

Nurcholish Madjid: The Visionary Intellectual

A Book Review of Ahmad Gaus AF's *Api Islam*

by
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Every thinker, wrote the Hungarian thinker Georg Lukacs, is a man of his age. In that sense, to understand the true import and meaning of a particular idea, one must understand and appreciate the context for the emergence of the idea.

Every idea conceptualized by a thinker belongs to the world of the profane. It is the result of interactions in society, a function of power-play and competing interests - and as Edward Said would say, is secular in essence.

This is what readers can garner from a newly published book by Kompas, *Api Islam: Nurcholish Madjid, Jalan Hidup Seorang Visioner* (The Fire of Islam: Nurcholish Madjid: The Path of a Visionary). Written by Ahmad Gaus AF, a close associate of the late Nurcholish Madjid, who was also known as Cak Nur, this book offers insights into the life of Indonesia's leading reformist, who known for his clarion call of *Pembaruan pemikiran Islam* (Renewal of Islamic thought) since early 1970s.

It is no understatement to say that the landscape of Indonesian Islam would not be what it is today if not for the role of Cak Nur as the prime architect of this modernizing trend within Islam.

One cannot appreciate the deep and lasting contributions of Cak Nur without understanding the context in which he operated to bring his ideas to fruition. Much of this context is narrated in *Api Islam*.

Written in a lucid and candid manner, this book offers crucial information on the struggles of Cak Nur as he sought to implement a new path for Islam in Indonesia. *Api Islam* is as much the life story of Cak Nur as a history of the renewal movement.

It is a testament to the effort of an individual to break the impasse of political Islam that dogged much of the early period of Independence Indonesia, and present Islam as a cultural and moral force.

Three chapters are particularly useful in understanding the context of the rise and growth of the pembaruan, with Cak Nur as the central actor. One is the chapter detailing the early polemic Cak Nur delivered in his lectures in 1970 and 1972, provoking the emergence of a new thinking among young activists of the era. Second, is the chapter on the

institutionalization of the movement through the establishment of Yayasan Paramadina. Third, is the chapter on Cak Nur's role in the Indonesian Islamic Intellectual Association (ICMI) and his involvement in the reform that led to the downfall of Soeharto and the New Order regime.

The role played by Cak Nur is not insignificant. It is for this that the title of "visionary" is most apt to describe the man whose life has been dedicated to the reform of Indonesian Islamic society in the present.

However it is unfortunate that *Api Islam* is more narrative than introspective. This is evident from the lack of Cak Nur's own voice throughout this book. What were some of his own inner thoughts and internal struggles as he confronted the many challenges that came along the way, one wants to know.

How did he negotiate the tensions he faced in socializing his views? Unfortunately, Cak Nur is no longer around. The difficulty in garnering an introspective account may lie with Cak Nur's own demeanor as one who was always optimistic and often kept his innermost dilemmas hidden.

Nonetheless, *Api Islam* an important documentation of the life of Indonesia's most prominent thinker and also provides context for the rise and growth of neo-modernist Islam in Southeast Asia.

No one can doubt that Cak Nur's version of Islam has generated both support and opposition in Malaysia and Singapore, although the latter is more apparent. One can hope that this book can be an impetus to trace the transmission of ideas and orientations through some of the actors revealed in the chapters.

Such an endeavor will be of tremendous importance toward understanding the dynamics operating in the competing struggles to define and represent Islam in Muslim societies in this region.

Cak Nur truly is a beacon for many who seek reconciliation between tradition and modernity. As his biography reveals, he continues to light the spirit of a truly substantive and universal ethos and message of Islam for generations to come.

His life story is testament to the possibility of imagining and re-imagining a new way of living Islam, particularly for the younger generation. For that, this book should be a welcomed companion to the voluminous writings of Cak Nur as it gives an intimate peek into the life of a visionary, and arguably one of the most important reformist thinkers of contemporary Islam.

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