of fiqh, alongside the more general issues of how Islam was to play a role in the modern world, and remain true to its identity.
Nurcholish Madjid is one of those taking part in this quest. Born in 1939, he is one of the best known Muslim public figures in Indonesia. He grew up during a critical period in the evolution of the Indonesian state. He was certainly aware of the privations of the period of the Japanese occupation, of the euphoria created by the proclamation of Indonesian Independence in 1945, and the anguish resulting both from the attempts of the Dutch to reclaim their former colony, and political infighting among the Indonesians themselves. During the years of his adolescence, he was able to see how divisions between Muslims had been exacerbated by leaders of different tendencies — reformist, traditionalist, call them what you will — forming political parties to present their conflicting views at the local and national levels. He also took note of their failure to make any effective contribution to the public good in Indonesia from the date of the first Parliamentary elections in 1955 to the end of the traumatic decade of the sixties. It was against this background that he made a speech on 3 January 1970, in which he gave dramatic utterance to the slogan ‘Islam Yes, Partai Islam No’ (Islam Yes! Islamic Parties, No!). In subsequent lectures and writings, he has proceeded to formulate a significant structure of ideas concerning the position and role of Islam in Indonesia, a state predominantly Muslim, though ethnically and religiously plural.

Nurcholish regards himself as a ‘neo-modernist’, although it must be conceded that this term, no less than ‘modern’, is inherently troublesome. He regards modernity as a synonym for rationalism, and Islam par excellence as a religion based on rationality, and argues these views on the basis of the Qur’an and hadith. He has not written any formal work on tafsir, however, and in his writings has shown little specialist concern with the other traditional Islamic disciplines.

His ideas and motivations derive from four overlapping contexts: his family background, his education, the events of the period in which he grew up, and the distinctive character and experience of Indonesia as a new nation in the modern world.
education that had characterised Nurcholish's early education. He was a successful student there, and in his senior years took part in its teaching programme.5

Like many able and ambitious students in the provinces, Nurcholish went to Jakarta for tertiary study. He was determined to continue the combination of religious and secular studies he had already begun, and so enrolled at the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN: State Institute of Islamic Studies) Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta.6 It was one of a number of such institutes established in each of the major centres of Indonesia, designed to teach religious along with secular subjects using the same modern academic methods, in a way designed to produce graduates with a well-rounded education qualified to serve in the various institutions related to religious administration in the country.

Political events

1960, the year in which Nurcholish entered the IAIN, saw the virtual end to the Darul Islam revolts against the central government in West Java, Aceh and the South Celebes.7 These had been provoked in part at the end of 1949 by the establishment of Indonesia, not as an Islamic state, but on the non-confessional ideology of the Pancasila, or 'Five Principles'. These are: belief in God (God being designated by the indigenous word Tuhan, not the Arabic-Islamic 'Allah'), nationalism, humanitarianism, social justice and democracy. In other words, to be an Indonesian was to profess a religion, but not necessarily to be a Muslim. The goal of these three regional revolts, which were in part coordinated, had been to transform Indonesia into an Islamic republic.

1960 was also a year in which the instruments and ideals of parliamentary democracy in Indonesia were in terminal decline, if not worse. The first parliamentary elections had been held in 1955 and the principal parties emerging with significant representation were the Partai Nasionalis Indonesia (the Indonesian Nationalist Party: PNI); the Partai Komunis Indonesia (the Indonesian Communist Party: PKI); the Masyumi, an Islamic political party based on reformist religious ideas and principles; and the NU representing traditionalist Islam, traditionalism being understood as adherence to the jurisprudence of the Shafi'i madhhab. Both Islamic parties had as part of their platform the ideal of Indonesia as an Islamic state, to be achieved by parliamentary means. The Nationalists and Communists, and a large number of minor parties, on the other hand, gave their allegiance to the Pancasila as the defining ideology of the new nation.

Notwithstanding the fact that the voting population of Indonesia at the time was about 90 per cent Muslim, the two principal Muslim parties together won only 42 per cent of the total vote. Moreover, although both had as a common goal Indonesia as an Islamic state, they were divided by profound disagreements on a number of issues. These included the need to accept the authority of one or another of the traditional schools of law (not necessarily the Shafi'i), their regional distribution, which had cultural concomitants - the NU being largely, but no means exclusively, Java based, and the Masyumi being largely, but again by no means exclusively, Outer Islands based - and by their political policies. The Masyumi was uncompromisingly anti-communist and pro-western, and had little confidence in the personality and policies of the then President Soekarno. The NU, on the other hand, was sympathetic to Soekarno, and prepared to enter into parliamentary coalitions that included both Nationalists and Communists (in which the Masyumi refused to participate), if only to secure political leverage not available to the Masyumi, and thereby have control over the Ministry of Religion. As a result, although both were Islamic parties, there was no basis for political cooperation between them.8

Nurcholish began his tertiary studies in Jakarta aware of the failure of the Darul Islam movements to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia by armed rebellion, and of the inability of the Islamic parties even to work together in pursuit of common goals, let alone to gain a majority of parliamentary seats. He had, moreover, suffered personally from his father’s attempt to break the nexus between membership of the NU, with all that it entailed in respect
of fiqh (that is, the authority of the Shafi‘i madhhab), and accepting the political policies of the Masyumi.

