

Nurcholish Madjid Desacralization and Contemporary Religious Authority

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Article	Abstract
Article History : Received: August 29, 2026 Reviewed: September 25, 2026 Accepted: October 02, 2026 Published: October 04, 2026 Keywords : Desacralization, Nurcholish Madjid, Tawhid, Modern Religious Life How to Site : Sukma Mulia & Adenan Adenan. (2026). Nurcholish Madjid Concept of Desacralization and Its Relevance to Modern Religious Practice. <i>FiTUA: JURNAL STUDI ISLAM</i>, 7 (2), 16-26  The works shared below License Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC-BY-SA)	Nurcholish Madjid's concept of desacralization emerged from his concern over the tendency to treat human interpretations, religious authorities, and worldly interests as sacred and absolute. This issue remains relevant to contemporary religious life, particularly in the cult of religious figures and the use of religious identity in political competition. This study aims to analyze the foundations of Madjid's concept of desacralization and examine its relevance to contemporary religious authority and identity politics. The study employs a qualitative approach through library research using a descriptive-analytical method. The primary source is Nurcholish Madjid's <i>Islam, Doctrine and Civilization</i>, supported by relevant scholarly literature on desacralization, religious authority, and identity politics. The study finds that Madjid's desacralization operates through two related mechanisms: desacralizing human authority and distinguishing religious values from contingent political interests. The first mechanism places religious figures, their interpretations, and intellectual products within the realm of human and relative authority, thereby allowing them to be examined critically rather than treated as absolute. The second mechanism separates Islamic religious values from political interests, preventing political choices, institutions, and identities from acquiring religious legitimacy simply through the use of religious symbols.

INTRODUCTION

Islam essentially carries a mission to liberate humanity through the doctrine of tawhid that is, affirming Allah as the one and only God worthy of worship. The phrase “lā ilāha illā Allāh” is not only the foundation of faith but also implies that humans must free themselves from all forms of servitude to anything other than Allah (Musawamah et al., 2025). Within this framework, various human-derived elements whether ideas, traditions, figures, institutions, or political interests cannot be placed in a sacred and absolute position. This awareness is important because religious life does not always align with this principle. The idolization of religious figures, excessive blind adherence (taqlid), and the use of religious symbols and identities for political gain indicate a tendency to treat human creations as if they possessed unquestionable truth.

This issue becomes even more complex in modern religious life, which is characterized by the rise of social media and the free flow of information. Religious authority is no longer formed solely through educational institutions and religious organizations but also through figures who gain popularity in the digital sphere (Effendy, 1998). This situation creates opportunities for the emergence of religious understandings that are not always grounded in adequate scholarly knowledge. The phenomenon of idolizing religious figures demonstrates how some members of society may uncritically accept a figure's claims and regard their opinions as absolute truth. At the same time, the political arena continues to show the use of religious identity as a tool to gain support and draw

boundaries between groups (Ali, 2022). This situation highlights the importance of reintroducing a framework of thought capable of distinguishing between the sacredness of religion and the products of human thought.

One relevant framework for understanding this issue is Nurcholish Madjid's concept of desacralization. For Cak Nur, tawhid carries intellectual implications that liberate humans from servitude to anything other than God. Desacralization is not intended to eliminate religious values from human life, but rather to place worldly matters in their proper context recognizing their relative nature and openness to reason (Fadil et al., 2026). Thus, religious figures, social institutions, traditions, ideas, and political practices should not be treated as sacred and beyond criticism. This framework positions reason as a vital tool for understanding life's challenges, enabling believers to distinguish between teachings that originate from God and human interpretations of those teachings.

A number of studies have examined Nurcholish Madjid's thought in relation to desacralization, rationalization, and political identity. Azamuddin et al. (2025), for example, examine the comparison between the political secularization of Ali Abd al-Raziq and Nurcholish Madjid, placing Madjid's thought primarily within the broader discourse of Islamic political reform (Azamudin et al., 2025). Similarly, Muhammad Nur Ilham et al. (2024) discuss Madjid's thought in relation to identity politics, particularly the relationship between religious identity and political contestation. Other studies have examined desacralization as a process of rationalizing religious thought and separating worldly affairs from excessive claims of sacred legitimacy (Didik Lutfi Hakim, 2014; Muhammad Nur Ilham et al., 2024). These studies demonstrate that desacralization has been discussed in relation to political life, rationalization, and identity politics.

