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'Islam, Yes, Islamic Party, No' call relevant

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INDONESIA'S leading and independent Muslim intellectual, Nurcholish Madjid, surprised the political establishment in May when he announced his bid for the presidency in next year's election.

Cak Nur, as he is popularly called, is a respected thinker. Observers of the Islamic revivalism in this region would have remembered Cak Nur for his slogan in the early 1970s, one which the likes of Pas would find blasphemous, "Islam, Yes. Islamic Party, No".

It would be good for Barisan Nasionalled Malaysia and Umno's Islam if Indonesia boasts of a modernist ulama as president - an ulama who, quite correctly, rejects the idea of an Islamic state as a "myth".

Since the 1960s, Cak Nur had already seen the dangers of polarisation in the Muslim community where the traditionalist and proIslamic state modernists are pitted against the so-called secular modernists.

A Javanese raised in the traditionalist stronghold of Jombang in East Java and "anak didik" of the great Islamic thinker, University Chicago's Fazlur Rahman, Cak Nur's writings represents a new genre of Islamic scholarship that puts together Quranic tafsir (commentary) with contemporary political analysis and sophisticated social theory.

He does not invoke jurisprudential cadences of Islamic traditions or talk about the abstract idealism of Islamic modernism. I remember him as a thinker who initially troubled me with his provocative scholarship on the legitimacy and role of secularisation in Islam - now increasingly accepted and enlarged by intellectuals like Abdullahi AnNaim, Ja'far Sheikh Idris and Zaid Shakir.

Like Indonesia's Islamic modernists such as Djohan Affandi and Fachry Ali, Cak Nur chose the middle road between secular liberalism and the Kaum Tua's ideologised Islam. As early as the 1970s, Cak Nur criticised fellow ulama for misunderstanding the essence of Islam by turning the profane into the sacrilegious.

Among the profane are the notions of an Islamic state and Islamic political parties. In a nutshell, Cak Nur challenged the orthodox views of the traditionalists.

Like Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Cak Nur believes in the fundamentals of Islam but vehemently rejects the manmade imperatives (and the attendant deviations that accrue from their blind acceptance) such as the Islamic state. Cak Nur bristles against those Muslims who instead of focusing on intellectual and social renewal, waste their time on ideological bickering.

Central to Cak Nur's religious thought is the need for Muslims to secularise the political while preserving the truly sacred in Islam. As he wrote in Islam, Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan: "Islam itself, if examined truthfully, was begun with a process of secularisation. Indeed, the principle of tauhid represents the starting point for a much larger secularisation. This commitment to tauhid requires a neverending effort to distinguish the divine from the human in Islamic traditions."

In distinguishing the divine from the human in Islamic traditions, tauhid implies a commitment to reason, knowledge and science. This can be understood as acts of devotion to a creator whose majesty is immanent in the natural laws of the world. Going by the thought of Cak Nur, modernity resides in a process - a process of discovery in which truths are relative, leading to the discovery of the Absolute Truth, Allah.

Cak Nur's critics argue that since Islam is a total way of life, accepting secularisation amounts to a renunciation of Islam's holism. He is accused of being overly influenced by Western theologians such as Harvey Cox, who wrote *The Secular City*. More commonly, he is accused of ignoring the Sunnah or Prophet's traditions.

A Malaysian critic - a certain professor whom I had the privilege of studying under for two wholesome years - wrote, "to deny this precedent is to rid Islam of its sociological wholeness, transforming it into a mere spiritual personalist ethical system akin to what Christianity has become in the West".

I disagree. I am inclined to believe that what Cak Nur meant is that some areas in the Sunnah responded to the immediate issues and concerns that had emerged during specific historical context. Thus, the sieving of the divine from the human or the use of reason is integral in the process of interpreting the traditions.

Cak Nur's critics are trapped in the straitjacket of dogmatism. Imprisoned in their worldview of 18th century West Europe, they understand secularism as the separation of church from state. The Muslim modernists of Cak Nur's ilk view secularism as "a principle of public policy for organising the relationship between religion and the state in a specific context" and that it must be understood in a contextual sense of each particular society.

Cak Nur warns that the subordination of Islam to party politics would cause the stagnation of modernism among the ummah. This alarm is already ringing in Malaysia.