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Nurcholish Madjid, Liberation Theology, and the Reconstruction of Islam as a Religion of Humanity: A Contemporary Analysis

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Abstract

This study scrutinises Nurcholish Madjid's thought through the prisms of Liberation Theology and the reconstruction of Islam as a religion of humanity, concentrating specifically on inclusive pluralism, substantive democracy, and liberation-oriented pedagogy. Employing a qualitative literature review methodology, the inquiry interrogates recent scholarly discourse and foundational texts germane to Madjid's work, Liberation Theology, and the evolving contours of contemporary Islamic thought. The analysis unfolds via thematic content analysis, permitting the identification, classification, and synthesis of pivotal motifs such as the doctrinal relocation from theocentrism to anthropocentrism, the reconfiguration of Tawhid within social-justice discourse, the broadening of the term ahl al-kitab, and the repudiation of doctrinal theocracy. Findings indicate that Madjid counsels a shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism, positing that while affirming divine oneness, Tawhid concurrently repudiates all oppressive dynamics confronting humanity. His discourse underscores the enduring relevance of Qur'anic values as interventions against contemporary exigencies—including structural poverty, social injustice, and the pluralism crisis—while simultaneously positioning education as a conduit for spiritual liberation, the cultivation of critical consciousness, and the nurturing of public morality that liberates religion from political co-optation. The research substantiates Madjid's stature as a preeminent modern Muslim intellectual who adeptly fused liberation theology, political engagement, and pedagogy, thereby engineering a comprehensive and civilising transformation of society.

Keywords: Nurcholish Madjid, Liberation Theology, Islam, Religion, Humanity.

Introduction

The present geopolitical condition reveals a marked re-politicisation of religious traditions, undermining the assumption that secularisation would uniformly excise them from the public sphere (Ciftci, 2015). Across the spectrum of lived religions, including Islam, the affective dimension of faith re-enters the socio-political arena, actively reframing moral and institutional agendas (Woodward, 2007). Such a re-emergence exposes a persisting collective instinct—

whether spoken or subdued—for a moral vocabulary that secular discourses often fail to satisfy (Ali, 2006). Rather than a remnant of pre-modernity, this re-entrance of faith consolidates collective identities and recalibrates public deliberation. In response, the academic and activist communities are pressed to reconstruct theological discourses that remain critical and capacious enough to engage the array of contemporary global crises (Crabtree, 2022).

At the same time, classical ‘Ilm Kalam, which has shaped Islamic theological discourse for centuries, now confronts a moment of critical self-reflection. Its scholarly achievements remain undeniable, yet contemporary observers frequently depict the discipline as insular and insufficiently engaged with urgent material and existential crises, ranging from systemic poverty and deep-seated ignorance to geopolitical violence and ecological collapse. More than historiographical, such a diagnosis signals a perceived incapacity of the inherited paradigms to translate doctrinal articulation into actionable, socially resonant guidance, thereby producing a significant experiential rupture for many believers (Zamzila & Rambe, 2025). Underlying this rupture is an increasingly vocal interrogation of religion’s ability to remain pertinent and generative in confronting shared human predicaments. When inherited discursive boundaries falter in addressing pressing realities, the vacuum invites scholarly and communal reflection upon the necessity for a re-contextualised, praxis-driven Islamic theological methodology (Hakim & Muzammil, 2023).

This inquiry confronts the enduring malaise rooted in the conflict between certain historical, often exclusivist, readings of Islamic tradition and the contemporary imperatives of human emancipation, distributive justice, and recognition of religious pluralism. Over time, many of these readings have faltered in accommodating the plural textures of modern societies or in confronting entrenched and systemic injustices. Such a confrontation is not merely a matter of external critique; rather, it exposes a persistent rigidity—both theological and hermeneutical—within this tradition that, when unexamined, curtails its capacity for meaningful engagement with modern pluralism and frustrates its ethical horizons (Sinn et al., 2015).

In this context, the Indonesian intellectual Nurcholish Madjid posed a decisive challenge to the entangled oppositions of exclusivity and pluralism (Pratama, 2023; Bruinessen, 2006). Madjid affirmed that religious plurality is not an incidental aberration in the Indonesian archipelago but a geopolitical and existential given that demands serious theological labour (Kim et al., 2020). He accordingly proposed a radical reformulation of fundamental Islamic categories to cultivate an inclusively reflexive theology. Madjid urged scholars to study Islam not as a self-enclosed dogma but as a historical, sociologically textured, and anthropologically situated reality. His intellectual enterprise, therefore, serves as an internal corrective that seeks to align the normative resources of Islam with the urgent demands of emancipatory politics and principled, active pluralism (Barton, 2007).

This research investigates Nurcholish Madjid's appropriation of liberation theology within a modern Islamic framework and appraises his endeavour to recast Islam as a faith oriented toward human flourishing. Central to the investigation is the epistemic transition from a theocentric to an anthropocentric theological paradigm, wherein social justice, pluralism, and the education of the oppressed acquire interpretive primacy. The study's significance resides in its contextual and practical theological method, which is designed to engage pressing contemporary problems—notably poverty, structural injustice, and crisis in pluralistic coexistence—while advancing the corpus of progressive Islamic intellectual discourse.

