

## ***Sunnatullah* as a Bridge Between Revelation, Tradition, and Reason: The Relevance of Nurcholish Madjid's Thought for Contemporary Indonesian Islamic Politics**

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relationship between revelation, tradition, and reason in the thought of Nurcholish Madjid and to explain its relevance to the development of Islamic politics in contemporary Indonesia. This study is important because debates concerning the relationship between Islam, modernity, and politics continue amid the growing tendency toward the formalization of religion in the public sphere. The study employs a qualitative approach and collects data through library research. The findings show that Nurcholish Madjid's thought centers on *tawhid* as an epistemological principle that connects revelation, tradition, and reason through the concept of *sunnatullah*. He understands tradition as a source of values that must be dynamically reinterpreted to respond to social change, while he views modernization as an internal process that remains consistent with Islamic values. This framework generates a substantive vision of Islamic politics that prioritizes justice, democracy, pluralism, and public welfare over religious symbolism. The relevance of this perspective appears in the development of Indonesian Islamic politics, which demonstrates a gradual shift from formalism toward substantivism. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the concept of *sunnatullah* functions as an epistemological bridge between revelation, tradition, and reason in the construction of substantive Islamic politics. These findings expand interpretations of Islamic neo-modernism within the context of contemporary Indonesia.

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### ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis relasi wahyu, tradisi, dan akal dalam pemikiran Nurcholish Madjid serta menjelaskan relevansinya terhadap perkembangan politik Islam di Indonesia kontemporer. Kajian ini penting dilakukan karena perdebatan mengenai hubungan Islam, modernitas, dan politik masih berlangsung di tengah menguatnya kecenderungan formalisasi agama dalam ruang publik. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif*

*dengan pengumpulan data melalui studi kepustakaan (library research). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemikiran Nurcholish Madjid berpusat pada tauhid sebagai prinsip epistemologis yang menghubungkan wahyu, tradisi, dan akal melalui konsep sunnatullah. Tradisi dipahami sebagai sumber nilai yang harus direinterpretasi secara dinamis untuk menjawab perubahan sosial, sedangkan modernisasi dipandang sebagai proses internal yang selaras dengan nilai-nilai Islam. Kerangka tersebut melahirkan pandangan politik Islam substantif yang menekankan keadilan, demokrasi, pluralisme, dan kemaslahatan publik di atas simbolisme keagamaan. Relevansi pemikiran ini terlihat dalam perkembangan politik Islam Indonesia yang menunjukkan kecenderungan bergesernya orientasi dari formalisme menuju substansialisme. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan menunjukkan bahwa konsep sunnatullah berfungsi sebagai jembatan epistemologis antara wahyu, tradisi, dan akal dalam membangun politik Islam substantif. Temuan ini memperluas pembacaan neo-modernisme Islam dalam konteks Indonesia kontemporer.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Islam, tradition, and modernity constitutes one of the central themes in the development of contemporary Islamic thought in Indonesia (Bruinessen et al., 1996; Burhani, 2018; Rahman, 1984). Since the Reformasi era, Indonesia's public sphere has witnessed an increasing expression of religiosity alongside growing demands for democratization, pluralism, and social modernization (Hasan, 2018; Lukens-Bull & Makin, 2025). This condition has generated extensive debates regarding the position of Islam in national and state life, particularly concerning how the normative values of religion can interact with dynamic social change. Within this context, some groups tend to preserve religious traditions through textual and normative approaches, while others seek to adapt Islam to the demands of modernity through various reform agendas. This polarization indicates that the primary challenge facing contemporary Muslims does not lie in choosing between tradition and modernity, but rather in constructing a productive dialogue between the two within an Islamic framework that remains relevant to changing social realities (Azra, 2006; Hefner, 2011; Saeed, 2006).

This debate also appears in the dynamics of Islamic politics in Indonesia. On the one hand, religion continues to serve as an important source of moral legitimacy and collective identity in political life. On the other hand, various attempts to formalize Islam within political institutions frequently encounter complex electoral and social challenges. This phenomenon demonstrates that the success of Islamic politics depends not merely on the use of religious symbols but on the ability to transform Islamic values into substantive, democratic, and socially responsive public agendas. Several studies have shown that the development of Islamic politics in the post-Reformasi period has shifted from a formalistic orientation toward a more substantive approach that places justice, public welfare, and public ethics at the center of Islamic political engagement (Bruinessen, 2013; Fealy & White, 2008; Hefner, 2011). Consequently, scholars need a conceptual framework capable of bridging revelation, tradition, and social change so that Islam can function as a source of public ethics without losing its relevance in modern society.