The final collapse of the parliamentary structure set up in 1955 came with an attempted coup in 1965. In its wake, Soekarno lost power, and General Suharto became effective ruler of the country. The effects were widespread and traumatic. Upwards of half a million communists or suspected communist sympathisers were killed, a large proportion of them in Nurcholish’s home region of East Java, and many by NU militias. The personal trauma this caused him must have been very profound.16

The resulting so-called New Order did not open any new windows of opportunity to Islamic political parties, not even to the Masyumi, which had been consistently anti-communist, and whose leaders had been victimised by both extreme nationalists and leftist sympathisers. Rather, the reverse was the case. In the aftermath of the attempted coup, for the first time in a generation, there had been an outbreak of Muslim violence against Christians in South Sulawesi and West Java. Memories of the Darul Islam revolts were still fresh, and militant Islam was regarded as being as much of a danger to the development of Indonesia as a unitary state as communism; in fact it was regarded as constituting the main political threat to the government. As a result the government took a number of steps to exclude parties identified by religion or a religious ideology from the political process. The Islamic faith was to have full expression as a complex of religious, cultural and social ideas and values, but not to present itself as a political ideology that might challenge the status of the Pancasila. The government’s goal was finally achieved in 1973, when the political parties permitted to participate in elections were reduced to three, with names that did not indicate a religious identity: the Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (the United Development Party: PPP), which subsumed the Muslim parties; the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (the Indonesian Democratic Party: PDI), which subsumed a number of other parties, including non-Islamic religious parties, the former Indonesian (democratic) Socialist Party and the secular nationalists; and, finally, there was Golkar (Golongan Karyawan: the

Tertiary studies

Such were the events that unfolded throughout the years during which Nurcholish was a student at the IAIN. He had enrolled in the Faculty of Arts in the Department of Arabic Literature and the History of Islamic Thought, and followed a broad-based humanities programme, completed in 1968. He graduated in that year with the submission of a thesis entitled al-Qur’an: ‘arabiyyun lughatan wa ‘alamiyun ma‘nan. The title – The Qur’an: Arabic in Language, Universal in Significance – should be noted. It indicates a significant stage in his intellectual development: a perception of the tension between the role of a single language given unique status by divine revelation, and the plural world in which this one language and the religion revealed through it were destined to play a universalistic role.

This choice of title shows that his thesis is not simply the conclusion of an academic programme, but a stage in his continuing engagement with issues and ideas about which leading Muslim figures of the time, whether ‘modernists’ or ‘traditionalists’, were already contending. These included Muslim identity, inter-religious relations, and the role of religion in politics and in economic and social development.

These debates were enriched at the end of the decade by the return of a number of highly gifted individuals – educationalists, administrators, and scholars – from courses of study at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal. Among them were Harun Nasution and Mukti Ali. Harun Nasution was to reorganise the academic programme of the IAIN12 and establish a seminal post-graduate programme there; and Mukti Ali was to serve as Minister of Religion in 1973, and
subsequently become Rector of the IAIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta. These and others became leaders in a movement that took the attitudes and thinking of many Indonesian Muslims, Nurcholish among them, beyond the neo-Hanbalism (the intellectual legacy of Rashid Rida) which had dominated the thinking of the self-styled Indonesian reformists during the 1950s.\textsuperscript{13} They had not provided clearer answers to the challenges presented by modernity than those offered by the traditionalists they had set out to displace, and the Masyumi, the political party by which they tried to realise their ideals, had limited success.

Just as he had served as a teacher at the Gontor madrasa on the conclusion of his studies there, after graduating from the IAIN Nurcholish joined its staff. At the same time, he worked as a researcher at the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI: The Indonesian Academy of Science).

\textbf{As a student and academic activist}

However, between 1960 and the year of his graduation, Nurcholish was not only a student but emerged as a leader in student religio-political organisations. He joined the Jakarta branch of the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (the Islamic Student Association: HMI) in 1963, and soon began to play a major active role in its activities. He must therefore have been acutely aware of the events that were taking place around the IAIN campus, which was not insulated from the tensions and oppressive atmosphere that pervaded Jakarta during these years. In 1966 (the year after the attempted coup), he was nominated to attend the national congress of the HMI in Solo, where he was elected General Chairman of its National Executive for a three year term, (1966–1969). He was later re-elected for a second term (1969–1971). Throughout his years there he had been a keen participant in the debate on renewal and reform in Islamic thought, necessary if Islam was to meet the challenges posed by modernity, particularly during his second term as president of the HMI.

The Muslim Student movement in Indonesia had international affiliations in which Nurcholish also played a role. He served as president of Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Asia Tenggara (the Union of Islamic Students of Southeast Asia: PEMIAT), from 1967 to 1969. From 1968 to 1971, he was Assistant Secretary General and a founder member of the International Islamic Federation of Students’ Organisations (IIFSO). He became general editor of the journal Mimbar Jakarta, and organised or belonged to a number of study clubs.\textsuperscript{14}

By the end of the decade he had realised that the struggle for Indonesia as an Islamic state through the efforts of political parties had come to a dead end. Thus his goal became Indonesia as a state that was Islamic, and he attempted to achieve this by seeking a meaning or ‘Islamic’ that could take into account the essential ethnic and religious pluralism of Indonesia, which would make it genuinely inclusive of all the diversity within the state. And it is this experience which lies behind the dramatic challenge referred to earlier, ‘Islam Yes, Partai Islam No’.

By the time the new decade began, Nurcholish had participated in, and continued to take part in, debates on the ways in which Islam and Muslims could respond to the challenges of modernity. The questions discussed were various, and they were raised in different forms: What kind of rethinking or the interpretation and authority of the Qur’an and hadith was necessary if these foundation texts were to be relevant to the modern world? How could Islam play its role in the modern world and retain its authenticity? Was Islam an ideology in competition with other ideologies? Was an Islamic state a necessary or even a desirable goal? Did Islam have the right or even the need for a privileged position in the apparatus of the state? How could Islam play its role in a civil society, in a religiously plural society, and how should it see its position vis-à-vis other religions?