Literature Review

The Genesis and Evolution of Liberation Theology: From Latin America to Global Contexts

Liberation theology developed in Latin America during the 1960s among Catholic scholars responding to entrenched poverty and pervasive social injustice (Ciftci, 2015). Gustavo Gutiérrez and other theologians stressed the necessity of interpreting the Christian message from the vantage of those who suffer (Gutiérrez, 2023). Although rooted in classical Catholic doctrine, the movement openly assimilated Marxist social critique, particularly the analysis of systemic exploitation and institutionalised inequality. This scholastic exchange permitted theologians to suspend classical anthropology in favour of interrogating the socio-political conditions that produce destitution and exclusion. The assessments were not abstract; they catalysed the formation of popular ecclesial communities that educated peasants and workers in conscience and Scripture and incited collective struggles for agrarian reform, workers' rights, and authentic popular sovereignty (Zamzila & Rambe, 2025). Throughout the subsequent decades, Liberation Theology's intellectual and organisational coordinates accompanied the anti-apartheid struggle in southern Africa, evident in the witness of thinkers and bishops such as Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu. The movement's critique of imperialist exploitation and dedication to people with low incomes also resonated in the Islamic Republic, particularly in the writings of Ali Shariʿati, who translated its categorical imperative for justice into a contemporary Shiʿi idiom of anti-colonial resistance and economic reform (Dabashi, 2008; Rahemtulla, 2023).

The later geographic and denominational dispersal of Liberation Theology indicates that its foundational convictions—preferential option for the poor, interrogative hermeneutics, structural critique, and the call to praxis—sustain a prophetic and ecumenical capacity that transcends their Latin American genesis. This universality suggests that both the experience of oppression and the aspiration for liberation surpass particular confessional confines, rendering the corresponding theological postulates amenable to reception and modification by diverse religious communities. Although its immediate visibility may have diminished, Liberation Theology endures as a formative reference for present-day confessional and socio-political initiatives, notably through its discerning interrogation of neoliberal regimes and its sustained insistence upon solidarity among subjugated constituencies in an era of intensified global interdependence (Rahemtulla, 2023).

Although Liberation Theology offers significant contributions, especially its concern for the poor and oppressed (Vegel, 2018), the movement has not escaped harsh criticism, mostly from ecclesiastical authorities and conservative academics (Hohner, 2015; Vegel, 2018). These criticisms center on three main issues: dependence on Marxist analysis, the risk of political co-optation, and theological reductionism.

First, Liberation Theology has been heavily criticized for its apparent reliance on Marxist categories, particularly in its analysis of society and history (Vegel, 2018). Critics, as expressed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, are concerned that the use of Marxist analysis, even if only as a sociological tool, will inherently lead to the acceptance of the entire Marxist atheistic ideology (Hohner, 2015). There is a real risk that Liberation Theology will introduce a Marxist understanding of history and selectively interpret sacred texts, equating the biblical poor with the oppressed classes in the capitalist system (Vegel, 2018). This criticism accuses Liberation Theology of using Marxist analysis of society, history, and justice, only giving it a Christian expression (Vegel, 2018).

Second, Liberation Theology is accused of theological reductionism that leads to the politicization of faith (Vegel, 2018). Liberation Theology is accused of reducing the spiritual concept of 'redemption' to merely worldly and temporal 'liberation' (Vegel, 2018). Critics argue that Liberation Theology overly politicizes the message of the Gospel, making evangelism and liberation from sin secondary or neglected in favor of political and economic liberation (Hohner, 2015; Vegel, 2018). As a result, Liberation Theology is considered to be at risk of losing the unique identity and

mission of the Church, and instead becoming an instrument in political games. The criticism highlights that Liberation Theology, by focusing on class struggle and efforts to create "God's Kingdom on Earth" (in a form shaped by Marxism), neglects the Church's primary task of making disciples (Vegel, 2018).

Islamic Liberation Theology: Key Figures, Principles, and Debates in Contemporary Scholarship

The term "Islamic Liberation Theology" designates readings within the Muslim tradition that join the struggle against oppression to the quest for social justice (Dabashi, 2008; Rahemtulla, 2023). Such readings resonate with the normative Islamic injunctions of amr bil ma'rūf wa nahi anil munkar, which compel believers to contest wrongdoing at every social level (Curtis, 2014). Among the leading voices within this normative rereading are Ali Shari'ati, Farid Esack, Hamid Dabashi, and Asghar Ali Engineer (Esack, 1997; Engineer, 1989). Integrating liberationist paradigms, each has turned the critical lens first upon Western imperial formations, then upon structures of economic and political tyranny within Muslim polities themselves. Their oeuvre insists upon the imperative to translate Islamic ethical principles into active engagement with the pressing injustices of the contemporary political arena.

Comparative research on liberation theologies reveals similar discursive patterns in the Christian and Islamic traditions: each rereads the entire religious corpus through the perspectives of the disenfranchised and subaltern (Ciftci, 2015). Both traditions foreground orthopraxy and celebrate the self-activity of the oppressed, critiquing the detached other-worldliness of some doctrinal formulations. Divergences, however, remain. Theoretically, the Islamic paradigm—lacking an unequivocal magisterium comparable to the Roman see—may possess a structurally greater openness to radical institutional transformations and apocalyptic mobilisations, a tendency evidenced in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Such a constellation of factors suggests that liberationist energies interact distinctively with institutional frames. A holistic appreciation of the phenomenon must trace the continually reciprocal relation between scholarly interpretation and believers' situated, embodied practices.