One of the intellectuals who offers such a framework is Nurcholish Madjid. As a neo-modernist Muslim thinker, Nurcholish Madjid sought to construct a synthesis between Islamic teachings, the Islamic intellectual tradition, and the demands of modernity. He rejected religious approaches that relied exclusively on textual readings detached from historical and social contexts. Instead, he positioned

revelation, reason, and empirical reality as three interconnected elements in the formation of religious knowledge (Mahendra, 2023). Through this framework, Islam emerges as a value system that remains open to change without abandoning its normative foundations. This perspective continues to provide a relevant framework for understanding contemporary Islamic and national issues in Indonesia.

Studies on Nurcholish Madjid's thought have developed along several major trajectories. First, a number of scholars have focused on his ideas concerning pluralism, democracy, civil society, and secularization. Abdullah (2021) examined Nurcholish Madjid's contribution to the development of religious pluralism in Indonesia. Bakti (2005) analyzed his interpretation of civil society, democracy, pluralism, and secularization as foundations of Islamic modernity. Similarly, Pratama (2023) situated Nurcholish Madjid's thought within the tradition of Indonesian Islamic neo-modernism, which seeks to reconcile Islamic values with democracy and civil society. These studies successfully demonstrate the relevance of Nurcholish Madjid's thought for the development of a democratic society; however, they do not specifically explain the epistemological foundations that underpin these ideas.

Second, several studies have examined Nurcholish Madjid's political thought in the context of the relationship between Islam and the state. Nurdin (2016) compared the views of Soekarno, Mohammad Natsir, and Nurcholish Madjid concerning the relationship between Islam and the state in Indonesia. Lahaji and Faisal (2023) analyzed Nurcholish Madjid's critique of the discourse on the Islamic state and the caliphate. Woodward (2007) explored the relationship between piety and politics in Nurcholish Madjid's interpretation of Islam, while Barton (1997) demonstrated how Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid reconciled traditionalism and modernism within the framework of Islamic neo-modernism. Although these studies successfully mapped Nurcholish Madjid's political position, they primarily focused on normative and political dimensions and did not thoroughly explain the relationship among revelation, tradition, and reason as the conceptual foundation of his thought.

Third, several studies have highlighted Nurcholish Madjid's contributions to Islamic education, Islamic reform, and the development of modern Indonesian Islam. Miftahuddin (2025) discussed the concept of ideal Islamic education in Nurcholish Madjid's thought, while van Bruinessen (2006) examined his role as an influential Indonesian Muslim intellectual. Broader studies on Indonesian Islamic politics by Kadir (1999), Mujiburrahman (1999), and Arifianto (2020) explained the transformation of the relationship between Islam and politics within the context of Indonesian democracy. Although these studies provide important insights into the development of Indonesian Islam, they do not specifically connect Nurcholish Madjid's epistemological thought with the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian Islamic politics.

Based on this review of the literature, at least two research gaps remain. First, previous studies have focused primarily on pluralism, democracy, secularization, or the relationship between Islam and the state, while studies examining the epistemological structure of Nurcholish Madjid's thought, which rests upon the relationship among revelation, tradition, and reason, remain relatively limited. Second, few studies have connected this epistemological framework to recent developments in Indonesian Islamic politics. As a result, the conceptual contribution of Nurcholish Madjid's thought to the formation of a substantive and non-formalistic Islamic politics has not yet received adequate scholarly attention.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to analyze the relationship among revelation, tradition, and reason in Nurcholish Madjid's thought and to explain its relevance to the development of Islamic politics in contemporary Indonesia. More specifically, this study seeks to reconstruct the epistemological structure of Nurcholish Madjid's thought through an examination of the concepts of *sunnatullah*, Islamic tradition, and modernization, and then relate these concepts to the dynamics of Islamic politics within the context of Indonesian democracy.