However, the existing studies do not yet bring these discussions together into a single analytical framework that examines how desacralization operates in relation to contemporary religious authority and the social construction of religious legitimacy. Studies on identity politics primarily emphasize the relationship between religion and political competition, while studies on desacralization tend to focus on theological, intellectual, or political rationalization. Consequently, the connection between the desacralization of human religious authority and the use of religious identity for political purposes has not been sufficiently elaborated as two related expressions of the same problem: the tendency to attribute absolute legitimacy to human authority and worldly interests. This distinction is important because contemporary religious authority is increasingly shaped not only by formal religious institutions but also by the public visibility and popularity of religious figures, particularly in the digital sphere.

This study addresses this gap by examining Nurcholish Madjid's concept of desacralization through two interconnected dimensions: the desacralization of religious authority and the distinction between religious values and contingent political interests. The first dimension is used to examine the cult of religious figures and the tendency to treat their interpretations as unquestionable, while the second examines how religious identity can be detached from its theological foundation and employed in political competition. By bringing these two dimensions together, this study moves beyond viewing desacralization merely as a principle of Islamic intellectual renewal or political reform. Instead, it develops desacralization as an analytical framework for understanding how human authority and worldly interests may acquire quasi-sacred legitimacy in contemporary religious life.

Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze Nurcholish Madjid's concept of desacralization, particularly its underlying foundations of tawhid and rationality, and to explain its relevance to modern religiosity. This study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of Islamic thought, specifically regarding the relationship between tawhid, rationality, and criticism of human authority. On a practical level, this study is expected to serve as a reflective framework for the Muslim community, enabling them to balance religion, religious figures, traditions, and worldly interests in a proportionate manner so that religious life can develop in a rational, open, and objective way while remaining grounded in the values of tawhid.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach through library research with a descriptive-analytical design (Nasution, 2023). The study combines a philosophical approach and a contextual sociological approach. The philosophical approach is used to examine the conceptual foundations of Nurcholish Madjid's thought concerning *tawhid*, desacralization, rationality, human authority, and the distinction between sacred religious values and relative worldly matters. The contextual sociological approach is used to examine the relevance of these concepts to contemporary religious phenomena, particularly the cult of religious figures and the use of religious identity in political life. The analysis therefore moves from the reconstruction of Madjid's concept to its contextual interpretation in contemporary religiosity.

The research process consisted of six stages: source identification, source selection, textual extraction, thematic coding, conceptual interpretation, and contextual analysis. First, source identification was conducted by collecting literature directly related to the research focus, including Nurcholish Madjid's works and scholarly publications addressing desacralization, *tawhid*, religious authority, rationalization of religion, identity politics, and contemporary religiosity. The literature was identified based on its relevance to the conceptual and contextual dimensions of the study. Second, source selection was conducted by applying relevance as the main inclusion criterion. Primary sources were selected when they directly presented Madjid's arguments concerning *tawhid*, desacralization, rationality, human liberation, and the treatment of worldly affairs as relative matters. Secondary sources were included when they provided scholarly discussion, interpretation, or contextual analysis relevant to these concepts, religious authority, the cult of religious figures, or religious identity politics. Sources that did not contribute directly to these themes were excluded from the analytical corpus (Fiantika, 2022).

The third stage, textual extraction, involved close reading of the selected sources and recording textual passages that contained arguments relevant to the research questions. From Madjid's primary text, the extraction focused on statements concerning the absolute sacredness of God, the relative status of human products, the relationship between *tawhid* and rationality, and the treatment of worldly institutions and interests. From secondary literature, relevant passages concerning religious authority, desacralization, identity politics, and contemporary religious practices were extracted for comparison and contextualization. The extracted material was then organized according to its conceptual relevance rather than merely according to the source in which it appeared (Abdussamad, 2022).