All these were matters of concern to an emerging generation of Muslims in Indonesia no longer content with the ‘classical’ traditionalist world view. The questions raised were radical. But paradoxically, despite the increasingly authoritarian attitudes of the government, the kinds of answers proposed – which in fact ques-
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mentioned the value of Islamic political parties – coincided with government policy, thus the debates and proposals deriving from them did not attract government interference, and in fact won its support. Nevertheless Nurcholish was aware that the government had its own ideological agenda and realised that answers to these questions would have to come about within the framework of the Pancasila, the state ideology. By 1972, at least one aspect of his thought was firmly established:

The concept of ‘Islamic state’ is a distortion of the [properly] proportioned relationship between state and religion. The state is one of the aspects of worldly life whose dimension is rational and collective, while religion is an aspect of another kind of life whose dimension is spiritual and personal.15

In America

A new stage in Nurcholish’s life began in 1978 when he went to the University of Chicago. After a false start in sociology, he transferred to philosophy in an Islamic studies programme, working under the late Professor Fazlur Rahman. There he specialised in the thought of Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), who was the inspiration for a number of radical reform and revival movements through subsequent Islamic history. He submitted a successful doctoral thesis, entitled *Ibn Taimiya on Kalam and Falsafa: problems of reason and revelation in Islam*, in 1984.

These six years were an important part of his life. The years in America opened up new intellectual horizons for him. Fazlur Rahman was at that time the doyen of a new wave of Islamic thinkers. He was concerned with problems of how to interpret the Qur’an in the modern world, alongside other difficult and sensitive questions. Examples of these included the modality of prophetic inspiration, the centrality of Qur’anic teachings to the achievement of social justice, and the authority of traditional formulations of *fiqh* (particularly those concerning relations between Muslims and the adherents of other religions) in the modern world. He argued that the meaning and message of the Qur’an and the basis for its continuing relevance lies not in any single verse, but in the book as a whole. This led him to develop a contextual approach to the interpretation of the Qur’an.17

Nurcholish did not take up all of Rahman’s concerns. He has written little if anything on the modality of prophetic inspiration, for example. However, he was to take up vigorously the notion of ‘contextuality’ as a heuristic device in Qur’anic interpretation, particularly in the way in which legal rulings were to be applied, and in determining the authority of the *fiqh* of previous centuries in modern times.

Return to Indonesia

Nurcholish returned to Indonesia in 1984, coincidentally the year in which the NU (by then solely a religious educational and social welfare organization, and not a political party) bowed to government pressure, and became the first major Islamic organisation to accept the Pancasila as its sole ideological basis. It is in the numerous media articles, lectures, interviews and a constant stream of publications after his return that one can see how, in light of his experience, he interprets and uses the Qur’an and hadith to discover appropriate responses to challenges facing the Muslim community in Indonesia. This was a community within the circumstances of a country with a particular identity and at a particular point in its history, under a government determined to enforce particular policies.

His encounter with Fazlur Rahman had given Nurcholish a broader perspective on the problems facing the Islamic world. He had already concluded that political parties could provide no solution. Thus he began to look behind legal rulings to the values enshrined in the Islamic revelation.10 His aim was to see these values realised in a way appropriate to the distinctive character of the Indonesian state, in a way that would safe-guard the integration of Indonesia as a political entity, and enhance the role of the Pancasila as the cornerstone of national unity.

Nurcholish has written widely on this issue, taking ‘contextu-
Nurcholish Madjid and the interpretation of the Qur’an

Nurcholish, then, encounters the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition as an individual responding to the social and ideological turbulence of his time, but with neither the constraints nor the insights of the traditional Islamic disciplines of fiqh and tafsir. Since he has not written any dedicated work of tafsir, the principles governing his interpretation of the Book need to be inferred from his writings on other topics, particularly those published after his return from the USA. His approach is pragmatic, as he comes face to face with divisions among Muslims over issues of fiqh, and the need for inter-religious harmony in Indonesia. It is far removed from the cerebral concerns with literary theory of a scholar like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd.20

His love, reverence for and acceptance of the Qur’an as a revealed Book, and the authority it commands, is simple and uncomplicated. Its status is unique. It is authentic, existing today in exactly the form it had when revealed to the Prophet. It is the word of God, divinely given and error-free. It is accessible to all in this form. The authority to interpret it is not restricted to any priestly class.

It is, moreover, a revelation totally compatible with reason, and bases its appeal on reason. It proclaims that God did not create the world ’ahathan (in an arbitrary manner), and calls on humankind to make use of its capacity to reason to appreciate the coherence of God’s design. The Qur’an then is perfectly compatible with modernity. Modernity is equivalent to rationality, and rationality is integral to Islam. Rationality is not the exclusive monopoly of ‘the West’, nor is it to be identified with westernisation. The challenge facing Muslims in the modern world is to recover the rational dimension of Islam that has, over the centuries, become overlaid with habit and custom.

Reason and revelation are interdependent. Reason by itself cannot provide adequate guidance for humankind without the support of revelation (the Qur’an). Revelation, however, is necessarily in a human language, and reason is the instrument by which revelation may be properly understood and put to good effect. The use of reason in understanding and applying the message of the Qur’an goes beyond discovering or ascertaining the meaning of individual words or verses. An interpreter has to reflect on every issue touched on in the context of the Qur’an as a whole and, in the light of such an understanding, establish the relevance of its message to the modern world. For Nurcholish, therefore, reason goes hand in hand with faith (iman). They cannot be separated.