Category	Description	Sources
Shared Principles	Reinterpretation of religion from the perspective of the poor/oppressed; Emphasis on action (orthopraxy) and the agency of the oppressed; Rejection of excessive other-worldliness (focus on worldly justice).	(Ciftci, 2015; Dabashi, 2008)
Distinctions in Christian Liberation Theology	Origin in Latin American Catholicism (1960s); Influence of the Second Vatican Council; Specific theological frameworks (e.g., Gustavo Gutiérrez's A Theology of Liberation).	(Ciftci, 2015; Gutiérrez, 2023)
Distinctions in Islamic Liberation Theology	Alignment with core Islamic principles such as amr bil ma'rūf wa nahi anil munkar; prominent figures include Ali Shari'ati, Farid Esack, Hamid Dabashi, and Asghar Ali Engineer; emphasis on anti-imperialism, economic justice, and challenging tyranny; hypothesis of higher potential for social upheaval due to absence of central authority.	(Ciftci, 2015; Dabashi, 2008; Engineer, 1989; Esack, 1997)

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Key Principles in Christian and Islamic Liberation Theologies. Source: (Authors own)

This table provides an overview of convergences and divergences between Christian and Islamic liberation theologies. Both frameworks consistently privilege the viewpoint of the marginalised, prioritise transformative practice over doctrinal correctness, and critique any spirituality overly fixated upon the eschaton. However, Christian liberation thought first crystallised within the Latin American Catholic milieu of the 1960s, drawing momentum from the Second Vatican Council and theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez. Islamic liberation theology, by contrast, is articulated through the mandate of amr bil ma'rūf wa nahi 'an al-munkar and is cultivated by intellectuals such as Ali Shari'ati and Farid Esack, positioning anti-imperial critique, the pursuit of economic justice, and defiance of tyranny at its centre. Moreover, the Islamic paradigm is sometimes assessed as having heightened capacity for sociopolitical upheaval because it lacks a singular ecclesial body capable of doctrinal closure or disciplinary sanction (Rahemtulla 2023).

The Intellectual Journey of Nurcholish Madjid and the Indonesian Neo-Modernist Movement

Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005), affectionately referred to as Cak Nur, emerged as a formative figure in the Indonesian neo-modernist movement, influencing religious thought and civic discourse (Bruinessen, 2006). He promulgated a conception of Islam that prizes dynamism, rational critique, inclusivity, situating tolerance, democratic governance, and pluralist coexistence at the core of the faith's contemporary viability (Barton et al., 2021). Madjid's intellectual trajectory delineated a notable reorientation: early affiliation with conservative Islamic political formations gradually led to a more explicitly reformist disposition (Barton, 1997; Barton et al., 2021). This transition illustrates an ongoing engagement with the exigencies of modernity and a self-conscious programme of renewal within the Islamic tradition.

During the 1970s, he memorably articulated the provocative declaration, "Islam Yes, Islamic Party No!" (Bruinessen, 2006). This seemingly paradoxical statement revealed his conviction that the realm of politics, being contingent and contingent human affairs, must be ordered by pragmatic, worldly criteria rather than the transcendent dictates of religion. He thereby advocated a politicisation that preserves the ethical dimension of Islam while confining its institutional immediacy, effectively advocating a "political secularisation" that insulates the state from religious categorisations of authority for governance (Sirry, 2007). However, his project was not secularism in any genealogical sense congruent with the Western model; it was instead a deliberate desacralisation of state and party institutions(Bakti, 2005). In disentangling Islam from party accountability and electoral cycles, he sought to recover the original ethical content of the religion and present it as the generative horizon of public virtue and substantive democracy. The ethical residue of Islam, thus released from party programmatic constraint, was imagined to circulate unobstructed in the public sphere, thereby exerting a universal and uncompromised ethical force that exceeds the terminus of any single party or state apparatus (Woodward, 2007).

Madjid consistently framed democracy as a dynamic process subject to continual adaptation, distinctly eschewing any notion of a finished constitutional model (Ichwayudi et al., 2025). He asserted that such a process entails an ethical horizon, active, critical participation, and a persistent mediation of Islamic values within and against civil institutions. Through the notion of "Islamic democracy," he situated popular sovereignty at the centre of polity, reserving normative resources from Islam to underwrite public morality, yet sharply distinguishing his project from any statally dominant theo-democracy (Thaha, 2005). Madjid accordingly elevated educational endeavours above immediate political mobilisation, arguing that advancing intellectual and moral capacities would, in the long run, best serve Islam's public flourishing in the Indonesian context (Miftahuddin, 2025). The sequence he thus disclosed indicates that for Madjid, authentic and enduring social change must be conceived as an extended temporal horizon, decisively anchored

in the formative advancement of individual intellect and ethics (Woodward, 2007).

