

**‘Neo-Modernism’ in a ‘Modern’ Islamic Organization,  
Muhammadiyah:  
A Preliminary Note**

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## **I. Introduction**

To those in non-Western countries, being modern has had diverse meanings. To adopt science and technology developed in the West, to imitate ways of life as are lived by Westerns and to absorb Western modes of thought have been viewed to be necessities of being modern. The ways modernity is understood have been circumscribed by ‘the structure of the conjuncture’ (Sahlins, 1985) where the encounters between the West and the non-West were made. The inner dynamics of non-Western countries have been important to shape the ways modernity is understood, acted out and reinterpreted.

The urgency to be modern in Islamic countries was precipitated by political and economic dominance of the West. In spite of this, Muslim intellectuals’ views on modernity were colored by a recognition that behind the Western progress lay scientific and philosophical achievements of Islamic civilization during the Dark Age, which had been forgotten by Muslims but had been exploited by Christian Europeans.

The recognition on the pivotal role of Islam in giving birth to modern developments brought an additional dimension to Islamic modernity. It was thought to be attainable not only by adopting Western science and technology but by recovering the original state of Islam freed from corruptions of the later generations. In this respect, the Islamic concept of modernity contrasts to that in other non-Western countries where tradition was generally thought to be a hindrance to the achievement of modernity.

The emphasis on the original state of Islam colored Islamic modernity with a reformist trend. The more Muslims stick to the pristine state, it was believed, the better they can cope with the Western dominance. This view could reduce Muslims’ resistance to modernity by highlighting the superiority of Islam over the West and the compatibility between them. Islamic reformism, on the other hand, spread a dualistic view on modernity. It was assumed that modernity does not necessarily mean to receive Western thoughts, which should be filled with Islamic ones. The reformist trend has heavily influenced on how to understand, accept and put modernity into practice.



In Indonesia, Muhammadiyah has been an organization pioneering the introduction of modernism. From its inception, its orientations toward modernity were in line with those in other Islamic countries. On the one hand, it enthusiastically carried out social and educational works modeling after Christian churches. On the other hand, it attempted to purify the faith, based on the Quran and Hadith. In Muhammadiyah, modernism was understood as a movement directed both at appropriating what had been achieved by the West, especially in its material and institutional fields and at sticking to the original teachings of Islam.

When new religious thoughts, which are called, although vaguely, ‘neo-modernism’ (Barton, 1991), ‘substantialism’ (Liddle, 1996) or ‘liberalism’ (Qodir, 2003; Qomar, 2002), have widened their influences since the 1980s, Muhammadiyah seemed to remain untouched. From the mid-1990s, however, influences of the new thoughts have started to be visible. A formulation of the concept, ‘missionary activities based on local culture (*dakwah kultural*)<sup>1</sup> exemplifies that Muhammadiyah has been undergoing an intellectual transformation triggered by the spread of neo-modernism.

Another sign of widening influences of neo-modernism is a foundation of Network of Young Intellectuals in Muhammadiyah (hereafter NYIM)<sup>2</sup> by a group of young activists. Its significance lies in the fact that individual efforts to spread the new thoughts have been successful in creating a platform for collective actions. Its foundation gives an impression that neo-modernism has found out its position firmly in Muhammadiyah.

Reactions to NYIM show, however, that this impression is not correct. Strong criticisms and antagonisms toward it have surged in public discourse to the extent that it is called a virus of Muhammadiyah. Various reasons are put forward to criticize it, but there is a common element, namely a disapproval of its pluralistic attitude toward other religions, specifically, Christianity. At the first glimpse, this criticism does not seem to be relevant, in that NYIM does not express its views on pluralism explicitly and does not consider it as one of its main programs. The inconsistency between those criticizing and criticized, therefore, gives us a clue to understand how mainstream Muhammadiyah members understand neo-modernism.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways neo-modernist ideas are understood and

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<sup>1</sup> As a part of its efforts to purify the faith, Muhammadiyah has attempted to eradicate local religious traditions that have no literate basis on the Quran and Hadith. Given this attitude, a proposal to take local culture into consideration in carrying out missionary activities can be assessed as something like a revolution in its religious orientations. For more about *dakwah kultural*, see Moeslim Abdurrahman (ed.) (2003) and Zakiyuddin Baidhaway and Mutohharun Jinan (2003).

<sup>2</sup> The term, NYIM, and all proper names related to it in the text are pseudonyms.



reinterpreted in Muhammadiyah. The focus of discussion is on the foundation of NYIM and reactions to it by mainstream members. It will be argued that whatever ideas and rhetoric are used, new religious thoughts are interpreted and evaluated in terms of their views on other religions, and ultimately on the absoluteness of Islam. If having a small possibility of eroding the absolute nature of Islam, the new thoughts face hard reactions from those accustomed to Islamic modernism. It is likely that the dualistic view on modernity, separating the material from the spiritual, has played a role in the ways modernist Muslims understand neo-modernism. For many of them, the fact that neo-modernism is based on intellectual and theological traditions of the West is already enough to say that it supports religious pluralism, which is viewed to erode the very basis of Islam.