**Contextualist ideas**

Up to this point, Nurcholish’s acceptance of, and approach to the Qur’an is uncomplicated – even simplistic. It is contextuality that provides the hermeneutic principle which is the starting point for the more radical aspects of his approach to it as he follows in the footsteps of Fazlur Rahman.

Contextualisation involves relating Qur’anic logia to two contexts: one is the time and circumstances of the Prophet when it was revealed, the other is the contemporary situation for which its guidance is needed, the situation in which today’s ‘receptors’ of
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His starting point is that the Qur’an is closely bound to a place and a time. It is intrinsically related to the world of seventh-century Hijaz. Its content includes the challenges faced by the Prophet, his concerns and aspirations, and those of the Muslim community with him at that time. Although it is the word of God, it cannot be fully understood outside of this context. Nevertheless, it transcends it.

Everything in the Qur’an is part of a divine plan. At a practical level, this means that the laws given in the Qur’an had a purpose for the time and circumstances in which they were revealed. There is a seamless relationship between them, although the classical jurists did not appreciate this relationship, or explore its implications. This principle determines his approach to the Qur’an, for he is aware of the differences between that time and those circumstances, and the world of the late twentieth century. In studying the legal prescriptions it sets out, he considers them in the light of the social context in which they were revealed, and sees the application of them first in the time of the Prophet, and then by successive generations of the ‘receivers’ of the text and various stages in the interaction of Islam with history at specific times and places.

This is a significant shift away from the traditional understanding of the Qur’anic revelation. Even though classical tafsir and fiqh scholars were equally aware that the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic in Arabia to an Arab prophet, they did not recognise the corollary that the Qur’an had to be understood as a historical text. They largely disregarded this fact, and stressed the gulf between the Qur’an as word of God and the historical context in which it had been revealed. The closest they came to a recognition of such a relationship was through asbab al-nuzul (compilations of hadith setting out the circumstances of revelation of particular Qur’anic verses). Yet even these they regarded as little more than footnotes to revelation itself. In fact, the jurists, in formulating their rulings, often overlooked the association between revelation and context provided by the asbab al-nuzul and argued that a ruling should not be regarded as ‘specific’ in application simply because a circumstance of revelation related it to a particular situation. It was tacitly understood that a ruling was general, and the onus of proof was on establishing that it was not.

For Nurcholish this distinction was of central importance. For him, such rulings were specific to place and time, and the onus of proof was on establishing that they were general. Rather, it was the values behind them that endured, for lying behind these legal prescriptions are values that transcend time and place, even though the particular legal prescriptions themselves need no longer be put into effect. Re-examination of many of them was required, and appropriate methodologies for doing so must be devised.

He was impelled to do so by his awareness that many of the divisions between Muslim communities in Indonesia were caused by disagreement over points of fiqh, which were in themselves trifling; such as, whether the formulation of intention before the performance of the ritual prayer should be made orally, or mentally, which was among the issues so bitterly contested between the traditionalists and the reformists. It was differences over jurisprudential matters of this kind that were in part responsible for the pain Nurcholish and his family suffered during the two years that he was at an NU pesantren referred to earlier, because his father was politically pro-Masyumi: differences that rendered the Islamic parties politically ineffective, and as a result of which Islam ceased to command respect.

Contextualism was his weapon of choice to put an end to such absurdities, as well as to tackle more serious issues such as the relations between Islam and other religions, and death as the penalty for apostasy. It had to be recognised that the traditional formulations of fiqh were essentially contingent, its rulings conditioned by time and place. He proceeded by what he called ‘contextualised ijtihad’, and argues that, although modern as a term, contextualised ijtihad was exercised during the earliest period of Islamic history, even though it had not been incorporated into jurisprudence.
Examples of his use and justification of it – involving what he called ‘reactualisation’ – are included in an anthology of interviews published in 1998.21 These interviews included responses to criticism. Among them is an answer to an attack on him by the Malaysian scholar Syed Naquib al-Attas. Al-Attas took the view that every law created in the history of Islam had the status of Islam itself. It was therefore improper to contextualise such laws, to ‘reactualise’ the situation in which they were first applied in order to assess whether they were still binding, or how their application might be modified in the light of changing circumstances.22

Nurcholish replied that such a ‘reactualisation’ had been applied by the second Caliph ‘Umar (r.634–644). He gave as an example ‘Umar’s decree forbidding the distribution of conquered land as part of the spoils of war after the conquest of Syria. At first sight, this appears to be counter to the explicit teaching of the Qur’an. Qur’an 8: 41 gives a general rule for the distribution of the spoils of war: one-fifth is for God, the Messenger, his kin, orphans, the poor and travellers; the remaining four-fifths are to be distributed equally among those taking part in the action in question. ‘Umar, however, refused to allow Arab soldiers or clans to treat land or landed property as part of the spoils of war, although the Qur’an does not distinguish land from other forms of booty. He ruled that property was to be considered the permanent possession of the conquered community. The revenue it generated might be distributed, but not the land that produced this revenue. The historian Lapidus remarks that this ruling not only ensured a fairer distribution of the spoils of victory, but protected cultivated land from pillage.23

