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An Analysis of the Concept of Islamic Thought Renewal: A Comparative Study of the Thought of Hasan Hanafi and Nurcholish Madjid

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Abstract

The renewal of Islamic thought seeks to respond to modernity while preserving Islam's foundational values, yet reformist projects differ according to their intellectual and socio-political settings. This study compares Hasan Hanafi's and Nurcholish Madjid's paradigms of Islamic renewal by examining their epistemological foundations, treatment of Islamic tradition, interpretive methods, objectives, and social implications. It employed qualitative comparative library research using selected primary works by both thinkers and relevant secondary scholarship. Data were collected through documentation and close reading, coded into five analytical categories, and examined through descriptive, contextual, and comparative analysis. The findings show that both thinkers reject rigid textualism, regard Islamic tradition as a dynamic resource open to critical reinterpretation, and orient renewal toward human dignity, justice, and social welfare. Their differences lie in methodology and transformative orientation. Hanafi reconstructs Islamic epistemology through phenomenology, anthropocentric theology, and al-Yasar al-Islami, directing renewal toward liberation from colonialism, authoritarianism, and structural inequality. Madjid develops Islamic Neo-Modernism through rationalization, the desacralization of worldly institutions, socio-historical interpretation, and inclusive pluralism, directing renewal toward intellectual, cultural, and democratic transformation. The comparison therefore identifies two distinct but potentially complementary models: Hanafi's revolutionary-structural renewal and Madjid's evolutionary-cultural renewal. This typology clarifies how different reform methodologies can preserve Islamic normativity while responding to diverse modern social contexts.

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Introduction

Islam, as a universal religion (*syumul*), possesses an inherent capacity to adapt to the changing dynamics of time and place (*shalih li kulli zaman wa makan*). This universality implies that Islamic teachings are not rigid; rather, they remain responsive to the social, political, economic, and scientific developments experienced by Muslim societies. However, historical reality shows that Muslims have often been caught between two extremes: a literalist-textual approach that neglects the changing context of the times, and a secularist approach that severs religious tradition in the pursuit of modernity. Consequently, there is a need for the renewal of Islamic thought (*tajdid*), not to alter its fundamental doctrines (*ushul*), but to renew the methods of interpreting religious texts, particularly matters of jurisprudential interpretation (*furu'iyah*), so that they remain relevant and functional within modern society.

Within the development of contemporary Islamic thought, several prominent Muslim intellectuals have sought to reformulate the methodology for interpreting Islamic texts. In the Arab world, Hasan Hanafi introduced his major intellectual project, *al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* (*Tradition and Renewal*). Observing that classical theology tended to be theocentric and encouraged passive and fatalistic attitudes among Muslims, Hanafi sought to deconstruct this orientation in favor of an anthropocentric perspective centered on human agency. Through his concept of the "Islamic Left" (*al-Yasar al-Islami*), he reconstructed theology into an ideology of social action aimed at liberating society from poverty, underdevelopment, and political authoritarianism.

In contrast, within the Indonesian Islamic intellectual landscape, Nurcholish Madjid (widely known as Cak Nur) developed a reformist movement commonly referred to as Islamic Neo-Modernism. Responding to dissatisfaction with the formalization and politicization of Islam during the New Order era, Cak Nur introduced the concept of "secularization" as an effort to desacralize worldly affairs. Rather than adopting a confrontational stance, his thought promoted an inclusive, rational, democratic, and pluralistic understanding of Islam that could engage constructively with modern society.

Although Hasan Hanafi and Nurcholish Madjid both championed the renewal of Islamic thought and intellectual liberation, they differed significantly in their methodologies and sociological contexts. Hanafi drew extensively upon Western philosophical traditions, particularly phenomenology and hermeneutics, integrating them with a dialectics of liberation. In contrast, Cak Nur remained more closely rooted in the classical Islamic intellectual tradition particularly the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah which he synthesized with the values of modern humanism.

Despite sharing the same reformist spirit, the two thinkers emerged from distinct social, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds and employed different methodological approaches. These differences make their ideas particularly worthy of comparative analysis in order to identify both the similarities and the differences in the paradigms of Islamic renewal that they proposed. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the concept of the renewal of Islamic thought as articulated by Hasan Hanafi and Nurcholish Madjid, while also analyzing the similarities and differences between their respective intellectual perspectives.

Method

This study employed a qualitative comparative library-research design to examine and compare the paradigms of Islamic thought renewal developed by Hasan Hanafi and Nurcholish Madjid. The units of analysis were the two thinkers' ideas concerning the status of Islamic tradition, the epistemological basis of renewal, methods of interpreting religious texts, objectives of renewal, and anticipated social implications. A comparative design was selected because the study sought not only to describe each intellectual construction but also to explain their convergences and divergences within their respective Arab and Indonesian socio-historical contexts.