Method

This inquiry systematically utilises a qualitative literature review to integrate multifaceted theological and intellectual domains (Creswell, 2014). Such a strategy permits an extended critical reading and hermeneutical engagement with the available literature rather than the collection of novel empirical evidence. The design adheres to a disciplined trajectory of recognising, curating, and interrogating scholarly contributions to the ideas of Nurcholish Madjid, Liberation Theology, and the reconceptualisation of Islam. This study strikes a balance between contemporary scientific discourse analysis and fundamental textual studies. Primary sources (Madjid's own writings) are treated as the core corpus for establishing his theological and conceptual postulates. Madjid's central works that are the focus of analysis include Islam: Doktrin dan Peradaban (Islam: Doctrine and Civilization) (1992) and Khazanah Intelektual Islam (Islamic Intellectual Heritage) (2019). These fundamental works are important for tracing Madjid's arguments regarding the shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism and his rejection of theocracy. Secondary literature ("recent scholarly discourse") serves as a contextual lens for assessing the ongoing relevance of Madjid's ideas in relation to contemporary crises, including structural poverty, social injustice, and the crisis of pluralism. The search protocol deployed across peer-reviewed archives was concentrated on Scopus-indexed journals, thereby subscribing to recognised scholarly quality and citation weight. The search string encompassed terms including, but not limited to, “Nurcholish Madjid," "Liberation Theology," "Islamic Liberation Theology," "Reconstruction of Islam," "Religion of Humanity," "Islamic pluralism," "anthropocentric theology," "Islamic democracy," and "neo-modernism." Articles published during the past decade were preferentially selected to reflect the present scholarly environment and ongoing discursive shifts. However, seminal studies were admitted temporally to ensure a sound historical grounding.

Analysis proceeded by employing thematic content analysis, which comprised four principal phases: (1) preliminary coding of each text to distil principal ideas, argumentative strands, and emergent themes; (2) organisation of these strands into thematic categories that grouped by conceptual affinity, including pluralism, Islamic democracy, and anthropocentric theology; (3) narrative synthesis to weave findings from disparate sources into an articulated, unified account; and (4) critical comparison to juxtapose divergent interpretations and to trace conceptual evolution, research lacunae, and the continuing relevance of these ideas against contemporary conditions. This iterative method guarantees that the review yields a chronicle of findings and a disciplined, argumentative reflection that advances the conceptual dimensions of the discourse (Humble & Mozelius, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Nurcholish Madjid's Theological Reconstruction of Islam

Nurcholish Madjid's intellectual trajectory is animated by principles that strongly echo Liberation Theology, notably its fusion of emancipatory praxis and the imperative of social justice (Madjid, 1992; Madjid, 2019). He framed education as an irreducible process of “spiritual and social liberation,” denouncing conventional curricula that either estranged learners from their cultural-religious inheritances or collapsed the activity of learning into instrumental rationality devoid of ethical dimension (Kholil et al., 2025). Madjid's outlook complements Paulo Freire's notion of "conscientisation," whereby pedagogy empowers the subjugated to name and analyse their condition, equipping them to engineer their freedom (Freire, 2020). This pedagogical lens uncovers a dialectical unity of epistemology and praxis in his articulation of emancipation. For Madjid, liberation transcends a purely external political or economic reordering; it encompasses

a simultaneous, radical reconfiguration of consciousness and understanding.

Madjid regards the reframing of "Islam" from a circumscribed confessional membership to the general principle of "surrender" to the divine will as a moment of critical hermeneutical renewal. This reframing is neither random nor subjective; it is somewhat grounded in Quranic assertions that the divine message is singular and addressed to humankind through a continuum of prophets, appealing to an original, God-conscious disposition in every soul. The Quranic declaration, "We do not distinguish between any of them" about the prophets, indicates a movement away from an insular, exclusivist view of religious belonging toward one that is essentially universal and inclusive. Madjid's interpretive procedure involves thoroughly examining the Qurʾān to disclose its wider moral and universal imperatives. Consequently, religious identity is reconceived not as a rigid boundary marker but as a common, primordial openness to the divine. This furnishes a robust theological foundation for interfaith solidarity and genuine mutual regard, rather than a minimalist, courtesy-based tolerance.

In addition, the Qurʾān presents human diversity not as a shortcoming or a catalyst for discord, but as an intentional divine ordinance intended to foster interaction, learning, and mutual enrichment among persons. Madjid posits that pluralism is an indispensable theological conclusion, encouraging spirited cooperation instead of mere forbearance. The expression li taʿārafū (“so that you may come to know one another”) in surah Al-Hujūrāt 49:13 serves as a keystone for this proposition. It denotes an active, mutual endeavour for comprehension rather than a subdued and passive coexistence. The same principle is corroborated by the Qurʾān’s injunction to safeguard every sanctuary of worship, conceived as sites wherein the divine name is invoked. Such a perspective contests narrow readings that cast religious variance as perilous; instead, it portrays diversity as a prospect for shared human advancement and a more profound apprehension of the multifaceted divine presence. This corpus thus affords a theological foundation from which to construct a genuinely pluralistic polity that acknowledges and exults in religious and cultural differences rather than simply tolerating them.