Nurcholish explains that ‘Umar based his judgement on the sense of the Qur’an as a whole. The Qur’an is fundamentally concerned with social justice, and the public good. This concern overrides the individual rights of those who, on the authority of this verse [Qur’an 8: 41], believed they could claim a share of the conquered land, a claim that would have wreaked havoc with social and economic life. Nurcholish points out that ‘Umar showed his awareness that the community he ruled had an ethical sense that lay deeper than any ad hoc legal prescription, and was composed of individuals who had a profound understanding of the spirit of religion.24

Another example of Nurcholish’s reasoning is his comment on Munawir Sjadzili’s suggested ‘reactualisation’ of a Qur’anic law of inheritance, in that a female with an equal degree of kinship should receive half the share of a male of a deceased’s estate [Qur’an 4: 11]. Munawir remarked that the education of his son had involved him in far more expense than that of his daughter, and raised the question as to why should the son, who had received so much from his father already, be entitled to double the share of his estate than that of his daughter?25

Nurcholish does not commit himself to a definitive answer but draws from the question a reflection on the appropriateness in such a case of applying a law on the basis of ‘ilal al-hukm (the efficient causes of the ruling), rather than ma’nat al-hukm (the reasoning behind the judgment). He suggests that a possible reason (‘illa) for this Qur’anic ruling is that the male is given a greater share of the estate because of his responsibility as breadwinner. But, he continues, the application of a law is determined by the reason for which it was prescribed. If this reason changes, then the application of the law changes. And he cites the appearance of the relatively recent phenomenon of the house-husband in American society, the woman in this situation being the breadwinner, a circumstance which would remove the reason for this ruling. He argues then that legal provisions in the Qur’an, such as the double share of an estate for a male, are themselves an ‘event’ deriving from the intersection of Islam with history at the moment of the Qur’anic revelation. Legal provisions cannot be considered in isolation from the purpose for which they were revealed, and the values they were intended to enshrine. Not to do so would be unfaithful to the general value-oriented message of the revelation, which was relevant for every time, place and circumstance.

A third example is his rejection of the traditional rule of fiqh which states that an individual who abandons Islam for another religion should be punished by death. On the occasion of an international conference, he challenged a delegate from Saudi...
Arabia who spoke in defence of the death penalty. In particular he asked why the evidence the delegate adduced in support of his argument was at the level of *fiqh*, which, as Nurcholish argues, is tightly bound to time and place, and not at the level of the Qur'an.

Nurcholish points out that there is no authority for such a penalty for apostasy in the Qur'an, and he cites a number of relevant verses. Of one who turns aside from Islam, the Qur'an says:

> One who turns aside from Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he will be among the losers. [Q. 3: 85]

The Qur'an further declares that a human being is free to accept or reject belief in God and His Prophet:

> Whoever believes, let him believe, and whoever rejects belief, let him reject it. We have prepared for those who do evil a fire that envelops them. [Q. 18: 29]

Nurcholish then draws the conclusion: It is God, not the state that will pass judgement on apostasy, and this judgement will come in a time of God's choosing. That there was at one time a death penalty for apostasy is due to historical circumstances. The death penalty may at one time have been appropriate. During the early period of Islamic history every Muslim was, in some sense a soldier. The community was under threat from armed enemies and its primary duty was to defend itself. In such a state of war the punishment for desertion is death. This is not now the case. In other words, the ruling according to *fiqh* that apostasy should be punished by death was the result of a specific interaction of event, circumstance, place and time. That interaction was in the past, and the ruling is no longer applicable. The tradition of *fiqh*, then, represents the experience of the 'receptors' of the Qur'anic message at particular points in time. Many other formulations of *fiqh*, representing as they do human responses to the fact of divine revelation, have no permanent, sacral authority.

In his approach to such questions, Nurcholish recognises that in the last resort, God alone is not subject to change. Accordingly, Muslims as members of human society - a plural society, undergoing rapid change - should not attach too much importance to the *fiqh* rulings made in the past beyond learning from them.

In the light of these considerations, Nurcholish, liberated from the impedimenta of history, feels free to discount the traditions of *fiqh* that justify or entail discrimination against the adherents of religions other than Islam, in order to explore without prejudice what the Qur'an itself has to say on the matter.

He insists that the Qur'an recognises these religions as valid instruments of salvation, and adduces a number of proof texts. There are several verses that establish that prophecy is universal, and so all peoples have knowledge of God. Among them,

> Every people has a messenger. So when their messenger comes, judgement will be made between them with justice. They shall not be wronged. [Q. 10: 47]

And,

> Messengers, some of whom We have already told of to you and Messengers of whom We have not yet told you. [Q. 4: 164]

The salvific validity of the religions preached by these prophets is guaranteed:

> Those who believe, those who follow Judaism, those who are Christians, those who are Sabaens, who believe in God and the Last Day, and do good Deeds, they have their reward with God. No fear shall fall upon them, they shall not grieve. [Q. 2: 62]

This is reiterated elsewhere:

> Among the people of the Book are those who have integrity, they recite the verses of God at set times during the night, they prostrate themselves [in prayer]; they believe in God and in the Last Day, they summon to what is right and prohibit what is wicked; they hasten to do what is right; they are included among those who are righteous. Any good they do, they will not be deprived of the merit they have acquired for it. God knows that they are devout. [Q. 3: 115-115]
These verses, Nurcholish argues, should be understood as enjoining the Islamic community not to define itself by narrow and exclusivist interpretations of the Qur'an in relation to other religions which had been formulated in the light of particular historical situations.

He underpins his argument with a reification of four Qur'anic words, *din, Muslim, Islam* and *Allah*. He sees in each of them a dual significance, one specific to the Muslim community and exclusive, the other generic and inclusive.

