

*Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and His Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia.* By Ann Kull. Lund, Sweden: Department of History and Anthropology of Religions, Lund University, 2005. 300 pp.

This is an important and unfortunately timely book. Kull chronicles the life and thought of one of Indonesia's most influential and creative Muslim thinkers; Nurcholish Madjid, or Cak Nur as he was affectionately known, who, as Indonesians often put it "returned to the mercy of God" in August of 2005.

Madjid was an influential and controversial theologian who advocated the both the modernization and Islamicization of Indonesian society, but rejected the notions of Islamic political parties and the Islamic state. He was a vocal and articulate advocate of democratic reform and played a central role in the "*reformasi*" (reformation) movement that led to the collapse of the "New Order" regime of Indonesia's second president Suharto. He was, however, a reluctant politician. When I last spoke with him, ironically over breakfast at the Embassy Row Hilton in Washington D.C., a tired and clearly unwell Cak Nur sighed and said: "Mark, I wish I could quit being a politician and go back to writing books." I first met Cak Nur in the late 1970s when he was a graduate student at the University of Chicago and I, one hundred fifty miles to the south at the University of Illinois. I met with him many times in subsequent years, most frequently during the "*Reformasi*" period when conferences on Islam and Indonesian politics were nearly as common as traffic jams in Washington and Jakarta.

On the basis of this long experience I can state with confidence that Kull's portrayal of Nurcholish's intellectual and political careers are accurate in almost every detail. The volume is meticulously researched, drawing on virtually all of the secondary sources as well as many of Nurcholish's own writings and interviews with Cak Nur himself and many of his Indonesian associates. The book is divided into three primary sections. The first is biographical, the second, consisting of two chapters concerns his religious and political thought

and the strategies he employed to diffuse and popularize them and the third positive and negative responses to them.

In her biographical account Kull stresses the importance of Nurcholish's father, Abdul Madjid, in the development of his thought and character. Abdul Madjid was affiliated with the conservative Muslim organization *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU). Unlike most NU members he remained loyal to the Islamic political party Masyumi when NU established itself as a party in 1952. If anything Kull understates the importance of this rupture in Nurcholish's life. He often spoke of his father agonizing over the decision and remembering seeing him standing weeping in the rice fields agonizing over its consequences. Among the most significant of these was that the young Nurcholish came to have one foot in the staunchly conservative, Sufi oriented world of NU and the other in the scripturalist/modernist world of Masyumi. Prior to his father's rupture with NU, Nurcholish studied at a traditional *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). These schools combine the study traditional Shafite legal texts with Sufi devotionalism. When his father stuck with Masyumi, Nurcholish was subject to serious harassment and subsequently transferred to the modernist *pesantren* in Gontor. Here the curriculum emphasized the study of only the foundational texts of Islam (*Qur'an* and *Hadith*) and secular subjects. Sufi devotionalism is prohibited. The tension between these very different theological orientations was to prove to be a source of both religious inspiration and social tension for the remainder of his life.

His experience at Gontor led Nurcholish to continue his studies at the IAIN (State Institute of Islamic Studies) in Gontor. Kull notes that during this period Nurcholish came under the influence of three of the days most important Indonesian Muslim scholars: Muhammad Natsir, Hamka, and Harun Nasution. Natsir was an avid proponent of democracy and of the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam taught by the modernist organization *Persatuan Islam*. Hamka was known as a prolific author, a gifted orator, and for his emphasis on personal piety. Nasution, who was educated at McGill University in Canada, was an educational reformer and founder of the IAIN

system. Virtually alone among Indonesian Muslim intellectuals he was a proponent of the rationalist Mutazilite school of Islamic theology. Nurcholish's life and works were to combine Natsir's emphasis on democracy with Hamka's piety and Nasution's emphasis on the development of Islamic education. He had little use for either fundamentalism or Mutazilite theology. Virtually all contemporary Muslims view Mutazilism as heresy because it maintains that the *Qur'an* is created, not the eternal speech of God as the "orthodox" Asharite school teaches. Nurcholish believed that by promoting Mutazilism, Natsution provoked an unnecessary controversy that detracted from his educational reform efforts.

