BOOK REVIEW

PIETY AND POLITICS: NURCHOLISH MADJID AND HIS INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM IN MODERN INDONESIA

Ann Kull, Lund Studies in History of Religions Volume 21 Lund: Lund University, 2005

With *Piety and Politics*, Swedish Islamologist Ann Kull has published the most extensive study on the Indonesian intellectual Nurcholish Madjid (1939-2005) -- also known as Cak Nur -- in English so far. This book is based on her doctoral thesis and was ready to go to press a few weeks before this leading neo-Modernist Muslim thinker's death in August 2005. In this study the author has focused on the later thought of Cak Nur, and in particular the diffusion and reception of his ideas.

The book's first two chapters deal with Kull's methodological concerns and situating Nurcholish in the context of contemporary Indonesia respectively. For her 'secular and empirical' research approach Kull is indebted to social scientists like the German sociologist Georg Stauth and Peter Beyer, a professor of religious studies at the University of Ottawa. From the former she has adopted a research method designed to integrate biography and ethnography, bringing together 'life projects, institutional affiliations and social networks' (16), in order to show how a thinker's ideas are embedded in a discrete social milieu. Beyer's distinction between *religious performance* and *religious function* provides a framework for analysing Cak Nur's interpretations of Islam and how these are applied to concrete situations. For a coherent presentation of the wide variety of sources that have inspired Nurcholish Madjid's ideas Kull borrows the notion of the 'Islamic basket', developed by her supervisor Jan Hjärpe. She explains: 'the "basket" is applicable to all religions and ideologies, and is said to contain the complete range of histories, activities, practices, beliefs, etc. that comprise an entire tradition. […] "The 'basket'

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is full. However, and this is important, not everything is on display all the time".' (10). For surveying Nurcholish's ideas during the latter part of his career, that is from the early 1980s onwards, Kull has mainly relied on *his Islam Agama Kemanusiaan: Membangung Tradisi dan Visi Baru Islam Indonesia* (1995).

In composing the biographical portrait of Cak Nur, the author has drawn on a number of earlier studies. For Nurcholish's career as a student leader in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the work of the Malaysian Muhammad Kamal Hassan is of prime importance. Notwithstanding the fact that in his assessment Hassan tends to side with some of Nurcholish's fiercest critics, it was the first major study of his ideas. Two other key sources in English are the writings of the Australian scholar Greg Barton, who has published a number of studies on Indonesian neo-Modernists, and Siti Fathimah's MA thesis, 'Modernism and the Contextualization of Islamic Doctrines: The Reform of Indonesian Islam Proposed by Nurcholish Madjid' (1999), written at Canada's McGill University. Kull has also made use of studies on the role of Islam in contemporary Indonesia by Hefner; Martin; Woodward; Saeed, and Steenbrink, in which the ideas of Cak Nur have received ample coverage. For situating Nurcholish in the context of present-day Indonesian intellectualism, the Ph.D. thesis by his close associate Budhy Munawar-Rachman is one of the most important sources. Kull considers it to be the most 'comprehensive study of Nurcholish's ideas' that has been made so far (22). Interestingly, it was written (in Indonesian) at the Advanced School of Philosophy in Jakarta, under the supervision of the German-Indonesian Catholic priest Frans Magnis Suseno, who has been an important interlocutor of Nurcholish throughout the years. Munawar-Rachman later became the manager of *Paramadina*, the NGO - and soon also a private university - founded by Nurcholish Madjid and a number of like-minded intellectuals in 1986.

An important aspect of Cak Nur's background is the dual secular and Islamic education which informs his intellectual outlook. After completing a public primary school, he pursued an Islamic-oriented education at prominent Javanese *pesantrens* in Jombang and at Gontor. In particular the latter school, with its emphasis on both Arabic and English language training, and classical Islamic studies alongside secular subjects, played an important part in shaping the young Nurcholish. He then pur-

sued a tertiary education at the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, studying adab (Arabic literature and Islamic history) rather than specialising in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) or kalam (classical theology). After a career in Indonesia's Association of Islamic Studies (HMI), Nurcholish continued his advanced studies in the United States, where he eventually obtained a doctorate in Islamic Studies from the University of Chicago, with a thesis on Ibn Taymiyya (1984), written under the supervision of Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988).

