

Multicultural Education in Nurcholish Madjid's Thought and Its Relevance to Religious Moderation in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia, as a multicultural nation, boasts a high level of religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity, yet simultaneously faces challenges in the form of increasing intolerance and religious radicalism. This situation demands an educational approach capable of instilling values of respect for diversity and moderate religious attitudes. This article aims to analyze the concept of multicultural education in the thinking of Nurcholish Madjid and its relevance to strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia. This research uses qualitative methods with a library research approach to Nurcholish Madjid's works and relevant scientific literature. The results indicate that Nurcholish Madjid's thinking positions plurality as a natural social reality that must be addressed openly, dialogically, and tolerantly. The values of democracy, equality, social justice, and respect for humanity embodied in his thinking align with the principles of multicultural education and religious moderation. Implementing these values in education has the potential to shape inclusive and moderate religious attitudes, while also serving as a preventative strategy to reduce intolerance and radicalism in Indonesia.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Nurcholish Masjid, Religious Moderation

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Introduction

Indonesia is known as a country with a very high level of social and cultural diversity. This diversity is evident in various aspects of social life, from language and ethnicity to customs and beliefs and religions. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), Indonesia has more than 1,300 ethnic groups with hundreds of regional languages spread across more than 17,000 islands (BPS, 2023). This makes Indonesia one of the countries with the highest levels of plurality in the world.

This diversity is not merely a demographic fact but also a social reality that shapes the perspectives, values, and identities of the Indonesian people. On the one hand, plurality is a source of cultural richness and significant potential for national development. However, on the other hand, differences that are not managed properly can trigger social friction, discrimination, and even horizontal conflict. Therefore, diversity in Indonesia requires wise management through education, public policy, and the strengthening of national values.

In this context, education plays a crucial role as a means of instilling multicultural awareness. Through education, students not only learn to recognize differences but also understand the meaning of tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect. This awareness forms the foundation for a peaceful and inclusive national life. Therefore, Indonesia's social and cultural diversity must not only be accepted as reality but also valued as a moral and cultural force that enriches national identity.

One Indonesian Muslim thinker who has made significant contributions to the discourse of pluralism and inclusive education is Nurcholish Madjid. He views religion, including Islam, as essentially conveying a universal humanitarian message that emphasizes respect for human dignity and freedom of thought (Nurcholish Madjid, 1992). Through his concept of "Islam, Yes; Islamic Party, No," Madjid seeks to emphasize that Islam is a source of moral and spiritual values that transcend the boundaries of political identities or specific groups (Madjid, 1999). This thinking lays an important foundation for the emergence of a multicultural education paradigm that emphasizes equality and openness to differences.

In Madjid's perspective, education should not only be oriented towards mastering knowledge but also towards developing a human character that values diversity. He emphasized the importance of humanizing education, namely an educational process that honors humans as rational and cultured beings (Madjid, 2000). Through this process, students are expected to understand differences as a natural law of God and use them as a means to get to know one another, rather than to compete or negate others.

The relevance of Madjid's thinking to religious moderation in Indonesia is clearly evident in the spirit of *wasathiyah* (the middle path) he espouses. This concept rejects extremism, both in the form of religious exclusivism and relativism that negates religious truth. Madjid teaches the importance of balancing religious commitment with openness to universal human values (Madjid, 1995; Rahmat, 2021). In a national context, this view aligns with the Religious Moderation program developed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, which emphasizes four main pillars: national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and acceptance of local traditions (Kemenag RI, 2019).

Thus, examining multicultural education in Nurcholish Madjid's thought is not merely a historical or philosophical examination, but also an attempt to discover its practical relevance for strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia. Nurcholish Madjid's thinking can serve as a conceptual foundation for developing an education system that fosters national awareness, respects differences, and strengthens social cohesion in a pluralistic society.

This article aims to in-depth describe the concept of multicultural education in Nurcholish Madjid's thought and analyze its relevance to religious moderation in Indonesia. This study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of inclusive Islamic education discourse while offering new perspectives on the practice of religious moderation in the educational and social contexts of Indonesian society.

Literature Review

1. Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is an educational approach oriented toward recognizing and respecting human diversity in all its dimensions, including ethnicity, culture, religion, language, and gender. The essence of this education is to instill the values of justice, equality, and inclusivity in the teaching and learning process, so that every student feels recognized and valued regardless of their socio-cultural background (Banks & Banks, 2021; Rentzi, 2023).

Conceptually, multicultural education arises from an awareness of the importance of an education system that is responsive to the plurality of society. According to Banks (2021), multicultural education is not simply about adding specific cultural content to the curriculum but also about reconstructing educational structures and practices to be equitable for all groups. This includes curriculum reform, dialogic learning methods, and creating a school climate that respects differences (Farid et al., 2024).

Multicultural education functions as a process of cultivating universal human values in a diverse society. This type of education aims not only to produce knowledgeable individuals, but also individuals with social and moral awareness to live side by side peacefully. In the Indonesian context, multicultural education is highly urgent because this nation is built on the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), unity in diversity, which demands mutual respect and appreciation (Mahfud, 2019; Huda, 2023).