This study argues that Nurcholish Madjid's thought cannot be understood merely as a project of Islamic reform or as a critique of the formalization of Islamic politics. Rather, his thought constitutes a dialectical epistemology that integrates revelation, tradition, and reason within a dynamic framework of *sunnatullah*. Within this perspective, tradition does not function merely as a legacy of the past that must be preserved in a static manner; instead, it serves as a source of knowledge that continuously undergoes reinterpretation through reason and historical experience. This argument expands prevailing interpretations of Islamic neo-modernism, which have generally emphasized the synthesis

of tradition and modernity, by demonstrating that the concept of *sunnatullah* functions as an epistemological bridge connecting the two. Through this framework, the study demonstrates that the form of Islamic politics most relevant to contemporary Indonesia is not one that prioritizes religious symbols and formalization, but rather one that transforms Islamic values into public ethics, democracy, and social welfare.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study focuses on the thought of Nurcholish Madjid, particularly his understanding of the relationship among revelation, tradition, and reason as articulated in his writings on Islamic reform and Islamic politics in Indonesia. The study selects this focus because Nurcholish Madjid's intellectual contributions have significantly influenced the development of contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia.

This study employs a qualitative approach because it seeks to understand and interpret the intellectual construction of a prominent Muslim thinker rather than measure relationships among variables quantitatively (Creswell, 2014; Samosir et al., 2023). The study draws upon both primary and secondary sources. The primary data consist of Nurcholish Madjid's major works, particularly *Tradisi Islam: Peran dan Fungsinya dalam Pembangunan di Indonesia* (Islamic Tradition: Its Role and Function in Indonesian Development) (2008). The secondary data consist of journal articles, academic books, previous research findings, and other scholarly publications relevant to Islamic thought and Islamic politics in Indonesia.

The researcher collected data through library research. The research process involved identifying, selecting, and critically reviewing literature relevant to the research focus. The researcher systematically examined primary and secondary sources that discuss Nurcholish Madjid's thought, Islamic tradition, modernity, and the dynamics of Islamic politics in Indonesia. The study analyzed the data using a critical-hermeneutic approach combined with content analysis. The analytical process consisted of three stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretation. During the interpretation stage, the researcher examined Nurcholish Madjid's thought within its socio-intellectual context and then connected it to contemporary developments in Indonesian Islamic politics in order to identify its relevance and theoretical contribution.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Tawhid, Revelation, and Sunnatullah as the Epistemological Foundations of Nurcholish Madjid's Thought*

Nurcholish Madjid constructed his intellectual framework on the conviction that Islam possesses an intrinsic capacity to engage with social change without losing its normative foundations. This position emerged from the intersection of the pesantren tradition, Islamic modernism, and his academic experience with Fazlur Rahman at the University of Chicago. These intellectual encounters encouraged Nurcholish Madjid to develop a neo-modernist approach that sought to connect the authority of revelation with modern rationality through a critical engagement with the Islamic intellectual tradition (Barton, 1997; Pratama, 2023). Within this framework, *tawhid* functions not merely as a theological doctrine but also as an epistemological principle that shapes the way human beings understand religion, reality, and history.

*Tawhid* occupies a central position because it serves as the source of all intellectual orientations and human actions. According to Nurcholish Madjid (2008), the doctrine of *tawhid* affirms that only Allah possesses absolute authority, whereas all other forms of reality remain relative and open to critical examination. This perspective rejects every attempt to sacralize cultural products, social institutions, or political constructions that are fundamentally the result of human thought and historical processes. Consequently, *tawhid* encompasses not only a spiritual dimension but also a dimension of intellectual liberation that encourages individuals to pursue knowledge through open and rational inquiry. From this perspective, religion does not hinder scientific development; rather, it provides an ethical orientation for human intellectual activity.

This principle of *tawhid* forms the basis of Nurcholish Madjid's understanding of revelation. He regards the Qur'an and the Sunnah as sources of absolute normative truth, yet he argues that the messages contained within revelation possess a universal character that transcends the boundaries of space, time, language, and particular social groups (Madjid, 2008). Islamic universalism originates from the meaning of *al-Islām* as complete submission to God, which constitutes the essence of all prophetic traditions. Therefore, Islam does not function as the exclusive identity of a particular community; instead, it represents a set of universal values that affirm the unity of God, the unity of prophethood, and the unity of humanity. This understanding explains why Nurcholish Madjid consistently places justice, humanity, freedom, and truth at the center of revelation's moral message and argues that these values must continuously inform social life.