Kull identifies both Fazlur Rahman and Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) as the two most important influences shaping Cak Nur's view of the Islamic heritage (102). Although Nurcholish rarely makes any explicit reference to his mentor, the impact of the methodology and reformist ideas of this Pakistani scholar on his thought 'cannot be overestimated' (64). Apart from this duo, other sources of inspiration form an eclectic mix, featuring Indonesian intellectuals who were often at odds with each other: such as Hamka and Harun Nasution; former ministers of religion Mukti Ali and Munawir Sjadzali, but also Western scholars such as Islamicist Marshall Hodgson, the theologian Harvey Cox, and the sociologist of religion Robert Bellah. Following Siti Fathimah, Ann Kull also notes the impact of the 'perennial philosophy' promoted by European-born Sufis such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and Martin Lings, of which Nurcholish showed himself a great admirer (105).

Since his days as chairman of the HMI, Nurcholish Madjid has been no stranger to controversy. Although not the focus of attention in this study, two speeches given in 1970 and 1972, in which he championed highly contentious views of the concepts of sekularisasi ('secularisation') and *desakralisasi* ('desacralisation'), caused furore among Indonesia's traditionalist and 'mainstream' modernist Muslims alike. Cak Nur was accused of being a 'secularist', and once hailed as a 'young Natsir', he was now disowned by Indonesia's grand old man of Islamic party politics. Nurcholish's idiosyncratic interpretation of the legacy of Ibn Taymiyya was also greeted with considerable scepticism by fellow scholars. What cannot be denied, however, is that his 'contrapuntal reading' - to borrow a term from Ebrahim Moosa - betrays not only an enormous erudition and grasp of both classical Islamic theology and the Muslim interpretations of Greek thought, but it also opens exciting possibilities for using the classical

Islamic legacy in entirely new ways.[1]

Captioning her chapter on Nurcholish's thought with the title 'The Ideas of Nurcholish Madjid: "Maintain That Which is Old and Good, and Take Over That Which is New and Better"', Ann Kull has surveyed the key concepts informing Cak Nur's writings since his two 'Paradigmatic Speeches' (106) of the early 1970s. In addition to *sekularisasi* and *desakralisasi*, more 'standard' Islamic notions like *takwa* ('God-fearing'), *fitra* (man's 'pure original nature and implicit inclination to holiness and truth' (108)), and *ijtihad* ('independent' reasoning or interpretation) are also of central importance. In addition, there is Nurcholish' reliance on the Qur'an and Sunnah ('Tradition of the Prophet') in his writings on the relevance of Islam in today's world. In regards to the latter it is important to note that Cak Nur warns against equating Sunnah and Hadith (*hadis* in Ann Kull's parlay). According to Nurcholish the Hadith collections focus on Muhammad's role as a prophet and leader, while the Sunnah also includes his actions as a private person (112-3).

All these notions and concepts informed Nurcholish Madjid's interpretation of the Islamic legacy, which has been characterised as 'neo-modernist', 'liberal', 'pluralist', and 'inclusivist'. *In concreto*, such an outlook translated into a concern for humanism, democracy, civil society, and religious tolerance. But on a more personal level - a reflection of his interest in Muhammad as a private person - it has also resulted in a deep interest in spiritualism and Sufism, leading Ann Kull to her ultimate conclusion that Nurcholish Madjid must be regarded as 'first and foremost a Sufi' (276). That contention is also informed by the author's findings concerning the 'Strategies for the Diffusion of Nurcholish's Ideas' (Chapter 4), which were developed in response to Indonesia' socio-religious landscape of the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Basing herself on the important work done by Australian scholar Julia Day Howell on the 'urban Sufism' that has been gaining a foothold among Indonesia's emerging and increasingly affluent city-dwelling middle and upper classes (89, 173), Kull describes how an organisation like Paramadina caters for the need among these new elites to find some deeper purpose to life than achieving social success or the amassment of wealth. Most of the data in this chapter, Kull collected during extensive visits to the Paramadina offices in Jakarta and lengthy talks and discussions with its staff and associated intellectuals.