Kull notes that in the 1960s and 1970s Nurcholish became a significant public figure because of the leadership roles he played in Muslim student associations and more importantly because of two extremely controversial speeches. Initially he was the darling of Masyumi supporters. The party was outlawed in 1959 but later reconstituted as a religious foundation *Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia* or DDI (The Indonesian Society for the Propagation of Islam) headed by Natsir. Nurcholish was, for a time, referred to as the "Young Natsir". Many expected that he would play a prominent role in fostering the religious and political agendas of Islamic modernism which included the reformulation of Indonesia as an Islamic state. As Kull notes their hopes were shattered by two speeches delivered in 1970 and 1972 in which Nurcholish rejected both the Islamic state and even Islamic political parties. What proved even more controversial is that he used terms including secularization and desacralization. It is unfortunate that Kull does not provide a more detailed analysis of these critical works and in her discussion relies exclusively on secondary sources. As she notes Nurcholish regretted his choice of words, many assumed that he was advocating a move towards a non-religious society. This was not the case. By secularization, Nurcholish meant that Indonesian should cease the practice of considering aspects of social life, including politics that are not authentically religious as being so.

Kull's discussion of Nurcholish's years at the University of Chicago helps to clarify the nature of his relationship with the Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman. She describes Rahman as having been a role model as well as a teacher for Nurcholish and other Muslim students. While they shared a general theological approach and a method of *Qur'anic* exegesis that emphasized what Rahman referred to as "general themes" rather than literal readings, Nurcholish, particularly in light of the furor provoked by his "secularization" speeches was careful to avoid the type of statements, including the denial of the physical revelation the *Qur'an* that led Rahman to spend much of his life in exile.

Chapters four and five which concern Nurcholish's participation in Indonesian political and religious life in the period after he returned from Chicago and the varying positive and negative evaluations of his works make important and lasting contributions. This is the first detailed account of the organization and activities of his Paramadina Foundation and University. Paramadina offers courses on religious subjects including law, mysticism theology, and philosophy for an urban, primarily middle class community. It is among the most active Indonesian NGOs promoting inter-religious dialog and tolerance. Nurcholish also used this venue to promote democracy and egalitarianism. This element of the foundation's program was especially important during the period of democratic transition that followed the end of the Suharto regime. Kull's detailed account of this period in Indonesian history reveals both the profoundly complex and difficult nature of the process and Nurcholish's deep commitment to social and economic reform as well as to procedural democracy.

Kull's treatment of responses to Nurcholish's thought seeks to balance account of his most ardent critics and staunchest supporters. Given the vast amount that has been written about him this is an enormous task. She takes great care to include supporters, including Moeslim Abdurrahman, who are none the less critical of some aspects of Nurcholish's thought and strategies and those among his harshest critics who have actually read his worked. Her

treatment of the positive evaluations of Nurcholish's theology are greatly enhanced that they are based on interviews as well as textual analysis. Unfortunately she was not able to interview his critics particularly those associated with *Dewan Dakwah*. If anything she understates the vitriolic nature of their critiques. I can state this in part because I have interviewed DDI leaders numerous times. She quotes passages in which Nurcholish's ideas are attributed to "Jews", compared with those of the generally reviled Turkish secularist leader Kamal Ataturk and mystics including Ibn al-Arabi and al-Hallaj who describe themselves as "having themselves become God". It is tragically ironic that an organization that promotes such hateful speech is housed in the old Masyumi, an organization Nurcholish's father sacrificed so much for, headquarters in Jakarta.

The least successful portions of the book are those summarizing Nurcholish's theology. She correctly identifies tolerance, pluralism, ethics, piety, mysticism, democracy, and gender issues as being among his central concerns, she does not engage any of his voluminous writings in detail. She mentions, but does not appear fully appreciate the novel ways he makes use of the works of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century scholar, Ibn Tamiyya. Ibn Tamiyya is known best for his denunciations of popular religion and is the darling of radical Islamists throughout the world. His writings are often used as "proof texts" for those who would label their theological and political opponents unbelievers (*kafir*), something Nurcholish never did. Since his student days in Chicago, Nurcholish used a different reading of Ibn Tamiyya's works to promote pluralism and tolerance. It is impossible to consider the subtlety and complexities of these arguments in the detail they deserve in a brief review but must be noted that by citing him in a theology of liberalism and inclusivism, Nurcholish turned Islamist arguments on themselves.

In sum this is an important book. It provides the basis and biographical context for more detailed explorations of the thought of one of the twentieth century's most important Muslim theologians.

All who knew Cak Nur or admired his work will want to read it. Priced at USD 89.50 it is far beyond the means of Indonesian and other Southeast Asian readers. Hopefully Paramadina will undertake an Indonesian translation.

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