Primary sources consisted of Hasan Hanafi's *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* and *Al-Yasar al-Islami*, including available translations, and Nurcholish Madjid's *Islam, Doctrine and Civilization* and *Islam as a Religion of Humanity*. Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and critical studies discussing the intellectual development and reform projects of both thinkers. Sources were selected purposively according to four criteria: direct relevance to Islamic renewal, explicit discussion of the thinkers' principal concepts, scholarly authority or primary authorship, and sufficient information for cross-textual comparison. Materials that merely mentioned either thinker without substantive analysis were excluded.

Data were collected through documentation and close reading. Relevant passages were identified, recorded, and classified in an analytical matrix comprising five categories: socio-historical background, view of Islamic tradition (*al-turath*), epistemological orientation, interpretive methodology, and the objectives and social implications of renewal. Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive analysis reconstructed each thinker's concepts from the primary texts. Second, contextual interpretation related those concepts to their intellectual and socio-political settings. Third, comparative analysis examined similarities and differences across the five categories and developed a typology of their renewal orientations. Interpretive credibility was strengthened by comparing statements across multiple primary works and corroborating them with relevant secondary scholarship; conclusions were drawn only from themes consistently supported by the documentary evidence.

Results

Comparative Findings

The documentary analysis produced a structured comparison across five categories: socio-historical background, understanding of Islamic tradition, epistemological orientation, interpretive methodology, and the objectives and social implications of renewal. The findings reveal a common reformist foundation but two distinct models of intellectual transformation.

Shared Reformist Foundations

First, both Hasan Hanafi and Nurcholish Madjid reject rigid literalist-textualist readings that reduce Islam to inherited formulations detached from contemporary realities. Their writings treat revelation as normatively authoritative while maintaining that human interpretation is historical and therefore open to critical reassessment. Renewal

consequently operates at the level of interpretation and intellectual methodology rather than alteration of Islam's foundational doctrines.

Second, both thinkers reposition Islamic tradition (al-turath) as a dynamic intellectual resource. Hanafi approaches tradition as historically formed consciousness that must be reconstructed in response to oppression and underdevelopment (Hanafi, 1980, 2007). Madjid similarly returns to classical Islamic scholarship to recover universal ethical principles relevant to modern Indonesian society (Madjid, 1992, 1997). Neither advocates the wholesale rejection of tradition; both distinguish between enduring normative values and historically conditioned formulations.

Third, the two projects share a humanistic orientation. Both relocate the significance of Islamic thought from formal doctrinal repetition toward its capacity to advance human dignity, justice, freedom, and social welfare. This convergence establishes human flourishing as the evaluative horizon of renewal, although each thinker defines the route toward that horizon differently.

Divergent Contexts, Methods, and Transformative Orientations

The first divergence concerns socio-historical context. Hanafi's project was shaped by the Arab defeat of 1967, colonial legacies, authoritarian politics, and economic inequality. These conditions produced a confrontational reform agenda directed toward structural liberation. Madjid's thought developed in Indonesia during the New Order, where the central problems were intellectual stagnation, religious formalism, and the sacralization of political interests. His response therefore emphasized cultural, civic, and intellectual renewal.

The second divergence lies in epistemology and interpretation. Hanafi combines phenomenology, hermeneutics, and social critique to move Islamic discourse from theocentric abstraction toward anthropocentric praxis. Religious texts are read from the standpoint of lived reality and the interests of oppressed communities. Madjid employs a Neo-Modernist and socio-historical approach that distinguishes universal Islamic values from contingent political and cultural forms. His concept of secularization functions as desacralization of worldly institutions, not as the exclusion of religion from public life.

The third divergence concerns the intended scale of transformation. Hanafi's *al-Yasar al-Islami* directs renewal toward changes in political, economic, and epistemic structures that reproduce domination (Hanafi, 1981, 2000). Madjid's project emphasizes the formation of rational, inclusive, democratic, and pluralistic Muslim consciousness through cultural reform (Madjid, 1992, 1997). The comparison therefore identifies Hanafi's paradigm as revolutionary-structural and Madjid's as evolutionary-cultural.

Discussion

Tradition as a Critical Resource for Renewal

The shared refusal to choose between uncritical traditionalism and the rejection of tradition is the most important convergence in the findings. Both thinkers treat al-turath as mediated through history: it remains indispensable to Muslim identity, but its meanings must be reconstructed when inherited formulations no longer address contemporary problems. This supports Rahman's argument that Islamic modernism requires a movement from historical interpretation to renewed ethical application rather than a simple opposition

between tradition and modernity (Rahman, 1982). However, Hanafi radicalizes this movement by making social reality a starting point of interpretation, whereas Madjid maintains a closer dialogue with classical intellectual resources.

Two Forms of Humanistic Transformation

The common humanistic orientation does not erase the difference between the objects of transformation. Hanafi's anthropocentric theology turns divine attributes into imperatives for human action: justice, freedom, equality, and resistance to domination. Shimogaki's reading of Hanafi similarly emphasizes the movement from inherited theological discourse toward liberative praxis (Shimogaki, 1993). In this framework, humanization requires transformation of the structures producing poverty, authoritarianism, and epistemic dependence.