Concept/Aspect of Madjid	**Key Verses/Concepts of the Qur'an**	**How the Verse/Concept Supports Madjid's Idea**
Universal "Islam" as Submission	QS. 2:136, 3:84 (No distinction between Prophets); QS. 30:30 (Fitra); QS. 21:108 (Submission to Allah's Will)	Emphasising the unity of the divine message across all prophets and humanity's innate tendency to recognise God, supporting the universal meaning of "Islam" as submission to God.
Expansion of Ahl al-Kitab	QS. 2:62, 5:69, 22:17 (Validity of other religions); QS. 10:47, 16:36 (Universal Prophethood)	Recognising the validity of other religions and shared values, implying various paths to salvation, and showing that prophethood is not limited to a specific tradition.
Religious Freedom	QS. 2:256 (There is no compulsion in religion)	Explicitly states there is no coercion in choosing a religion, affirms individual freedom of belief, and rejects coercion.

Diversity as Divine Will	QS. 49:13 (Get to know one another); QS. 4:1 (Created from a single soul); QS. 2:213, 10:19 (Humans are different by the will of Allah)	Emphasising human diversity as part of God's plan for mutual understanding and cooperation, not for division.
Interfaith Cooperation	QS. 22:40 (Protection of places of worship); QS. 5:48 (Competing in goodness)	Recognising and protecting all places of worship as sites of remembrance of God, promoting peaceful coexistence and positive competition in virtue.

Table 2. Qur'anic Foundations of Nurcholish Madjid's Inclusive Pluralism. Source: (Authors own)

Table 2 presents how Nurcholish Madjid drew upon the Qur'anic verses to elaborate an inclusive theory of pluralism, positing Islam as the universal injunction of submission to God, while interpreting religious diversity as an expression of divine will. For every methodological component of his argument, he adduces Qur'anic texts that either overtly or decisively underpin the equality of prophets, the legitimacy of non-Islamic faiths, the grant of religious liberty, and the imperative of cooperation and mutual esteem. The resulting study attests that Madjid's mode of interpretation exceeds mere contextual adjustment; it constitutes a deliberate theological enterprise aimed at the undoing of exclusivism, thereby erecting a social ethic grounded in justice, dignity, and collaboration across faith communities. The resultant scheme accordingly carries import that extends beyond the confines of Islamic scholarly circles, informing, in concrete ways, the ongoing pursuit of a peaceful and pluralistic social order.

Reconstructing Islam as a Religion of Humanity: The Shift from Theocentrism to Anthropocentrism

Central to Madjid's reformulation of Islam is his call for a decisive reorientation of Islamic theology from a primarily theocentric focus to one that foregrounds the human subject. He contended that classical theological discourse had ossified into an enterprise whose principal intent was the exoneration of the divine rather than the empowerment of human beings, leaving urgent worldly concerns unresolved. By centring human experience, this reformulation seeks to mediate between time-honoured textual heritage and contemporary exigencies, thus enabling a viable and resonant revival of Islamic thought. The reform directly engages widespread human predicaments, including the reality of pluralism, the openness of cultural and spiritual diversity, systemic poverty, and the degradation of the environment. Such a shift, far from suggesting a depreciation of the divine, is framed as an unequivocal ethical and theological demand, positing that the divine intention is inseparable from attaining human flourishing (Madjid, 1992; Madjid, 2019).

For clarity, the "Anthropocentric Theology" advocated by Madjid is a decisive reorientation of theology from a God-centered focus (theocentric) to a focus that prioritizes the human subject. This shift, which aims to mediate between textual heritage and contemporary demands, is based on the assumption that divine intent cannot be separated from the achievement of human flourishing. Meanwhile, "Humanity Religion" refers to Madjid's attempt to reconceptualize religious identity as a primordial, general, and universal openness to God, based on the general principle of "surrender" to divine will, rather than limited membership recognition.

It is important to distinguish Madjid's anthropocentric framework from Secular Humanism. Madjid's project is not secularism in the Western genealogical sense; rather, it is a deliberate

desacralization of state and party institutions. Madjid maintains Tawhid (Divine Oneness) as a theological anchor, which functions as an ethical mandate that categorically rejects all dynamics of oppression faced by humanity. The normative source of public ethics remains rooted in the transcendent moral goals embodied by the Holy Scriptures, not in human rationality alone.

Although Madjid empowers human agency—declaring that faith is synonymous with the pursuit of justice—he limits this agency within a theological framework. Human agency must be anchored in Tawhid as a transcendent moral horizon. Furthermore, his hermeneutical method, "Depth Islam," requires that the praxis of liberation be subject to critical dialogue with the testimony of Scripture, ensuring that the liberation of individuals from oppressive structures does not mean liberation from God Himself, but from anachronistic doctrines.

Madjid advanced a novel reading of core religion-ethical motifs, commencing with Tawhid, or divine oneness. By introducing an anthropocentric inflexion, he repositions Tawhid less as a dogma of God's indivisible essence than as a mandate concerning the individual's inner unity, thereby repudiating personal hypocrisy and advancing a vision of social harmony that transcends class division. The reinterpreted Tawhid thereby stipulates a categorical denial of coercion and subjugation grounded in the divine. The term is thereby re-fashioned from an isolated theological proposition into a vigorous ethical injunction, calling for sustained action against every shade of injustice. The affirmation of divine oneness thus becomes inseparable from the vigorous pursuit of human dignity and egalitarian recognition (Ali, 2006; Amin & Ritonga, 2023; Zamzila & Rambe, 2025).