The fourth stage, thematic coding, was conducted to identify recurring concepts and establish analytical categories (Moleong, 2021). The coding process began with concepts explicitly present in Madjid's thought, particularly *tawhid*, desacralization, rationality, human authority, and the distinction between sacred and worldly domains. These initial codes were then grouped into two analytical themes corresponding to the focus of the study. The first theme was the desacralization of human authority, which includes the treatment of religious figures, interpretations, and intellectual products as relative human authorities rather than absolute sources of truth. The second theme was the distinction between religious values and contingent political interests, which concerns the separation of religious principles from political institutions, political choices, and the use of religious identity for political mobilization. This thematic structure was developed from the recurring relationship between *tawhid*, human authority, and worldly interests identified in the primary and secondary literature.

The fifth stage, conceptual interpretation, involved interpreting the relationship among the identified themes rather than simply describing individual statements from the sources. Madjid's concept of desacralization was interpreted as a consequence of *tawhid*, in which absolute sacredness belongs only to God while human interpretations, institutions, traditions, and political interests remain relative and therefore open to critical examination. The analysis then examined how this conceptual distinction provides a basis for understanding the two identified dimensions of contemporary religiosity: the excessive elevation of religious figures and the attribution of religious legitimacy to political interests.

The sixth stage, contextual analysis, connected the conceptual findings with contemporary religious phenomena discussed in the selected literature. The first dimension was examined through the

phenomenon of the cult of religious figures, particularly the tendency to accept the claims of religious personalities without sufficient critical examination. The second dimension was examined through religious identity politics, particularly the use of religious symbols, identities, or claims to strengthen political legitimacy. The contextual analysis did not treat these phenomena as direct empirical findings from field research; rather, they were interpreted as contemporary contexts through which the analytical implications of Madjid's concept could be examined.

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis involving reduction of relevant textual material, thematic classification, conceptual interpretation, and synthesis of findings (Moleong, 2021). Source triangulation was used by comparing Madjid's primary arguments with relevant scholarly interpretations and studies addressing desacralization, religious authority, and identity politics. Through these procedures, the study develops an analytical connection between Madjid's concept of desacralization and the two contemporary issues examined in this research: the cult of religious figures and the use of religious identity in political competition.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From Secularization to Desacralization

The genealogy of Nurcholish Madjid's concept of secularization cannot be separated from the intellectual and political circumstances of Indonesian Muslims at the beginning of the 1970s. Rather than beginning with Madjid's personal biography, it is more relevant to trace how the concept emerged as an intellectual response to what he perceived as stagnation in Muslim thought, particularly the tendency to equate Islamic commitment with formal political affiliation (Munawar-Rachman, 2006). This concern became explicit in his paper, *Keharusan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat (The Necessity of Renewing Islamic Thought and the Problem of Ummah Integration)*, first presented in Jakarta on January 3, 1970, before activists, members, and families of HMI, GPI, PII, and Persami. In this paper, Madjid described a condition of intellectual stagnation (*kejumudan*) and the weakening of the moral and intellectual force of Muslims. He consequently placed the need for renewal in tension with the desire to maintain organizational and political unity among Muslims.

The historical background of this argument included the changing position of Islamic political forces after the dissolution of Masyumi. Through Presidential Decree No. 200 of 1960, the Indonesian government formally dissolved Masyumi and its branches and organizations. The subsequent political circumstances of the New Order further restricted the space for Islamic political parties and encouraged a reorientation of Muslim intellectual and social activism. In this context, Madjid's concern was not simply about the decline of a particular political party, but about the intellectual consequences of making political institutions the primary expression of Islamic commitment. His 1970 paper therefore questioned whether the growing formal identification with Islam was accompanied by a corresponding renewal of thought and social capacity. The problem was, in his view, not the existence of political activity itself, but the tendency to place political instruments in a position that exceeded their worldly and historical character.