Thus *din*, in its traditional sense, means the structure and prescriptions of a specific faith, Islam. But the word may, and indeed should also, be understood as having a universalistic dimension, and include the modalities of any and every submission to a divinity. The word *Allah* likewise is to be understood not simply as the personal name of God, as acknowledged by Muslims, but as having the generic sense of Absolute Truth (*Haqq*). *Allah* however is one of the most beautiful names of God. Thus it is only a short step for *Haqq*, and so *Allah*, to be understood as a word inclusive of any name of God in any and every religious tradition.

Such a universalistic, inclusive understanding of the two words *din* and *Allah*, he continues, is at the heart of the following Qur'anic verse, in which he clearly understands *Din Allah* as service of the Ultimate Truth.

 bölüm*in al-din 'inda Allah al-Islam* [Q. 3: 19] recognises and confirms the validity of every religion that can be included in these extended definitions of these key words. This even extends to those formally outside the house of Islam: whether Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism or Hinduism. With the Qur'anic words understood in this way, all religions are on an equal footing. And this has a legal consequence: the state has no justification in putting one religion in a privileged position over any other.

Understood in this way, the Qur'anic condemnation of 'whoever seeks a religion other than Islam' [Q. 3: 85] that most of the traditional commentators consider to abrogate the verses, 'Whatever good they do, they will not be deprived of the merit they acquire for it' [Q. 3: 113-115] and 'they have their reward from God' [Q. 2: 62], does not apply to the followers of any religion sincerely held, but only to whoever 'embraces and follows a way of life other than one of obedience and submission to God; one who opposes the divine design, goes counter to the universal law that dominates all the world.'28 It may be noted that in this Nurcholish neatly sidesteps the whole issue of abrogating (*nasikh*) and abrogated verses (*mansukh*).

If other religions are valid instruments of salvation, it follows that their scriptures too must have an effective authenticity. This is in spite of the argument of many Muslims based on the concept of tahrij, developed from the Qur'an [Q. 4: 46 and 5: 13 and 41], that the extant forms of Jewish and Christian scriptures are 'distorted', or else lack authenticity and authority since they are not accessible in the original language of revelation. Nurcholish states that the existing scriptures of these two religions should be considered as having, for those who accept them, the authority of valid revelations. In this, in one way or another, he may be drawing on Ibn Taymiyya's views on the authenticity or otherwise of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. In any case, Nurcholish is giving more weight to content than form. This view is consistent with his basic ideas on religious pluralism. It is, in fact, integral to it.

Nurcholish finds the cornerstone to the structure of his ideas on religious tolerance in the Qur'anic verse in which Muhammad is commanded,
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Say, People of the Book, come to a word that is just (kalima sawa’) between us and you, that we worship none but God alone. [It is] that we associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall treat others as lords alongside Allah. [Q. 3: 64]

On the basis that Allah here is to be understood as the Ultimate Truth, Nurcholish sees in this verse a call to adherents of every religious persuasion to meet each other with mutual respect, while yet remaining true to their own identity. He reifies kalima sawa’ to mean a ‘meeting point’ between members of different religious communities. The significance and value implicit in the phrase he sees as fully realised in the Pancasila. The words kalima sawa’ then are the ultimate authority for the Pancasila, the formula by which Indonesia establishes a meeting point between the state and the various religious traditions at home within it.

Nurcholish’s ideas provoked bitter opposition in some Islamic circles. He was accused of either being influenced by Jews or Orientalists or both. On one occasion he was put ‘on trial’ at the Taman Ismail Marzuki, the principal cultural centre in Jakarta, an event to which he was not invited, but nevertheless attended.29 His opponents claimed that his interpretation of the words din, Muslim, Islam and Allah lacked authority. A prominent scholar, Daud Rasyid, denounced him, saying, ‘He attempts to find a meeting point between religions by manipulating the meanings of verses, by misunderstanding the hadith of the Prophet, and defiling the words of the ulama’.30 A number of those making such accusations against him are associated with radical Muslim fringe movements in Indonesia,31 but it would be an exaggeration to suggest that these were his only opponents. He moves into paths along which many cautious and reflective mainstream Muslims would hesitate to follow him, at least without serious qualification.

His defence against these charges is not based directly on Qur’anic exegesis but on what he regards as a general concern of the Qur’an, one overriding every individual legal ruling, that of maslaha (public interest). For Nurcholish, it is maslaha which is preponderant in the matter of which interpretation of Qur’anic logia is to be followed, after a contextual analysis of the relevant verses. It is maslaha that is the crucial consideration in his plea for acceptance of pluralism and religious tolerance, and it is on the basis of maslaha that he gives preponderance to those Qur’anic verses that project tolerance and inclusiveness. If the earlier interpretations in classical Islamic law were to be followed, it would be difficult to justify the total equality of Muslim and non-Muslim within the framework of the state which Nurcholish urges. But public interest demands that this be so. Therefore he argues that Muslims and non-Muslims as human beings must be seen as equals; as citizens of a modern nation state, and as followers of valid religions. This was not the view of the classical formulations of figh, but Nurcholish argues that the essential flexibility and pragmatism of early Islam has been largely lost in these. Some of the philosophers however had preserved it, and he cites Ibn Rushd, who maintained that all religions were equal, and all were valid paths to God.

Essentially, then, he is emphasizing another hermeneutical principle of central importance to him: that in many cases it is the circumstances of the interpreter and the interpretive community that determines how a text should be understood. The difficulties that many, even mainstream, Muslims have with this principle can be readily understood, and their accusations that he is selective in his choice of texts and distorts the meaning of Qur’anic logia are by no means frivolous.