The universal character of revelation requires an ongoing process of interpretation. Nurcholish Madjid (2008) argues that revelation remains constant, but human understanding of revelation is always shaped by changing social and historical conditions. Consequently, religious commitment cannot stop at the literal reproduction of sacred texts; instead, it must involve a continuous effort to understand the moral and humanitarian purposes embedded within them. This perspective demonstrates that revelation and reason do not constitute competing sources of knowledge. Rather, reason functions as an instrument that enables human beings to grasp the universal meaning of revelation and apply it within diverse contexts. This position closely resembles Fazlur Rahman's neo-modernist approach, which emphasizes the necessity of reinterpreting revelation in order to preserve the relevance of Islam's normative message amid social transformation (Barton, 1997).

Within this framework, reason occupies a crucial position. Nurcholish Madjid views reason as a divine gift that enables human beings to understand reality and develop civilization. Because religious understanding results from human intellectual activity, it cannot claim the same absolute status as revelation itself. Every religious interpretation remains open to reexamination, criticism, and refinement in accordance with the development of knowledge and historical experience (Madjid, 2008). This perspective also forms the basis of his critique of *taqlid* and fatalistic modes of thinking that persist within segments of Muslim society. He argues that the decline of Muslim societies results more from the weakening of intellectual traditions and critical reasoning than from the teachings of Islam themselves. Therefore, Islamic renewal must begin with the strengthening of rationality, the advancement of scientific inquiry, and the reform of religious understanding (Miftahuddin, 2025; Saeed, 2006).

The relationship among *tawhid*, revelation, and reason reaches its conceptual culmination in the idea of *sunnatullah*. Nurcholish Madjid (2008) defines *sunnatullah* as the divine laws that govern the universe, social life, and historical processes in a regular and intelligible manner. Human beings can understand these laws through the proper use of reason. The concept of *sunnatullah* demonstrates that social change occurs according to objective causal principles rather than through mere chance or passive resignation. From the perspective of revelation, *sunnatullah* represents the universal values that guide human life. From the perspective of reason, it provides the foundation for scientific inquiry because it reveals an orderly reality that human beings can investigate and explain rationally. From the perspective of history, *sunnatullah* explains that the progress and decline of societies depend largely on how human beings respond to the divine laws operating within social life.

**Table 1. The Epistemological Foundations of Nurcholish Madjid's Thought**

Concept	Core Meaning	Epistemological Function
<i>Tawhid</i>	Recognition of the oneness of Allah as the only absolute reality.	Serves as the foundational principle for understanding religion, humanity, and reality; rejects the sacralization of cultural products, social institutions, and political authority.
Revelation	A source of universal normative truth that transcends space, time, and particular social groups.	Provides moral orientation and universal values such as justice, humanity, freedom, and truth that must be translated into social life.

<i>Sunnatullah</i>	Divine laws that govern nature, society, and history in a rational and orderly manner.	Functions as a bridge between revelation, reason, and empirical reality; explains that social change follows objective causal laws that human beings can understand.
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Source: Adapted from Madjid (2008), Barton (1997), and Pratama (2023).

This understanding positions *sunnatullah* as the point of convergence between revelation, tradition, and empirical reality. Revelation provides normative orientation, reason interprets and explains reality, and historical experience serves as the arena in which the values of revelation become actualized. This framework demonstrates that religion and modernity do not exist in an antagonistic relationship; rather, they can enrich one another through an ongoing process of dialogue. This position closely resembles Abdul Karim Soroush's theory of *al-Qabd wa al-Bast* (1990), which distinguishes religion as a transcendent truth from religious understanding as a historical and evolving human product. Consequently, Nurcholish Madjid's epistemological framework does not treat revelation as an obstacle to rationality. Instead, it positions revelation as a normative orientation that guides the use of reason in understanding the operation of *sunnatullah* within human life and history.

### Islamic Tradition as a Mechanism of Continuity and Renewal

One of the defining characteristics of Nurcholish Madjid's thought lies in his rejection of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. He does not regard them as two opposing poles that negate one another; rather, he views them as elements that must be brought together through a creative and continuous process of dialogue. In *Tradisi Islam: Peran dan Fungsinya dalam Pembangunan di Indonesia* (Islamic Tradition: Its Role and Function in Indonesian Development), Nurcholish Madjid (2008) argues that tradition represents the accumulated historical experience of Muslims that embodies values, knowledge, and wisdom that remain relevant to contemporary life. Therefore, people should neither treat tradition as a burden from the past that must be abandoned nor accept it uncritically as an unquestionable authority.