This concern explains the emergence of the expression "Islam Yes, Islamic Party No." The statement should not be interpreted as a rejection of Islam in public life, nor as an advocacy of separating religion from society. Rather, it was directed at distinguishing Islam as a religious commitment from political parties as historically contingent institutions. Madjid observed that many Muslims were more attracted to Islamic parties and organizations than to the intellectual and ethical ideas that those institutions were expected to represent. His formulation consequently sought to return political organizations to their proper status as human and worldly instruments rather than treating them as sacred representations of Islam itself.

From this point, the term *secularization* entered Madjid's project of Islamic renewal. The concept was not intended to reproduce Western secularism, understood as an ideology that necessarily marginalizes religion from public life. For Madjid, secularization referred to a process of placing worldly matters within their proper worldly sphere. Political parties, ideologies, social institutions, and other historical arrangements could therefore be evaluated critically because none of them possessed

the absolute status belonging to God. The distinction between *secularization* and *secularism* was consequently fundamental: secularization was conceived as a process of intellectual clarification and liberation from the excessive sacralization of worldly objects, whereas secularism referred to an ideological position with a different historical and philosophical genealogy.

The use of the term nevertheless generated considerable controversy. The controversy was partly linguistic and partly theological. For many Muslim intellectuals, the word *secularization* was closely associated with *secularism* and therefore appeared incompatible with Islamic teachings. H. M. Rasjidi became one of the most prominent critics of Madjid's formulation. In 1972, Rasjidi published *Koreksi terhadap Drs. Nurcholis Madjid tentang Sekularisasi*, a 112-page work specifically addressing Madjid's ideas concerning secularization (Ajeng, 2026). The debate demonstrates that the controversy surrounding Madjid's thought was not merely a disagreement over terminology; it concerned the relationship between religion and worldly affairs, the status of political activity, and the meaning of Islam's public role.

The theological foundation of Madjid's argument can be traced to *tawhid*. If God is the only absolute and ultimately sacred reality, then no created entity can legitimately receive the same status of absoluteness. From this premise, worldly institutions and human constructions must remain open to criticism, change, and rational evaluation. Secularization, therefore, was connected to the theological principle that Muslims should not attribute divine or absolute status to political power, ideology, historical institutions, or other worldly objects. Research on the development of Madjid's thought likewise identifies the relationship between *tawhid*, secularization, and the desacralization of what is essentially profane or worldly (Muhtadi, 2019).

This theological logic leads to the concept of *desacralization*. Desacralization does not mean denying the sacred dimension of religion. Instead, it means removing the attribution of sacredness from things that are not intrinsically sacred. The distinction is important because Madjid's argument involves two complementary movements: affirming the absolute sacredness of God while refusing to extend that absoluteness to the profane sphere. Political parties, political ideologies, state institutions, public figures, and other historical arrangements therefore belong to the worldly sphere. They may be important for social life, but their importance does not make them sacred. Such a distinction allows Muslims to participate in worldly affairs while retaining a critical distance from them (Rasjidi, 1972).

The concept of the *profane* or *worldly sphere* is consequently central to understanding Madjid's intellectual genealogy. The worldly sphere is not necessarily opposed to religion. Rather, it consists of matters whose forms are historically contingent and therefore subject to human reasoning, deliberation, and change. Desacralization enables Muslims to distinguish between religious principles that possess normative significance and human interpretations or institutions that remain historically conditioned. In this sense, the political realm does not disappear from Islamic concern; instead, it becomes an arena in which ethical and rational judgment can operate without being burdened by the assumption that a particular political form is itself sacred. This interpretation is consistent with Madjid's broader effort to connect Islamic renewal with rationalization and modernization (Barton, 1999).

Rationality thus becomes the practical consequence of desacralization. When worldly matters are no longer treated as sacred, they can be examined through reason, criticism, empirical experience, and historical reflection. Madjid's earlier formulation that modernization should be understood as rationalization rather than Westernization is important in this regard. Rationalization does not require Muslims to abandon Islamic faith; rather, it seeks to liberate intellectual activity from rigid attachment to inherited forms when those forms are not themselves essential to the principles of Islam. In this framework, *tawhid* provides the theological foundation, secularization identifies the process of distinguishing the worldly from the sacred, desacralization describes the removal of unwarranted sacred status from worldly objects, and rationality provides the intellectual method for dealing with those worldly matters.