His reply is that secondary sources in the post-Prophetic period have been accorded a sacral status that puts them virtually on a par with the foundation texts of Islam, and these sources obfuscate the true meanings of these texts. Such interpretations and rulings have to be desacralised through contextual analysis, so that the Qur’an and the Sunna can speak clearly and without any intermediary. In this, the general tendency and ethos of the Qur’an should be accorded more authority than individual verses taken out of their context. As opposed to the neo-Hanbalism of the earlier generation of the reformists – whose aim was to disengage authentic Qur’anic teachings from the views of interpreters, and then apply them with a puritanical literalness – his goal was to go further. His intention was to situate the Qur’anic teachings...
and establish the reasons for them in the socio-historical context of the revelation, to disclose the value that a particular ruling was intended to present, and then to search for the best means of achieving its realisation in contemporary Indonesia.

Conclusion

Nurcholish has no monopoly of such ideas. Mutatis mutandis they are widely scattered across the Muslim world, even though they nowhere command majority status. Yet his presentation of them is distinctive in the Indonesian environment. Even so, there are questions to be raised in any broader assessment of his achievement and its status in the larger panorama of the Islamic tradition. He justifies his ideas on pluralism by the Qur’an, but he has not arrived at them as a Qur’anic exegete. One could even question whether his interpretations of the Qur’an are exegesis at all in the proper sense of the word. Certainly his approach is not based on a word-by-word study of the Qur’an, making use of the established procedures, the checks and balances and qualifications of exegesis as an intellectually based discipline. Rather, it derives from a personal experience of the Qur’an as a whole in the situation of place and time that he is, and a reflection on the significance of particular words and phrases which he then highlights.

It is in this sense that his political and writing career may be seen as an interpretation of the Qur’an. He has attempted to discover in it significances that meet the needs of the contemporary ‘reception’ of the revelation, in the light of their current circumstances, and the community in which they live, an effort which finds its apogee in the discovery of a Qur’anic authority for the Pancasila in the phrase kalima sawa’. The results of his encounter with the Qur’an seem to match with his perception of the needs of Indonesia, and the political realities of Indonesia. That is one aspect of his vision.

There are however other aspects of his intellectual positions that merit exploration. It has already been noted that he is not an exegete, and that his treatment of the Qur’an does not derive directly from any one stream in the diverse traditions of Qur’anic exegesis. His references to Qur’an interpretation in general do not extend beyond the mystically tinged translation and commentary of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, or the more bleakly rationalist rendering and notes of Muhammad Asad.32

Siti Nadroh attempts to situate Nurcholish in a postmodernist context. She suggests that elements of a postmodernist approach are implicit in his understanding of the Qur’an, since he modifies the traditional Muslim view of it as a single reference point, a unique and exclusive meta-paradigm, by seeing it as establishing a variety of complementary reference points, each with its own validity. As she puts it, he conceives that in a pluralist world there is no place for the view, prevalent under modernism, that any one structure can speak with authority for all times and places. The reality of human diversity in a global village33 does not permit this. He recognises then, that postmodernism has a liberating potential. He is aware, however, of the danger of lapsing into relativism, and thus recognises that postmodernism is not a valid or complete discourse that can give an adequate answer to the problems engendered by modernism. The solution to the problem is to set the paradigm of tawhid (the declaration and recognition of the divine unity) over postmodernism. Once tawhid completes and guarantees the ideals implicit in postmodernism, and prevents any excess in the development of it that could lead to relativism. Thus, thanks to the enlightenment it brings, the misuse of religion that renders it a cause of wars is eliminated.34

Another approach to his interpretation of the Qur’an is to assess it in the light of more recent theories about the relation of a text to its readers. Madigan, in a recent study on the Qur’an, writes:

It is a brave, some might say foolhardy, person who proposes to tackle the question of the nature of texts in the present intellectual
climate, where the very notion of text seems to have become the
non-too-stable hinge on which virtually everything else hangs.
Nothing is more elusive these days than a text and scriptural reli-
gion arguably stands in urgent need of a more sophisticated under-
standing of the nature of texts.35

Nurcholish's plea that it is the circumstances of readers of the
Qur'an that play a critical role in determining its meaning for
them raises basic questions about the relation of text to reader,
and the semiotics of Qur'an interpretation. Up to the present,
however, his writings reveal no more explicit concern with semi-
otics at a theoretical level than with postmodernism.

Thus we return to the political and social context of Indonesia
as the dominant element in shaping his work, and come to the
tentative conclusion that he is not directly developing any intel-
lectual tradition but responding to the political environment in
which he lives, for which the guidance of the late Fazlur Rahman
has provided him with a road-map. Certainly his definition of the
Pancasila as the Qur'anic kalima sawa' - a meeting point of
pluralisms - shows the completeness of his immersion in the
concerns of Indonesia.