In the chapter on the reception of Nurcholish Madjid's ideas, the author has categorised the responses as 'positive' and 'negative commentaries'. Many of the latter have been well-known since the 1970s, both from the writings of the critics themselves and the earlier mentioned study made by M.K. Hassan. But Ann Kull has also identified a very interesting new voice, coming from a younger generation of Muslims known as 'Post-Traditionalists' or 'Postra' (reflecting Indonesians' penchant for coining acronyms). Postra emerged in early 2000 among young NGO-activists with an NU background. The view held by these critics is that Nurcholish Madjid has not gone far enough in his innovations. According to one of the spokespersons of Postra, Ahmad Baso, 'Islam has many voices and many truths; it is a hybrid culture that keeps changing. […]. "In my opinion Islam cannot be hegemonic against local cultures".' What Cak Nur is accused of is that he advocated 'a new *essentialism* […] a universalised and institutionalised brand of Islam, a legitimisation for hegemony' (237).

Postra is an interesting phenomenon to watch. Based on information derived from Baso, Kull notes that among their 'principal sources of information are Abdurrahman Wahid, Muhammad Arkoun, the Egyptian's Hassan Hanafi and Ali Abduh Razi, and the Moroccan Muhammad al-Jabri; other important sources that were mentioned are Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Christian liberation theology' (237). Kull agrees with Siti Fathimah that some of the above Muslim intellectuals' names belong to a 'larger tradition of Muslim thinkers and scholars throughout the world' of which Cak Nur is also part (245). With this we have touched on new type of Muslim intellectual, who combines a profound grounding in the study of the Islamic tradition with an equally solid familiarity with the western academe's achievements in the human sciences.

I agree with Ann Kull's assessment that for the development of such a new intellectual 'tradition' (a word that sits somewhat uneasy with an innovative trend!) '[g]lobalisation must be regarded a prerequisite' (255). It is important to recognise the fluidity that accompanies such a development. Scholars and thinkers like Nurcholish Madjid use a wide variety of sources and references, moving freely between classical texts and modern scholarly works. But it is also crucial to realise that globalisation has as its antithesis a renewed 'interest in cultural origins and in exploring question of identity'.[2] That would explain why Nurcholish, with a predomi-

nantly Indonesian audience, 'although his sources of inspiration are global, […] conceptualises his ideas in a way that makes them applicable to the Indonesian context' (249).

The fluidity in Nurcholish Madjid's use of sources is reflected in some of the 'positive commentaries' which Ann Kull recorded earlier on in her thesis. Here Cak Nur is characterised as a 'free-thinker' who refused to become institutionalised. In that respect, he is put alongside Hasan Hanafi, Mohammed Arkoun, and his critics from Postra (Hendro Prasetyo and Ali Munhanif, cf. p.226). Also Azyumardi Azra notes that Cak Nur is 'very hard to pin down to a certain, "absolute' typology' (222), as he attempted to develop an 'Islamic civilisation (*Peradaban Islam*) that would be both viable in a post-modern milieu and strongly rooted in classical Islam tradition' (221). This leads to an interesting, larger question, namely: To what extent can a thinker like Nurcholish Madjid be considered as belonging to that wider phenomenon of the 'liminal' or 'interstitial' intellectual often referred to in the postcolonial studies literature? This is not a question Ann Kull attempts to answer, but *Piety and Politics* contains ample material for considering such an issue.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Cf. Ebrahim Moosa (2005) *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina; Idem (2006) 'Contrapuntal Readings in Muslim Thought: Translations and Transitions' *JAAR* 74: 1, 107-18.

[2] Susan Bassnett (2003) *Translation Studies*. Third edition. London and New York: Routledge, p.1.