Nurcholish Madjid formulates this position through the principle of *al-Muhâfazhah 'alâ al-Qadîm al-Shâlih wa al-Akhdz bi al-Jadîd al-Ashlah* (preserving valuable traditions from the past while adopting new values that are better). This principle demonstrates that Islamic renewal does not require a rupture with the intellectual heritage of the past. On the contrary, renewal derives its legitimacy and strength from the ability to reinterpret tradition in accordance with the needs of each era (Madjid, 2008). Within this perspective, tradition functions as a source of moral and intellectual orientation that provides the foundation for sustainable social transformation.

This perspective appears clearly in Nurcholish Madjid's interpretation of the history of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. He explains that the process of Islamization did not occur through the destruction of local cultures; instead, it unfolded through a process of transformation that enabled Islamic values to interact with traditions that had already existed within society. The arrival of Islam produced significant social change, but this transformation occurred through mechanisms of adaptation and cultural reinterpretation rather than through a complete rupture with the past (Madjid, 2008). Consequently, the success of Islam's spread throughout Indonesia cannot be separated from the ability of Muslim scholars and preachers to integrate the values of *tawhid* into cultural structures that local communities already recognized and accepted. Figures such as Sunan Kalijaga often illustrate how local traditions can function as effective media for communicating Islamic teachings without erasing the cultural identity of society.

Through this approach, Nurcholish Madjid criticizes two equally problematic tendencies. First, he criticizes conservatism, which regards tradition as a completed entity that no longer requires reinterpretation. Such an attitude risks depriving tradition of its vitality because it cannot adequately respond to ongoing social change. Second, he criticizes forms of modernism that define progress as a process of severing ties with the past. According to Nurcholish Madjid, modernization that ignores its traditional roots will ultimately produce intellectual alienation and cultural disorientation (Madjid, 2008).

This perspective parallels H. A. R. Gibb's warning that Islamic modernism without continuity with the classical tradition risks intellectual impoverishment and the loss of historical depth (Sumantri, 2019).

On this basis, Nurcholish Madjid draws a clear distinction between modernization and Westernization. He defines modernization as a process of rationalization, scientific advancement, social efficiency, and civilizational progress that reflects the demands of *sunnatullah* throughout human history. In contrast, Westernization refers to the uncritical imitation of Western culture, which may not correspond to the needs and conditions of Muslim societies (Madjid, 2008). Therefore, he does not regard modernization as a threat to Islam. Instead, he views it as a logical consequence of Islamic teachings that value knowledge, creativity, and human responsibility in managing social life. This perspective explains why Nurcholish Madjid considers modernization a historical necessity that cannot be avoided but must be pursued within the framework of Islamic values and the social realities of Indonesian society.

This perspective also appears in his understanding of the historical development of Indonesian Islam. Nurcholish Madjid argues that the growth of Islam in Indonesia has produced a distinctive historical experience because it has unfolded within a society characterized by religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Consequently, the development of religious life cannot rely solely on the reproduction of doctrinal teachings; it must also involve a critical engagement with the nation's historical experience. In various writings, he encourages Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders to rediscover the classical potentials embedded within the Islamic tradition that can support the formation of a modern, democratic, and pluralistic society (Madjid, 2008). In this sense, tradition functions not only as the collective memory of the Muslim community but also as a source of inspiration for addressing future challenges.

Nurcholish Madjid's position demonstrates a strong affinity with Hassan Hanafi's framework of *al-turats wa al-tajdid* (tradition and renewal). Just as Hanafi views tradition as a resource that must be reconstructed in order to address contemporary problems, Nurcholish Madjid also argues that the Islamic intellectual heritage should be read critically and productively rather than worshiped or abandoned. This perspective reinforces the neo-modernist character of Islamic thought, which seeks to reconcile the authenticity of tradition with the demands of modernity through an ongoing process of reinterpretation (Barton, 1997; Pratama, 2023). Within this framework, tradition functions as a source of values and collective memory that must continuously undergo reinterpretation in order to remain relevant in the face of social change.