This contextualism (for he too is a contextual being), and the
conviction that members of the Muslim community of any place
or age have rights over the meanings assigned to the Qur'anic
text, are central to his approach. In his writings there is an evident
tension between the traditional beliefs concerning the inspira-
tion, authority and authenticity of the Qur'an with which he has
grown up, and the demands of the contemporary world in which
he lives. This tension is a primary energy source and motivation
for him to discover ways of opening up and displaying its rele-
vance to modern issues for Muslims and non-Muslims alike - to
strengthen the faith of Muslims, and demonstrate to non-
Muslims that in Islam is the best hope for the continuing rele-
vance of religion as a guide to life and moral values in the future.36

But, from another perspective, it may be asked how far his
journey has really taken him for, although his political aims and
ideals are clearly articulated, everything is set within the framework

of the Qur'anic revelation, and based on the authority of Qur'anic
words. Other religious communities are shown as having a place
and rights guaranteed by this revelation, but implicitly need to
recognise that the justification they enjoy is accorded them by the
Qur'an, over which the traditions to which they belong can claim
no authority. In other words, they are participants in an arena
established by the Qur'an. It is the Qur'an that sets the terms of
their acceptance, and their place in society is justified by the
concept of maslaha, or public good. This being so, Islamic political
parties would have nothing additional to contribute. Incidentally,
it may be observed that in Nurcholish's writings, there is little
evidence of any genuine encounter with the internal dynamics and
spirituality of any of the non-Islamic religious traditions that he
accepts as part of Indonesian life, and that his remarks on the
course of religious and intellectual history in the West from time to
time lack nuance.37

However this may be, Nurcholish's approach to the Qur'an is
important and distinctive in the Indonesian context. It is a voice
that recognises the status quo of a pluralistic society, and is
concerned for the public good. It evolves out of and alongside his
political activities, and his patriotism. Its primary goal is not a
theoretical construct of ideas, but an attempt to contribute to the
public good. His hope is that as Indonesia as a nation grows in
historical depth, and thus at a higher organizational level of inte-
gration, there is evolving with it an articulation of Islam, wedged to
Indonesia as a nation, that can serve as a model for inter-religious
harmony in other areas of the Muslim world.38

NOTES

1. Subsequently Nurcholish only, except on official documents,
Indonesians are usually known and referred to by a single personal name.
2. For a succinct account of his career and synopses of some of his
works see Peter G. Riddell, Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World (London,
3. These and other proper names are spelt according to the conven-
tional Indonesian transliteration of Arabic words.
4. For a background to relations between Mas'umi and the NU during

5. The biographical information presented here is taken from Siti Nadroh, Wacana Keagamaan & Politik Nurcholish Madjid (Jakarta, 1999), pp. 21-23. This is a useful introduction to Nurcholish and surveys his intellectual development. It had its origin in a thesis submitted to the IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah under the title Pandangan Nurcholish Madjid dalam perspektif Paham Keagamaan Postmodernisme.

6. This institution has a history dating back to July 1945, involving a number of changes in name and even location, but 1 June 1957 is regarded as the date of its foundation. The authors thank Dr. Salman Harun, currently Dean of the Faculty of Arts, for this information (Pedoman Akademik IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah [Jakarta, 2001], pp. 1-6).

7. For a full account of these regional revolts, and the threat they presented to the new republic, see C. van Dijk, Rebellion Under the Banner of Islam (The Hague, 1983). See especially on West Java pp. 68-51; South Sulawesi, pp.187-94, and on Aceh, pp. 396-29.


9. Ibid., pp. 225-44.


11. For an account of this, see Johns, 'Indonesia', pp. 207-29.

12. For biographical data on Harun Nasution, see Riddell, Islam, pp. 231-33.

13. Ibid., pp. 231-37.


17. The clearest overview of his approach to and understanding of the Qur'an is in the seminal work Fazlur Rahman, Major Themes of the Qur'an (Chicago and Minneapolis, 1986).


19. Nurcholish is a prolific author. Riddell, Islam, p. 239 refers to English renderings of his work in C. Kurzman, ed., Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook (New York, 1998). The authors are grateful to Dr. Eko Alvaros, who sent from Jakarta a number of volumes from his personal collection of Nurcholish Madjid's works not otherwise accessible to them.


22. Ibid., pp. 249-44.


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25. Ibid., p. 246.

26. This and all subsequent renderings of the Qur'an are by Anthony H. Johns.


29. This event occurred on 13 December 1992. A report of an interview with Nurcholish concerning it can be found in Madjid, Dialog Keterbukaan, pp. 297-300.


33. Nadroh, Wacana Keagamaan, pp. 80-90 quotes extensively from Nurcholish outlining this element in his thinking.

34. Ibid., p. 93.


37. Consider for example the section 'Islam dan Negara, serta Masalah Sekularisn' ('Islam and the State and the issue of Secularism'), in ibid., pp. cxxi-cxxii.

38. We are appreciative of the comments of Greg Fealy (Department of Political and Social Change, RSPAS, the Australian National University) on a draft of this chapter.

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The inclusion of Amina Wadud in this book on contemporary Muslim intellectuals and the Qur’an is fitting for several reasons. Firstly, her work conclusively establishes the Qur’anic basis of gender equality in Islam, and thus raises questions about patriarchal (mis)readings of the scripture. This has garnered her not only acclaim, but also criticism from those who have been unsettled by her work. Secondly, Wadud is the only woman in this group, a fact that powerfully illustrates her own achievements in a male-dominated field and her charge that, historically, women have been excluded from Muslim interpretive communities and, consequently, from the field of Qur’anic exegesis, or tafsir. This exclusion, she believes, explains why traditional tafsir is restrictive to women. Lastly, of the scholars included in this volume, Wadud is the only (African-American/Western) convert to Islam. She thus brings to her engagement with the religion not only a specific consciousness shaped by her identity, but also a spirit of critical inquiry that leads her to raise questions about Islam that people who are born Muslim often do not consider asking. As a result, she is often able to offer fresh insights into the Qur’an’s teachings.

Since Wadud is the first to acknowledge that people always read from specific sites and that they always bring specific forms of subjectivity into their readings—reading for her is an interpretive