Madjid's later writings show that the relationship between secularization and desacralization developed rather than simply disappeared after the 1970 controversy. His collected works include the 1970 paper *Keharusan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat*, subsequent writings

such as *Sekali Lagi tentang Sekularisasi*, and the later reflection *Sekularisasi Ditinjau Kembali*. This development indicates that the central issue in Madjid's thought was not the promotion of secularism, but the need to clarify the boundary between the sacred and the worldly. The later emphasis on desacralization therefore represents a conceptual clarification of the theological implications of his earlier argument rather than a simple replacement of one term by another.

Accordingly, the genealogy of Madjid's concept can be reconstructed as a sequence of interconnected ideas: the intellectual stagnation of Muslim thought generated the demand for renewal; the political identification of Islam with particular parties raised the problem of sacralizing worldly institutions; the 1970 formulation of *secularization* attempted to restore the distinction between religious commitment and political instruments; the controversy surrounding the term exposed the need for greater conceptual clarification; *tawhid* provided the theological basis for distinguishing God's absolute sacredness from created realities; *desacralization* then became a key formulation for removing sacred status from worldly objects; and the recognition of the *profane/worldly sphere* opened space for rational and critical engagement with social and political realities. In this conceptual structure, secularization is not the abandonment of religion but a process through which *tawhid* prevents worldly realities from being elevated to the status of the Absolute.

The Cult of Personality and the Death of Critical Thinking

The most visible consequence of the loss of critical thinking among religious believers today is the prevalence of the cult of personality (excessive worship of public figures), in which preachers are idolized to an extreme degree (Hidayat & M. Noer, 2001). People who are seeking spiritual solace amid modernization often find themselves caught up in believing popular figures who boldly promise implausible miracles rather than presenting scientific knowledge whose accuracy can be verified (Dito Alif Pratama, 2023).

This phenomenon is clearly illustrated by the popularity of Iyus Sugirman, founder of the UNIQ Nusantara Islamic Boarding School in Malang, who is better known as Mama Ghuftron. Rather than building a religious reputation through a valid scholarly lineage (such as the study of Quranic exegesis or hadith), Mama Ghuftron's status as a prominent figure is built on implausible narratives. In various viral videos, he claims to have the ability to communicate in the language of ants, the language of angels, and even the language of jinn. This phenomenon can be observed in the public controversy surrounding Iyus Sugirman, popularly known as Mama Ghuftron, whose statements circulated widely through social media in 2024. Reports by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) documented several controversial claims associated with his viral videos, including a statement concerning a purported video call with the Angel of Death. In response, MUI announced in July 2024 that it was conducting further study of the teachings and statements associated with Mama Ghuftron and coordinating with MUI authorities in Malang. MUI representatives also expressed concern that such statements could influence public religious understanding.

Viewed through Nurcholish Madjid's concept of desacralization, the phenomenon illustrates the importance of maintaining a distinction between religious authority and claims concerning extraordinary religious status. Desacralization does not mean rejecting religion or denying the sacred dimension of Islam; rather, it requires that created persons, institutions, and worldly claims not be elevated to an absolute or unquestionable status. For Madjid, this principle follows from *tawhid*: because only God possesses absolute sacredness, human beings and their claims remain subject to rational examination and critical evaluation (Madjid, 1992). From this perspective, the public reception of religious figures should not rest solely on extraordinary claims or symbolic authority, but should remain open to critical inquiry, religious knowledge, and rational assessment (Madjid, 1992).

Deputy Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) KH. M. Cholil Nafis openly stated that Mama Ghuftron's claims are dangerous for the Muslim community because they lack any scientific basis whatsoever and have the potential to mislead. However, the most crucial point to examine from a sociological perspective is the fact that thousands of his followers continue to blindly accept and believe these absurd claims without the slightest critical scrutiny.