### **The Relevance of the Revelation–Tradition–Reason Dialectic for Contemporary Indonesian Islamic Politics**

The most tangible implication of the relationship among revelation, tradition, and reason in Nurcholish Madjid's thought appears in his understanding of Islamic politics. Drawing upon the principle of *tawhid*, he rejects the tendency to equate Islam with particular political institutions. *Tawhid* carries not only a theological meaning concerning the oneness of God but also an ethical implication that no organization, political party, or political authority can claim sacred legitimacy in the name of religion. Within this framework, the slogan "Islam Yes, Islamic Party No," which he articulated in 1970, should be understood. The statement did not reject the presence of Islam in the public sphere; rather, it criticized the reduction of Islamic teachings into a narrow and partisan political identity (Madjid, 2008; Nurdin, 2016). He positioned Islam as a source of values that transcends short-term political interests, whereas political parties function as worldly instruments that society must evaluate based on their performance and commitment to the public good.

This position closely relates to Nurcholish Madjid's critique of the formalization of Islam in political life. He argues that the success of Islamic politics does not depend on the use of religious symbols or demands for an Islamic state. Instead, it depends on the ability to realize justice, honesty, equality, and public welfare within political governance (Bakti, 2005; Lahaji & Faisal, 2023). Therefore, Islam does not require a state formally labeled as an "Islamic state" to fulfill its ethical aspirations. What matters most is the translation of the universal values of revelation into democratic, accountable, and

socially responsive political practices. This perspective explains why Nurcholish Madjid consistently opposed political projects that sought to identify religion with state power.

The relevance of this critique appears clearly in contemporary Indonesian Islamic politics. The 2024 General Election showed that the United Development Party (PPP), which had long been recognized as one of the principal representatives of Islamic politics, received only 3.87 percent of the national vote and failed to surpass the four-percent parliamentary threshold (Fakhriansyah, 2024). At the same time, other Islamic-based parties did not demonstrate significant electoral dominance compared to nationalist parties. This phenomenon indicates that religious identity alone no longer serves as a decisive factor in democratic political competition. Voters increasingly evaluate parties based on performance, integrity, policy programs, and leadership capacity rather than the religious symbols they employ. This condition demonstrates that the formalization of Islamic identity does not automatically generate strong political legitimacy within Indonesia's increasingly complex and plural society (Arifianto, 2020).

This development can be understood through the framework of *sunnatullah* developed by Nurcholish Madjid. From the perspective of *sunnatullah*, social and political life operates according to objective laws of cause and effect rather than symbolic claims or normative legitimacy alone. Political parties that fail to build public trust, demonstrate good governance, or avoid pragmatic power politics inevitably face political consequences regardless of the ideological identity they adopt. Consequently, political success depends not on the use of religious symbols but on the ability to translate religious values into concrete social actions that generate tangible benefits for society.

This perspective also explains why Nurcholish Madjid viewed democracy and civil society as essential instruments of modern political life. He did not regard democracy as an exclusively Western product. Instead, he considered it a political mechanism consistent with the principles of consultation (*shūrā*), justice, and respect for human dignity that have long existed within the Islamic tradition (Bakti, 2005; Hefner, 2011). Therefore, political modernization does not equate to Westernization. Modernization represents a process of rationalizing social life that enables the realization of universal Islamic values through institutions that are more open, participatory, and accountable. By contrast, Westernization refers to the uncritical adoption of foreign values and practices without considering local social contexts and traditions (Madjid, 2008).

This distinction becomes increasingly relevant when Indonesian politics confronts two equally problematic tendencies. On one side, conservative groups freeze tradition and employ religious symbols as instruments of political mobilization. On the other side, some groups equate modernity with ideological secularism and the exclusion of religion from public life. Nurcholish Madjid rejects both positions. He proposes a synthesis that places Islam as a source of public ethics, tradition as a source of collective memory, and reason as an instrument for responding creatively to social change. Within this framework, being modern does not require becoming Western, just as being religious does not require rejecting democracy and pluralism.

This framework demonstrates that the concept of *sunnatullah* functions not only as a theological principle but also as an epistemological foundation for the development of substantive Islamic politics. *Sunnatullah* enables the integration of revelation, tradition, and reason in the critical interpretation of political reality. Revelation provides normative orientations through values such as justice, honesty, and humanity. Tradition provides historical experiences that shape collective identities. Reason interprets both dimensions in response to contemporary challenges. Through this integration, Islamic politics ceases to function as a project of formalizing religious symbols and instead becomes an effort to embody Islamic values within a democratic, pluralistic, and just public sphere. Consequently, Nurcholish Madjid's critique of Islamic formalism remains relevant because symbol-oriented Islamic politics tends to lose electoral appeal, whereas a substantive approach centered on public ethics corresponds more closely to the pluralistic and democratic character of Indonesian society.