Madjid's humanism operates through a different mechanism. Desacralizing political institutions prevents contingent organizations and ideologies from claiming absolute religious authority, while inclusivism provides an ethical basis for democratic citizenship and interreligious civility. Barton's account of Indonesian liberal Islamic thought confirms the centrality of rationality, openness, and plural public life in Madjid's project (Barton, 2001). Humanization here depends less on revolutionary restructuring than on the cultivation of critical consciousness and civic culture.

Context, Method, and the Direction of Renewal

The findings demonstrate that reform methodology cannot be separated from the problem a thinker seeks to resolve. Hanafi's phenomenological and confrontational method corresponds to a context interpreted through colonial domination and political defeat. Madjid's socio-historical and accommodative method corresponds to a plural nation-state in which religious formalism could threaten democratic and national integration. Their divergence is therefore not adequately described as radical versus moderate; it reflects different diagnoses of crisis, different agents of change, and different levels of intervention.

Comparative Contribution and Contemporary Relevance

The article's comparative contribution lies in the proposed typology of revolutionary-structural and evolutionary-cultural renewal. Existing discussions often examine Hanafi and Madjid within separate Arab and Indonesian intellectual histories. Reading them together shows that Islamic renewal may operate simultaneously at structural and cultural levels. Hanafi contributes a critique of domination and a theology of social action, while Madjid contributes a model of desacralization, inclusivism, and democratic civility.

These paradigms should therefore be understood as potentially complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Structural transformation without cultural and ethical renewal risks reproducing domination in new forms, while cultural renewal without attention to material and political structures may leave systemic injustice intact. Their synthesis suggests that contemporary Islamic thought can remain rooted in normative tradition while combining critical interpretation, social liberation, intellectual openness, and democratic responsibility.

Conclusion

Hasan Hanafi's concept of the renewal of Islamic thought constitutes a manifesto for the reconstruction of Islamic civilization, emerging as a critical response to the multidimensional crisis experienced by the Muslim world following the 1967 Six-Day War. Through his monumental project, *al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* (*Tradition and Renewal*), Hanafi proposes three fronts of intellectual reconstruction: the reinterpretation of the classical Islamic heritage, the dismantling of Western epistemological hegemony, and the recognition of the empirical realities of Muslim societies as a primary source for the formulation of Islamic thought. The most radical dimension of this project is reflected in his reconstruction of Islamic theology (*'Ilm al-Kalam*), shifting its orientation from an abstract theocentrism to an anthropocentrism centered on human action, in which the values of faith are translated into concrete commitments to justice and freedom. This intellectual synthesis ultimately culminates in *al-Yasar al-Islami* (The Islamic Left), a form of practical theology that transforms religious texts from objects of purely academic inquiry into an ideology of liberation and a driving force for social revolution on behalf of the oppressed (*mustad'afin*).

In contrast, Nurcholish Madjid's (Cak Nur's) concept of the renewal of Islamic thought represents the paradigm of Islamic Neo-Modernism, which emerged from his concern over intellectual stagnation, religious formalism, and the romanticization of Islamic politics during the early years of Indonesia's New Order era. The foundation of his thought lies in the concept of secularization as a process of sociological desacralization, aimed at liberating worldly institutions from misplaced sanctification so that Muslims may think rationally and objectively without becoming trapped in the "idolatry" of politics cloaked in religious symbolism. Through a socio-historical reexamination of the classical Islamic intellectual tradition, Cak Nur also developed a theology of religious inclusivism and pluralism based on the concept of *kalimatun sawa'* (a common or universal ground), with the objective of fostering *civility* among followers of different religions. Ultimately, Cak Nur's epistemology redirected Islamic thought from a rigid legal-formal orientation toward a substantive and essential approach, positioning Islam as an *élan vital* a moral force that promotes human dignity, human rights, and democratic values within the context of Indonesian nationhood.

The comparative analysis of Hasan Hanafi's and Nurcholish Madjid's concepts of the renewal of Islamic thought reveals both significant intellectual convergence and substantial methodological divergence. In terms of their shared paradigm, both thinkers reject rigid literalist-textualist interpretations of Islam, reconceptualize the Islamic intellectual tradition (*al-turath*) as a dynamic heritage open to critical reinterpretation, and orient Islamic thought toward the realization of human liberation, justice, and social dignity.

Their paradigmatic differences, however, are shaped by distinct existential experiences and socio-historical contexts. Hanafi, whose intellectual outlook was profoundly influenced by the trauma of the Arab defeat in 1967 and the experience of imperialism, developed a revolutionary and confrontational reform movement through what may be described as a "Left Phenomenology," aimed at transforming existing structures of political and social power. By contrast, Cak Nur, whose thought matured during the relative stability of Indonesia's New Order period, adopted an evolutionary and culturally accommodative path through the paradigm of Islamic Neo-Modernism. His approach emphasized the desacralization of politics and the cultivation of democratic, inclusive, and pluralistic individual consciousness rather than the radical restructuring of political institutions.

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