This is where the concept of desacralization is crucial to apply. Nurcholish Madjid reminds us that all human attributes, the ability to speak, and personal charisma are profane matters. Humans are mortal beings who always have weaknesses. Sacralizing human figures and uncritically accepting their teachings that contradict rationality is a tangible form of modern idolatry (Aqil, 2025). Desacralization calls on believers to objectively evaluate a preacher based on his moral integrity and common sense, rather than on claims of imaginary miracles.

The Commodification of Religion in the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election and the 2024 General Election

The decline of rational thinking becomes particularly important to examine when religious sentiment becomes intertwined with political competition. Political systems, political parties, and elections are humanly constructed institutions designed to regulate collective life. As such, they belong to the worldly sphere and remain open to rational evaluation and historical change (Kitiarsa, 2008). In electoral competition, however, religious symbols, scriptural references, and religious identities may become part of political communication. When this occurs, the boundary between religious values and contingent political interests can become less distinct.

This dynamic was particularly visible during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. One of the most widely discussed episodes concerned a statement by Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in which he referred to Qur'an Surah Al-Ma'idah verse 51 while discussing political choice. The statement was subsequently interpreted by various groups as an insult to Islam and became the subject of extensive public debate, demonstrations, and legal proceedings. The episode demonstrates how a Qur'anic verse can become closely connected with electoral competition and political mobilization. Rather than treating the episode simply as evidence of deliberate religious manipulation, it is more appropriate to examine how the interpretation of a religious text became part of a highly contested political context.

The verse referred to in the controversy is Qur'an Surah Al-Ma'idah [5]:51:

يٰۤاَيُّهَا الَّذِيْنَ اٰمَنُوْا لَا تَتَّخِذُوْا الْيَهُودَ وَالنَّصٰرَىٰ اَوْلِيَآءَ ۚ بَعْضُهُمْ اَوْلِيَآءُ بَعْضٍ ۚ مَن يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَاِنَّهُ مِنْهُمْ ۗ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ اٰيْهُدٰى الْقَوْمَ الظّٰلِمِيْنَ

“O you who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as close allies. Some of them are close allies of one another. Whoever among you takes them as close allies indeed, he is one of them. Indeed, Allah does not guide the wrongdoers.” (QS. Al-Ma'idah/5:51)

The controversy surrounding the verse illustrates an important distinction between the religious text itself and its use within a particular political context. The Qur'anic verse belongs to the sacred domain of religious revelation, whereas the interpretation of the verse in relation to a contemporary electoral contest involves human reasoning, political circumstances, and social interests. The distinction is important for understanding Madjid's concept of desacralization because desacralization does not require the desacralization of revelation itself. Instead, it concerns the need to prevent human interpretations, political institutions, and worldly interests from acquiring an absolute status equivalent to the sacred.

The political controversy surrounding the 2017 election also contributed to large-scale demonstrations and demands for legal action against Ahok. Various studies have examined the episode as an important case of identity politics and religious mobilization in Indonesian electoral politics (Fautanu et al., 2020). From an analytical perspective, the significance of this case lies not only in the political consequences of the controversy but also in the way religious interpretation, political identity, and electoral preference became closely connected. The case therefore provides a relevant context for examining Madjid's concern about the relationship between religious commitment and worldly political interests.

A similar interaction between religion and electoral communication could be observed during the 2024 general election. The Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) explicitly addressed the potential politicization of ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA) and conducted preventive measures involving religious leaders and organizations. Bawaslu emphasized the importance of

preventing identity-based political mobilization that could threaten social cohesion. This institutional response demonstrates that the relationship between religious identity and electoral competition remained an important issue in the 2024 election.