## Discussion

The findings demonstrate that *tawhid*, revelation, reason, and *sunnatullah* constitute an integrated epistemological framework within Nurcholish Madjid's thought. This framework explains why he rejected two dominant tendencies in modern Islamic thought: conservatism, which freezes tradition, and secularism, which separates religion from social life. For Nurcholish Madjid, revelation provides normative orientation, while reason contextualizes the values of revelation within an ever-changing reality. Consequently, Islamic renewal does not emerge from rejecting tradition or uncritically embracing modernity. Instead, it develops through a continuous dialogue among sacred texts, rational inquiry, and historical experience.

This interpretation reveals the close affinity between Nurcholish Madjid's thought and Fazlur Rahman's neo-modernist project, which emphasizes the need to reinterpret Islamic teachings in order to preserve their relevance amid social transformation (Barton, 1997). However, the findings of this study indicate that Nurcholish Madjid's contribution extends beyond reconciling revelation and modernity. He positions *sunnatullah* as an epistemological principle that explains the relationship between transcendent norms and empirical reality. Within this framework, social change does not threaten religion; rather, it forms part of God's laws that human beings must understand through rational inquiry.

These findings complement the studies of Abdullah (2021), Bakti (2005), and Pratama (2023), which primarily emphasize pluralism, democracy, and civil society in Nurcholish Madjid's thought. While these studies successfully demonstrate the social and political relevance of his ideas, they do not adequately explain the epistemological foundations that support them. This study therefore demonstrates that *sunnatullah* constitutes a crucial element connecting revelation, reason, and historical reality within Nurcholish Madjid's neo-modernist framework.

The findings also show that tradition occupies a central position in Nurcholish Madjid's thought. He does not understand tradition as a static legacy of the past; instead, he treats it as a source of knowledge that requires continuous reinterpretation. The principle of *al-Muhâfazhah 'alâ al-Qadîm al-Shâlîh wa al-Akhdz bi al-Jadîd al-Ashlah* reflects his conviction that continuity and renewal function as complementary processes. Consequently, modernization does not require severing ties with the past but rather demands the creative transformation of values that have long existed within society.

This position can be interpreted through Hassan Hanafi's framework of *al-turats wa al-tajdid*. Just as Hanafi views tradition as a resource that must be reconstructed to address contemporary challenges, Nurcholish Madjid also positions tradition as the foundation of Islamic renewal. The difference lies in their respective contexts. Hanafi develops his analysis from the perspective of Arab-Islamic civilization and its relationship with the West, whereas Nurcholish Madjid begins from the historical experience of Indonesia's plural and multicultural Islam. Consequently, tradition in Nurcholish Madjid's thought functions not only as a source of theological legitimacy but also as a mechanism of social integration that enables Islam to develop without losing its cultural roots.

This interpretation expands Barton's (1997) discussion of Islamic neo-modernism as a synthesis of traditionalism and modernism. The findings demonstrate that tradition in Nurcholish Madjid's thought serves a broader function as an epistemic resource for understanding social change. Within this framework, modernization does not signify Westernization but rather an internal process that emerges from the adaptive and transformative capacity of the Islamic tradition. Tradition therefore functions simultaneously as collective memory and as a source of inspiration for developing a democratic and pluralistic modern society.

The most significant implication of the relationship among revelation, tradition, and reason appears in Nurcholish Madjid's political thought. The findings indicate that his critique of the formalization of Islam originates from the principle of *tawhid*, which rejects the sacralization of political institutions. Within this framework, the slogan "Islam Yes, Islamic Party No" should not be interpreted as a rejection of religion in public life. Rather, it constitutes a critique of reducing Islam to a narrow political identity. He positions Islam as a source of ethical values that must be translated into political practices grounded in justice, accountability, and public welfare.