Madjid re-situated the classical articulation of God’s justice (al-‘Adl) within the larger social justice concern. He contended that socio-economic inequality arises from unjust institutional arrangements rather than from any preordained cosmic design. In doing so, he undermined readings that might tacitly endorse colonial rule or reinforce present disparities. By relocating the source of suffering from a transcendent decree to the human commitment to dismantling unjust systems, he invites adherents to take ownership of communal reformation. Faith thus becomes synonymous with the pursuit of justice, rendered into an undertaking of human agency. His notion of "liberation spirituality" further clarifies the mission: emancipating persons from repressive structures and an anachronistic reading of inherited doctrines. This spirituality requires that scriptural texts be interpreted in ways that diagnose and heal social malaise, while also upholding the transcendent moral goals that Scripture embodies (Zamzila & Rambe, 2025). This guarantee of balanced interpretation is found in Madjid's hermeneutical methodology, which he calls "Depth Islam" or "Depth Theology."

This method requires a hermeneutical circle that ensures that the goal of liberation remains anchored in transcendence. This circle begins by paying attention to reality and facing contemporary demands (diagnosing social ills), continues with critical dialogue with the testimony of the Holy Scriptures (upholding transcendent moral goals), and ends with reflective interpretation. This repetitive and dialogical process ensures that Madjid's theology is able to meet the demands of humanity's ever-changing existence while maintaining the dynamism of tradition and the core principles of freedom and justice in faith. Furthermore, Madjid's shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism functions as a firm ethical and theological demand, which affirms that divine intent is inseparable from the achievement of human flourishing. This is what theologically guarantees that the focus on social healing is not a subjective choice, but rather an obligation that binds Scripture. The praxis he envisioned is at once reflective and militant; it liberates the soul from the weight of external oppression and the constraining orbit of dogmatic certitude. Such an understanding ensures that religious observance remains inseparable from the concrete struggles of communities (Madjid, 1992; Madjid, 2019).

Madjid advanced what he called "Depth Islam," a method paralleling "Depth Theology," which invites scholars to travel beneath the surface of ritual and creed to discern the core liberty and justice of the faith. His effort centred on the lived evidence of Islam for humanity, plurality, and ultimately peace. He conceived a hermeneutical circle that begins by tending to reality, proceeds to a critical dialogue with scriptural testimony, and closes with a reflexive act of interpretation that opens once more to the world. His process safeguards the tradition's dynamism, enabling theologians to continually revisit primary texts in the light of changing historical and ethical imperatives. The result is a body of thought that remains inner alive, capable of meeting the transforming requests of human existence while advancing values that belong to all. (Madjid, 1992; Madjid, 2019).

Aspect	Traditional Theocentric	Madjid's Anthropocentric
Primary Focus	Defending God's attributes, divine principles, and theological debates (Kalam), maintaining orthodoxy.	Protecting and empowering humanity, addressing pressing human issues (poverty, pluralism, social injustice, environment), and achieving social transformation.
Understanding of God's Justice (al-'Adl)	Primarily focused on God's inherent justice as an abstract concept, often used to justify the existing social order or divine decree.	Reconstructed within a social justice framework, recognising social inequity as a product of unjust structures and systems, not predetermined fate. Tawhid explicitly rejects all forms of oppression.
Role and Relevance of Theology	Perceived as stagnant, disconnected from contemporary problems, and primarily theoretical discourse.	Practice-oriented, contextualised, dynamic, and understood as a "human science," it aims to transform the world to transform individuals.
Hermeneutical Approach	Literary, superficial, or dogmatic interpretations of religious texts are often made.	"Depth Theology/Islam " goes beyond literal texts to seek principles and spirit; it employs a hermeneutical circle (cultivating reality, dialogue with sacred texts, continuous interpretation).
Implications for Human Agency	Can lead to fatalism or over-reliance on divine decree, potentially limiting human initiative for change.	Emancipating individuals from oppressive structures and religious doctrines; empowering humans to become aware of their condition and acquire tools to transform it; fostering spiritual autonomy and moral clarity.

Table 3. Paradigm Shift: From Theocentric to Anthropocentric Islamic Theology (as advocated by Madjid). Source: (Authors own)

Table 3 illustrates the theological shift articulated by Nurcholish Madjid, moving from conventional theocentrism toward a more contextual and transformative anthropocentrism. Whereas classical theology often defends divine attributes within an abstract, fatalistic horizon, Madjid articulates a vision of theology as a human science of liberation, purposefully directed toward social justice, pluralism, and the empowerment of persons. He reformulates the notion of divine justice such that it becomes inseparable from the configuration of a just social order, categorically repudiating any form of oppression legitimised by the notion of destiny. His method of deep religious interpretation, which he terms Depth Theology, promotes a dialogical and context-sensitive engagement with sacred texts, reinforcing the individual capacity to function as a constructive agent of social transformation.