One example that generated public discussion was the appearance of Ganjar Pranowo in a televised Maghrib call-to-prayer broadcast in September 2023. The broadcast showed Ganjar participating in religious activities, including performing ablution and praying. The appearance subsequently generated debate concerning the relationship between religious imagery and electoral communication. Bawaslu urged prospective presidential and vice-presidential candidates to refrain from using public broadcasting frequencies for political socialization. At the same time, Bawaslu stated that the broadcasting aspect still required assessment by the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI). Therefore, the episode is more appropriately understood as a case that generated public debate over the use of religious imagery in electoral communication rather than categorically characterized as the manipulation of religious symbols.

The same analytical distinction can be applied to the involvement of religious leaders in electoral campaigns. Statements supporting particular candidates constitute political expressions when made within the context of electoral competition. However, when a political preference is presented as an absolute religious obligation, the distinction between a contingent political choice and a religious command may become blurred. This distinction is relevant to Madjid's concept of desacralization because political choices belong to the worldly sphere, while religious revelation belongs to the sacred sphere.

For Madjid, this distinction can be traced to the principle of *tawhid*. If Allah alone possesses absolute and ultimate sacredness, then no human institution, political party, political leader, or electoral preference can possess the same status. His formulation "Islam Yes, Islamic Party No" can therefore be understood as an effort to distinguish Islam as a religious commitment from political organizations as human and historical institutions. Political parties may articulate particular interpretations and interests, but they cannot be equated with Islam itself. Consequently, political preferences should remain open to criticism, deliberation, and rational evaluation (Madjid, 2008).

Desacralization consequently provides a framework for placing political matters within the proper worldly sphere. It does not require Muslims to remove religious values from political life. Rather, it encourages a distinction between religious principles and contingent political interests. Political leaders and political programs can therefore be assessed through their records, policies, capabilities, and consequences for society, while religious values continue to provide ethical considerations for citizens. This distinction allows religious commitment and rational political judgment to coexist without turning a particular political choice into an unquestionable religious obligation.

From this perspective, the relevance of Madjid's thought to contemporary electoral politics lies in the distinction between the sacred and the worldly. Religious texts remain sacred, but their application to particular political circumstances involves human interpretation and therefore requires critical reasoning. Political parties, candidates, campaigns, and electoral preferences, meanwhile, remain worldly matters that can be evaluated and changed. Desacralization thus does not diminish the role of religion in public life; rather, it prevents contingent political interests from being elevated to the level of religious absolutes.

The Implications of Desacralization for Modern Religious Life

The implications of Nurcholish Madjid's concept of desacralization can be understood at three interconnected levels: theoretical, educational, and digital. At the theoretical level, desacralization provides a conceptual framework for analyzing *human religious authority*. The principle of *tawhid* establishes that absolute sacredness belongs exclusively to Allah, while religious authority exercised by human beings remains historically and socially situated. Religious scholars, preachers, teachers, and other public religious figures may possess knowledge and influence, but their interpretations and claims remain open to examination and criticism. Desacralization therefore helps distinguish respect for religious authority from the attribution of absolute authority to human beings. Respect is necessary for

maintaining ethical relationships with religious scholars, but respect does not mean treating every statement or interpretation as beyond question.

This distinction has an important implication for contemporary religious discourse. Human religious authority is not identical to divine authority. A religious figure may convey, interpret, and teach Islamic teachings, but the figure does not become sacred simply because he or she is recognized by the public as a religious authority. This distinction allows religious communities to maintain respect for scholars while retaining intellectual responsibility in evaluating religious claims. In Madjid's framework, such an attitude is consistent with *tawhid* because it prevents human beings, institutions, and interpretations from receiving an absolute status that belongs only to God. Desacralization therefore provides a theoretical instrument for examining how religious authority is constructed, maintained, and sometimes exaggerated within modern society.

At the educational level, desacralization has implications for the development of Islamic religious literacy. Religious education should not only teach religious knowledge but also cultivate the ability to distinguish between respect and sacralization. Students need to understand that respecting teachers, scholars, and religious leaders does not require accepting every statement without critical examination. The distinction between *respect* and *sacralization* is particularly important in an environment where religious knowledge is obtained from diverse sources, including teachers, books, social media, video platforms, and online religious communities. Islamic education can therefore combine reverence for religious knowledge with intellectual responsibility, encouraging students to examine sources, understand context, compare interpretations, and distinguish established religious teachings from individual opinions.