Recent research shows that multicultural education plays a crucial role in strengthening social cohesion and preventing intolerance in educational settings. Farid et al. (2024) found that implementing the principles of inclusivity and fairness in elementary schools significantly increased empathy among students from different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Rohmat (2023) emphasized that multicultural values, such as equality and tolerance, can strengthen national character and reduce the potential for social conflict in a pluralistic society.

Furthermore, multicultural education emphasizes the importance of developing critical awareness of discriminatory practices within the education system. Rentzi (2023) highlights the importance of applying critical multicultural theory to create a truly inclusive and socially just school culture. This approach teaches students not only to accept differences but also to actively fight for equality and combat all forms of structural injustice.

Thus, multicultural education can be understood as a humanistic, democratic, and transformative educational paradigm. This education seeks to shape individuals who are open, critical, and empathetic towards others, and capable of living harmoniously in a pluralistic society. In the Indonesian context, strengthening multicultural education is an important foundation for fostering religious moderation, social tolerance, and national solidarity amidst broad cultural diversity.

2. Religious Moderation

Religious moderation is a concept that emphasizes the importance of practicing religious teachings in a balanced manner, neither excessively (*tatharruf*) nor trivializing (*tafrit*). In Indonesia's diverse social context, religious moderation is a crucial paradigm for maintaining harmony in religious life and strengthening national unity (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). Religious moderation requires people to be wise in understanding religious texts and to be adaptive to humanitarian and national values.

Conceptually, the term "moderation" comes from the Arabic word "*wasathiyah*," meaning middle, just, and balanced. The Quran refers to Muslims as "*ummatan wasathan*" (a moderate people), a people who are able to position themselves between two extremes and become role models of justice. This interpretation emphasizes that moderation is not a compromise on religious values, but rather an effort to balance spiritual commitment and openness to social realities (Fahri & Zainuri, 2019).

In practice, religious moderation serves as a social instrument for building a peaceful, tolerant, and respectful religious life. According to Nurcholish Madjid (1992), religion should

be a source of inspiration for progress and peace, not a tool of discrimination that fosters hostility. Madjid's thinking emphasizes that true faith is reflected in an open, inclusive attitude and respect for differences of belief. This view is in line with the spirit of Islamic wasathiyah developed in the national policy on religious moderation (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019).

Furthermore, religious moderation has four main pillars: (1) commitment to nationalism, (2) tolerance of differences, (3) rejection of violence, and (4) acceptance of local culture (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019; Haryono, 2024). These four pillars serve as the moral and social foundation for building harmonious relations between religious communities in Indonesia. A moderate attitude also helps prevent the development of extreme ideologies, both radical and liberal, which could threaten social stability and national harmony (Mubarok, 2023).

Contemporary research shows that religious moderation not only impacts interfaith relations but also strengthens national character and identity. According to Rahmat (2023), religious moderation in educational settings plays a crucial role in shaping a generation that is religious, open, and patriotic. Meanwhile, research by Alaverdov (2023) confirms that moderation in religious practice can enhance an individual's ability to empathize and cooperate across cultures in a complex global era.

Thus, religious moderation is not merely a slogan or policy, but rather an ethical and cultural paradigm that guides religious communities to live peacefully alongside each other in diversity. In the Indonesian context, religious moderation is the foundation for creating a civilized society, a society that is religious without fanaticism, and plural without losing spiritual values.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with library research. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is on analyzing the thoughts of a prominent figure, Nurcholish Madjid, and their relevance to the concepts of multicultural education and religious moderation in Indonesia. A qualitative approach allows researchers to understand the meaning, values, and context of the ideas studied in depth and reflectively. The data sources in this study consist of primary sources, namely Nurcholish Madjid's original works, such as "Islam, Doctrine and Civilization," and "Islam, Modernity, and Indonesianness," and secondary sources, namely literature and related scientific studies discussing Nurcholish Madjid's thoughts, including books, journal articles, theses, and dissertations.

The data collection technique used was documentation, namely collecting, identifying, and reviewing various relevant written sources. All data obtained was analyzed and classified according to the main research theme. After data collection, all data was analyzed using content analysis. To ensure data validity, researchers use source triangulation techniques, namely comparing and evaluating data from various literature sources to obtain valid information and objective interpretation.

Results

1. Multicultural Education in Nurcholish Madjid's Thought

Nurcholish Madjid views plurality as a natural and unavoidable social reality in human life. He believes that diversity in religion, culture, and outlook on life is not an aberration, but rather part of God's will (sunnatullah) inherent in His creation. Therefore, plurality should not be approached with suspicion or rejection, but rather with an open, dialogical, and mutually respectful attitude. Madjid emphasizes that acknowledging diversity is a manifestation of religious maturity, because a mature faith does not feel threatened by differences (Madjid, 1992).

In the context of education, this view demands an inclusive and non-discriminatory learning process. Education should not be a means to instill exclusivist attitudes or claims of a

single truth that could potentially give rise to intolerance. Instead, education should be a space for the formation of pluralistic awareness, where students are encouraged to understand differences as a social reality that must be accepted and managed ethically. Thus, education plays a crucial role in instilling the values of openness and respect for others, without sacrificing one's religious beliefs (Susanto, 2014).