Unique Characteristics of Madjid's Thought: Inclusive Pluralism, Substantive Democracy, and Educational Liberation

Nurcholish Madjid's intellectual contribution is marked by his original fusion of classical Islamic doctrines and contemporary liberal principles, positioning him beyond conventional Islamic scholarly trends. The interwoven notions of inclusive pluralism, substantial and morally grounded democracy, and educational emancipation define his project not as a collection of distinct topics but as a coherent, self-reinforcing epistemic order. His pluralistic theology, grounded in a rereading of Qur'anic universality, grants normative legitimacy to a society composed of diverse, competing convictions; this pluralism is, in his scheme, the indispensable precondition for democracy. Madjid understands democracy as an "open, unfinished process" demanding an "ethical substance" and "critical participation" at every stage of state and civil society. He argues that this ethically charged politics finds its origins, drive, and durable development solely within the unfolding process of educational emancipation (Kholil et al., 2025). Hence, reform of theological doctrine, theoretical commitments on governance, and the daily practices of pedagogy are not separate domains, but are instead mutually constitutive and inseparable within his systemic conception of a polity that is both authentically Muslim and humane (Rijal & Pranajaya, 2025; Woodward, 2007).

Madjid championed a pluralism that reframed "Islam" away from a denomination and toward a disposition—the active surrender to the divine, a disposition he discerned under the religious surface of all prophetic communions. He broadened the conventional ahl al-kitab, which had confined the category to Jews and Christians, to include the scriptural and non-scriptural traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, cultivating a more capacious and respectful map of religious diversity (Muhammad, 2025). His epistemological "Depth Islam" discerned the spirit of religion in cultivating humanity, embracing diversity, and promoting peace, deliberately outgrowing the limits of literal exegesis.

By reconstituting the notion of confessional belonging, he prepared the ground for a genuinely pluralistic polis in which differences are not grudgingly borne but are publicly acknowledged as variants of a single, revelatory divine intention, thereby fostering authentic and sustained interfaith cooperation.

Principles/Aspects of Madjid Democracy	Key Verses/Concepts from the Qur'an	How the Verse/Concept Supports Madjid's Ideas
Democracy as an Adaptive Process	QS. 42:38 (Consultation in matters); QS. 3:159 (Consult with them)	Emphasising collective decision-making and consultation as sustainable principles for managing affairs, in line with the adaptive nature of democracy.
The People as the Supreme Authority	QS. 2:30 (Khalifa on earth); Concept of Bay'ah (Oath of Allegiance)	Implies shared responsibility and sovereignty of the people in managing the affairs of the earth as representatives of God, with allegiance as a contract between the rulers and the people.
Islam as Public Morality	The concept of Al-Adl (Justice); Rejection of oppression (from reconstructed Tawhid)	Transforming divine justice into social justice, emphasising that Islamic principles must be the source of ethics for civil norms and human rights.

Rejection of Theo-democracy	Dualism of the Sovereignty of God and Human Reason (QS. 7:54, 2:30)	Distinguishing between God's sovereignty in fundamental legislation and humanity's mandate to use reason for the public good, avoiding rigid theocracy.
Emphasis on Justice & Human Rights	Judicial Independence (Example of Umar); The Concept of Amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi anil munkar	Affirming the importance of a fair and impartial judicial system to protect rights and the obligation to uphold good and prevent evil.
Accountability	Bay'ah as a Contract: The Role of the People in Shura	Building accountability through agreements between rulers and the people, with consultation as a mechanism to guide and correct rulers.

Table 4. Qur'anic Principles Underlying Substantive Democracy According to Nurcholish Madjid. Source: (Authors own)

Madjid described "substantive democracy" in intentionally open and flexible terms. He argued that democracy can never close into fixed definitions; instead, it remains "an ongoing, adaptive process" that requires ethical depth, critical civic engagement, and unending negotiation between religious convictions and civic institutions. Whereas Maududi conceived of a theo-democracy that locates God as sovereign and enumerates constitutional rituals, Madjid's framework identifies the people as the highest authority while regarding Islam as a formative source of public moral vision. Rather than subordinating civic life to religious dictates, his analysis foregrounds civil principles, universal social justice, and safeguarding citizens' rights within a plural society, firmly rejecting the politicisation of sectarian identity (Madjid, 1992; Madjid, 2019). Such a conception advances beyond procedural voting mechanics to the moral and ethical grounds that alone can sustain a genuinely inclusive and just political order (Woodward, 2007).

Principles/Aspects of Madjid's Education	**Key Verses from the Qur'an**	**How the Verse Supports Madjid's Ideas**
Education as Spiritual/Social Liberation	QS. 96:1-5 (The Command "Read!")	Establishing the pursuit of knowledge as a fundamental divine command, opening the way for liberation through knowledge and understanding.
Consciousness (Critical Awareness)	QS. 45:13 (A sign for those who reflect); QS. 39:9 (The difference between the learned and the ignorant)	Encouraging reflection and critical thinking to understand the signs of God in the universe and distinguish truth from error, by awareness of one's condition.
Criticism of Dogmatism	QS. 35:28 (Only those who know fear Allah)	Indicates that actual knowledge leads to a more profound respect for God, implicitly challenging blind obedience and dogmatism.
Fostering Critical Thinking	QS. 39:9 (The difference between the learned and the ignorant)	Poses a rhetorical question emphasising the value of knowledge and critical thinking, encouraging individuals not to accept things at face value.

Spiritual Autonomy & Moral Clarity	QS. 58:11 (Allah elevates the status of the knowledgeable)	Connecting knowledge with elevated status and a deeper understanding of faith, leading to spiritual autonomy and moral clarity.
Lifelong Learning	QS. 20:114 (Prayer "Add to me knowledge")	Implies the pursuit of continuous and never-ending knowledge as part of spiritual and intellectual growth.