The relevance of this perspective appears in contemporary Indonesian Islamic politics. PPP's failure to surpass the parliamentary threshold in the 2024 election demonstrates that religious symbolism no longer functions as the primary determinant of political choice. Voters increasingly evaluate parties based on integrity, performance, and their capacity to solve public problems. This finding supports Arifianto's (2020) analysis that Indonesian Islamic politics has increasingly shifted from symbolic orientations toward substantive ones. Within a competitive democratic environment, political legitimacy derives not from claims of religious identity but from the ability to deliver tangible benefits to society.

Furthermore, these findings complement the studies of Nurdin (2016), Lahaji and Faisal (2023), and Woodward (2007), which examine the relationship between Islam and the state in Nurcholish Madjid's thought. Although these studies successfully demonstrate his critical position toward the Islamic state and identity politics, they do not adequately explain the epistemological foundation underlying these positions. This study shows that his critique originates from the concept of *sunnatullah*, which views political life as a sphere governed by objective social laws. Within this perspective, political success or failure depends upon the quality of human action rather than the religious symbols employed.

Unlike previous studies that focus on pluralism, democracy, secularization, or the relationship between Islam and the state, this study demonstrates that *sunnatullah* serves as the key epistemological concept linking revelation, tradition, and reason in the construction of substantive Islamic politics. This concept expands the interpretation of Islamic neo-modernism from a mere synthesis of tradition and modernity into a methodological framework for critically understanding social and political change. Consequently, the substantive Islamic politics proposed by Nurcholish Madjid possesses not only a normative foundation but also a robust epistemological basis for addressing the challenges of contemporary Indonesian democracy.

Theoretically, this study expands Fazlur Rahman's neo-modernist framework by demonstrating that *sunnatullah* functions as an epistemological bridge connecting revelation, tradition, and reason. The study also enriches Hassan Hanafi's framework of *al-turats wa al-tajdid* by positioning tradition as an epistemic resource that enables modernization without sacrificing cultural identity. Furthermore, the study provides a more explicit political dimension to the concept of *sunnatullah* by presenting it as an instrument for understanding social and political dynamics rationally.

Practically, these findings encourage Muslim intellectuals, religious organizations, and Islamic political actors to shift their orientation from religious symbolism toward the strengthening of public ethics. Islamic education should develop approaches that integrate revelation, tradition, and reason through a dialogical process, while Islamic organizations and political parties should prioritize justice, transparency, and social welfare as the primary indicators of political success. Through such efforts, Islamic values can remain relevant within Indonesia's democratic, pluralistic, and continuously evolving society.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Nurcholish Madjid's thought is built upon a dialectical relationship among revelation, tradition, and reason that is rooted in the principle of *tawhid* and articulated through the concept of *sunnatullah*. Revelation provides a universal normative orientation, tradition functions as a collective memory and a source of historical values, and reason enables the process of reinterpretation that allows Islamic teachings to remain relevant in the face of social change. Within this framework, tradition does not function as a legacy that must either be preserved statically or abandoned in the name of modernity. Instead, it serves as an epistemic resource that continuously undergoes reconstruction in order to address contemporary challenges. This perspective generates a substantive vision of Islamic politics that places justice, public welfare, democracy, and public ethics at its center rather than emphasizing religious symbolism or the formalization of Islamic identity.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its reconstruction of the concept of *sunnatullah* as an epistemological bridge that connects revelation, tradition, and reason in Nurcholish Madjid's thought.

Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on pluralism, democracy, secularization, or the relationship between Islam and the state, this study demonstrates that *sunnatullah* constitutes the conceptual foundation that explains the relationship among Islamic renewal, modernization, and substantive Islamic politics. This finding expands existing interpretations of Islamic neo-modernism from a mere synthesis of tradition and modernity into a methodological framework for critically understanding social and political change. Consequently, this study contributes theoretically to the development of contemporary Islamic thought and offers a new perspective for understanding Islamic politics in Indonesia.

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a figure study and textual analysis, which prevents it from exploring in greater depth how Nurcholish Madjid's ideas have been implemented by Islamic organizations, political parties, and social actors within contemporary political practice. Second, the study relies primarily on the works of Nurcholish Madjid and therefore does not systematically compare his thought with that of other Muslim neo-modernist thinkers. Future research may address these limitations by conducting comparative studies between Nurcholish Madjid and figures such as Fazlur Rahman, Hassan Hanafi, or Abdul Karim Soroush. Future studies may also examine the relevance of the concept of *sunnatullah* within the practice of Islamic politics, civil society movements, and the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian democracy.

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