The values of multicultural education in Nurcholish Madjid's thinking are reflected in his emphasis on the principles of democracy, equality, social justice, and respect for humanity. He views every human being as having equal dignity before God, so there is no justification for discriminatory treatment based on religion, ethnicity, or social background. Education, from this perspective, functions not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a process of character formation and moral awareness for students, enabling them to coexist peacefully in a pluralistic society (Madjid, 2000).

Thus, Nurcholish Madjid's thinking provides a strong conceptual foundation for the development of multicultural education in Indonesia. Education oriented toward humanitarian values and plurality is not only relevant to the nation's diverse social reality but also serves as a strategic tool for building a tolerant and moderate religious life.

2. The Concept of Religious Moderation from Nurcholish Madjid's Perspective

Religious moderation emphasizes a balanced religious attitude, not extremes, and respect for differences in belief. Nurcholish Madjid's thinking aligns with this concept, as he rejects claims of a single truth that could potentially give rise to intolerance. Nurcholish Madjid emphasizes that religious teachings should be understood substantively, emphasizing the essential values contained within them, rather than merely focusing on symbolic and formalistic aspects. According to him, religious understandings that place too much emphasis on symbols, rituals, or external identity have the potential to obscure the primary purpose of religion as a moral guide and human liberation. Therefore, Madjid criticized rigid and legalistic approaches to religion because they tend to foster exclusive attitudes and claims of a single truth (Madjid, 1992).

In Nurcholish Madjid's view, a moderate attitude in religion is reflected in a person's ability to engage in open dialogue, respect the beliefs of others, and be willing to coexist peacefully in a pluralistic society. Interfaith dialogue is seen as an important means of building mutual understanding, not as an attempt to confuse religious teachings. Madjid emphasized that mature faith is characterized by a readiness to listen to and understand differences, without losing commitment to one's own beliefs (Madjid, 2000).

Furthermore, Nurcholish Madjid positions religion as a source of universal moral and humanitarian values. Religious teachings should not be used as a tool to legitimize conflict or violence, but rather as inspiration for upholding justice, humanity, and peace. From this perspective, religious moderation is not a compromising attitude that weakens faith, but rather a manifestation of mature and socially responsible religiosity. This substantive understanding of religion makes Nurcholish Madjid's thinking relevant in the context of strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia (Susanto, 2014).

3. The Relevance of Multicultural Education to Religious Moderation in Indonesia

Multicultural education, based on the ideas of Nurcholish Madjid, is highly relevant to efforts to strengthen religious moderation in Indonesia. This is due to Madjid's emphasis on the values of pluralism, tolerance, and inclusivism as the foundation of religious life in a pluralistic society. For Madjid, diversity is not a threat to faith, but rather a social reality that must be managed wisely through mutual respect and openness. Education, in this context, is a strategic tool for instilling this awareness in students from an early age (Madjid, 2000).

Through education that instills the values of pluralism and tolerance, students are not only equipped with normative religious understanding but are also guided to develop inclusive and moderate religious attitudes. Students are encouraged to understand that differences in beliefs

and outlooks are an inevitable part of social dynamics. With this approach, education serves to shape a more mature perspective on religion, namely understanding religious teachings substantively and viewing them as a source of moral and humanitarian values, rather than as a tool to justify exclusive or intolerant attitudes.

Implementing multicultural educational values in the curriculum can be an effective preventative strategy to reduce the potential for intolerance and radicalism. An inclusive, dialogical, and diversity-respecting curriculum can foster students' critical awareness of extreme religious narratives. From Nurcholish Madjid's perspective, such education does not intend to relativize religious truth, but rather to instill a balanced, just, and socially responsible religious attitude (Madjid, 1992).

Schools and educational institutions, therefore, play a crucial role as spaces for constructive dialogue and learning about diversity. Through healthy interactions between students from diverse backgrounds, schools can become miniature multicultural societies that foster mutual understanding and respect. This role is in line with Nurcholish Madjid's idea that places education as a vehicle for character formation and social awareness, so that it can produce a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also morally and spiritually mature in facing the reality of Indonesia's diversity (Auliani et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Nurcholish Madjid's thinking has made a significant contribution to the development of multicultural education and the strengthening of religious moderation in Indonesia. His view of plurality as a natural social reality emphasizes that religious and cultural diversity is God's will and must be addressed with openness, tolerance, and mutual respect. This perspective provides a strong theological and philosophical foundation for multicultural education in the context of Indonesia's diverse society.

Multicultural education based on Nurcholish Madjid's thinking emphasizes the values of democracy, equality, social justice, and respect for humanity. Education is understood not only as a process of transferring knowledge but also as a means of developing students' character and moral awareness, enabling them to coexist peacefully despite differences. These values align with the principle of religious moderation, which emphasizes a balanced, inclusive, and dialogical religious attitude. Therefore, Nurcholish Madjid's thinking is worthy of being used as a conceptual reference in developing educational policies and practices oriented toward peace, humanity, and diversity.

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