Table 5. Qur'anic Emphasis on Knowledge, Reflection, and Spiritual Growth in the Thought of Nurcholish Madjid. Source: (Authors own)

The aggregate evidence provided in Tables 4 and 5 indicates that Nurcholish Madjid conceives substantive democracy not simply as a formal mechanism for leadership selection, but as a lived and evolving process guided by ethical conviction, critical civic engagement, and a collective spiritual consciousness. In the context of contemporary Indonesian politics, Madjid's theology of democracy offers a powerful tool for addressing pressing challenges, such as the politicization of sectarian identities and religious polarization. This framework explicitly rejects the politicization of sectarian identities and advocates for the desacralization of state institutions. By positioning Islam as a source of public morality rather than a state ideology, Madjid directs religion to become the ethical foundation for social justice and inclusive pluralism, while maintaining the political sphere as a human affair subject to reason for the collective good.

Drawing upon Qur'anic precepts, he insists that popular sovereignty, the correlates of mutual consultation, the imperative of social justice, and safeguarding human rights are inextricably linked to Islam's inclusive and transcendental moral imperatives. His categorical distancing from a monolithic theocratic paradigm underscores the notion that divine sovereignty, while absolute, is regarded as the transcendent moral horizon informing the collective. In contrast, the orchestration of public life remains the entrusted responsibility of human intellect functioning for the collective welfare. Within this framework, democracy is reconceived as a fluid and receptive arena in which religious principles and civic institutions engage in constructive reciprocal influence, thereby fostering a political landscape capable of sustaining justice, embracing pluralism, and decisively repudiating every manifestation of religious discrimination and exclusivist doctrine.

In his articulated framework, Madjid foregrounded education as a decisive instrument that can help cultivate informed, critical, and spiritually self-sufficient citizens. To Madjid, education transcends the mere transmission of information; it constitutes a liberatory process that empowers learners to discern social realities, identify injustice, and engage actively in rectification. He endorses the dialogic educational model, consonant with Freire's conception of conscientisation, the gradual awakening of critical consciousness that equips persons to contribute constructively to democratic life (Freire, 2020).

By fostering critical thinking, nurturing a sense of public morality, and upholding respect for diverse convictions, Madjid anticipates the emergence of a generation that is intellectually equipped and ethically resolute in its commitment to justice and to the wider humanity. His educational vision, which interweaves theological, political, and pedagogical strands, thereby delineates a comprehensive model of social transformation that situates human beings, rather than abstract forces, as active agents in the ongoing construction of a just, pluralistic, civilised, and resilient society, one adequately prepared to confront the exigencies of the contemporary era.

Conclusion

This research elucidates how Nurcholish Madjid dismantled and reconstructed Islamic theology employing creative modern value synthesis alongside Qur'anic principles with three primary Islamic pillars: inclusive pluralism, substantive democracy, and liberating education. Within the pluralism framework, he globally interprets Islam as submission to God. He broadens the definition of ahl al-kitab to include followers of other religions, which allows him to provide strong theological support for inter-religious cooperation and harmony (Ritonga et al., 2023). Within democracy, he opposes theocracy as the rigid highest form of rule, puts the people as the highest authority, and places substantial emphatic value on consultation, social justice, and safeguarding human rights as core Islamic ethics of public Islam. In education, Madjid adheres to the liberating paradigm put forward by Freire that focuses on the need for critical awareness, spiritually moral public figure, moral, and civic virtue.

The change he suggested—from theocentrism to anthropocentrism—transformed theology from defending the attributes of the divine into a means of empowering humans and dismantling structures of oppression. His approach to interpreting texts—Islamic theology—adheres to a profound and dialogical method, ensuring relevance to present social challenges. These challenges include enduring structural poverty and social injustice, environmental crises, and cultural pluralism. Madjid's thoughts provide a model of theology that is progressive, in addition to being contextual and practical, is deeply transformative and vital in advancing an inclusive, democratic and civilised society for Indonesia, the Muslim world and humanity.

This study, which is methodologically a qualitative literature review (thematic content analysis), focuses on the intellectual corpus of Nurcholish Madjid and secondary scientific discourse to construct and evaluate his theological framework. Therefore, the main limitation of this study is its theoretical and hermeneutic nature. This study outlines Madjid's ideas on anthropocentric theology, inclusive pluralism, and substantive democracy, but does not empirically measure or evaluate the actual impact, implementation, or success of these ideas in social, political, or institutional practice in Indonesia.

To bridge the gap between discourse and practice, further research is highly recommended. Future studies could focus on examining institutions and organizations that are explicitly influenced by Madjid's thinking. More broadly, empirical evaluation is needed to measure how his ideas have been applied in practical domains: 1) Pedagogy: Evaluating the extent to which Madjid's concepts of liberation education and critical consciousness (conscientisation) have been applied and influenced curricula or practices in educational institutions, as well as measuring their actual results; 2) Governance: Analyzing how Madjid's substantive democracy is articulated by policymakers and applied in governance and civil society practices; 3) Community Life: Evaluating the impact of his ideas of inclusive pluralism and social justice in promoting interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and social cohesion in communities, especially in the face of religious polarization.

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