This educational implication is closely connected with Madjid's emphasis on rationality. Critical reasoning does not necessarily weaken religious commitment; instead, it can protect religious understanding from unexamined claims and excessive dependence on personal charisma. Religious literacy should consequently encourage students to ask whether a claim has an adequate textual basis, whether its interpretation is consistent with established Islamic scholarship, and whether the claim is being presented as religious teaching or as an individual interpretation. In this sense, desacralization supports an educational model in which faith and reason are not placed in opposition but function together in the responsible understanding of religion.

The implications become even more significant in the digital environment. Social media has transformed the way religious authority is produced and distributed. A person's visibility can be increased rapidly through short videos, viral content, follower networks, and algorithmic recommendation systems. However, popularity does not necessarily establish religious authority. A large number of followers does not automatically demonstrate the depth of religious knowledge, while viral content does not by itself establish the validity of a religious claim. Desacralization provides a critical framework for examining this phenomenon because it prevents visibility, charisma, and popularity from being confused with sacred legitimacy.

Accordingly, contemporary digital religious literacy needs to establish several distinctions: popularity is not the same as authority; charisma is not the same as truth; and virality is not the same as religious validity. These distinctions do not require the rejection of popular religious figures or digital religious communication. Rather, they encourage audiences to evaluate religious content based on its sources, arguments, scholarly context, and consistency with Islamic teachings. In this context, digital literacy becomes part of the practical application of rationality within modern religiosity.

The digital dimension also demonstrates why desacralization remains relevant beyond the political context in which Madjid initially formulated his ideas. Religious authority is no longer produced exclusively through traditional institutions such as pesantren, mosques, universities, and established scholarly networks. It can also emerge through digital visibility and public engagement. This transformation creates opportunities for broader access to religious knowledge but also creates challenges concerning the verification of religious claims. Desacralization can therefore function as a conceptual lens for examining the distinction between legitimate religious authority and authority constructed primarily through popularity, performance, or public visibility.

Taken together, these implications demonstrate that desacralization does not seek to reduce the role of religion in modern society. Its significance lies in maintaining the distinction between the sacred and the human. At the theological level, it protects the principle that absolute sacredness belongs only to Allah. At the theoretical level, it provides a framework for critically examining human religious authority. At the educational level, it encourages religious literacy based on respect, reasoning, and source verification. At the digital level, it helps society distinguish popularity from authority, charisma from truth, and virality from religious validity. Modern religiosity can therefore remain firmly committed to Islamic teachings while remaining open to criticism, scientific knowledge, social change, and diversity.

In this formulation, desacralization offers a model of religiosity that combines theological commitment with intellectual responsibility. Absolute submission is directed toward Allah, whereas human interpretations, institutions, leaders, and social practices remain within the sphere of critical human engagement. This distinction enables Muslims to preserve the sacredness of religion without transforming human authority into an unquestionable object of devotion. The continuing relevance of Madjid's thought consequently lies not in separating religion from modern life, but in developing a form of religiosity capable of responding to modern political, educational, and digital realities through reason, ethical judgment, and social responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that Nurcholish Madjid's concept of desacralization should be understood not as the removal of religion from public life, but as a theological-epistemological mechanism for de-absolutizing human authority. Grounded in *tawhid* (*la ilaha illallah*), desacralization affirms that absolute sacredness belongs only to Allah, while human interpretations, religious authorities, political institutions, and social practices remain relative and therefore open to rational examination and criticism. The conceptual contribution of this study lies in extending the meaning of desacralization from its original concern with political and intellectual renewal to the contemporary problem of religious authority. In the digital age, the concept provides a framework for distinguishing respect from sacralization and religious authority from popularity, charisma, or virality. This perspective also has implications for Islamic education and digital religious literacy by encouraging source verification, critical reasoning, and responsible engagement with religious discourse. Further research may empirically examine how younger Muslims negotiate religious authority and identity politics in digital spaces.

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