## **II. Modernism in Muhammadiyah**

In Indonesia, desires to cope with the Western dominance by facing modern developments were materialized in the form of a mass organization, Muhammadiyah. Efforts of its founder, Ahmad Dahlan, to embrace modernity followed two steps. He tried to recover the pristine state of Islam by sticking strictly to the Islamic Scriptures. He also attempted to incorporate ‘novelties’ from the West into Muhammadiyah’s programs, which had been fiercely resisted by his contemporary Islamic leaders.

At the early stage of development, an urge to return to the original state of Islam did not give birth to scripturalism. This was possible by Dahlan’s strong opposition to blind submission to established traditions and emphasis on the role of reason in interpreting teachings of Islam. According to him, a reformation of religious thought was attainable by interpreting Islamic teachings with independent reasoning. In this respect, reformism in Muhammadiyah was open and flexible enough to be called, as Kurzman does (1998: 9), ‘liberal’.

The later development, especially after the Independence, saw a gradual decline in the liberal tendency and a surge of conservatism. Several interrelated factors worked to bring this. First, despite of continuing criticisms on it, Muhammadiyah began to be regarded as an integral part of Indonesian Islam. As its existence was no longer questioned, the chances for its religious orientations to be put into question also decreased.<sup>3</sup> The second is related to its political role. Under the Old Order, Muhammadiyah played a major role in the national politics, while under the New Order, it was involved in political affairs either through its members sitting in the

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<sup>3</sup> The task of examining theological problems was assigned to a handful of members belonging to the *Majlis Tarjih*.



cabinet or through direct negotiations with the government. The more its political role was strengthened, the more its energy was spent on political maneuverings rather than theological renewal. Third, a rapid expansion of its educational and social institutions prompted it to pay attention more to their managerial and financial problems. Fourth, due to the expansion of public education and welfare systems modeled after Western ones, Muhammadiyah's role in introducing innovations from the West was gradually taken by the government. Its members' pride as a pioneer of modern institutions continued, but it became less sensitive to rapid changes taking place under the New Order.

In sum, Muhammadiyah's strengthening socio-political position brought changes in its religious outlook. Its reformism put more emphasis on its puritanical and revivalist aspect, so that rational interpretations of the Scriptures were applied more to finding out rationales for Islamic teachings and less to searching for their contextual meanings. Modernism became more a symbolic jargon and the previous enthusiasm to keep up with modern developments was overshadowed by the urgency to manage its programs. These helped conservatism and scripturalism to be strengthened in Muhammadiyah.

Another factor that reinforced conservatism and scripturalism was its leadership composition. From the beginning, Muhammadiyah's leadership was dominated by traders and entrepreneurs. Although exposing years of religious teachings, many of them were not in a position to be actively involved in religious debates. Consequently, they placed emphasis on practice (*amal*), which was expressed in the form of founding modern schools, orphanages, and clinics. This does not mean that they were not concerned about religious issues but that the burden of carrying out theological quests and renewals was given to only a few. A gradual shift in its leadership composition from traders to civil servants and teachers since the late 1960s did not bring a notable change. They were also not full-time religious scholars and were not actively engaged in proposing new religious thoughts.<sup>4</sup>

Conservative and scriptural trends and pragmatism brought 'an intellectual stagnancy' where members did not actively seek after new religious thoughts concerning how to return to the original state of Islam in the modern world, how to interpret and contextualize Islamic teachings, how to establish its programs in accordance with changes in the modern world and so on. The political pressure from the government also played a part for Muhammadiyah to stick to the status quo.

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that a consensus over the ways of interpreting religious teachings (*manhaj*) has not yet reached shows that theological issues have not been tackled seriously by its leaders.



The 1980s witnessed a symptom of change. Concerns were raised over such problems as excessive bureaucratization, intellectual stagnancy, slowness in revitalizing its programs in accordance with socio-political changes, and scripturalism. The crisis of Muhammadiyah, which had been pinpointed by a few, came to the fore when the New Order government forced all organizations in Indonesia to accept Pancasila as their sole ideological basis. Although Muhammadiyah dealt with this pressure without internal cleavages, and, according to some, succeeded in protecting its interests, this gave its members chances for introspection. After the Congress that approved of the government policy, a series of seminars were held where its current conditions were reviewed critically.<sup>5</sup>

When introspective moves set in motion, Muhammadiyah was experiencing a significant change in its leadership, namely that scholars from universities started to participate actively in Muhammadiyah. Although the presence of university lecturers was not new to Muhammadiyah, their impacts were different this time. First, their number was far more than before, so that they could exert their influences more widely and collectively. Second, many of them, whether be specialized in religious studies or not, had experiences either of higher education in Western countries or of exposing to Western scholarly traditions of religious studies. Their intellectual backgrounds were different from those in the earlier period who relied heavily on Arabic sources and traditions. For them, religion could be a subject of objectification: although Muslims learn Islam, it includes the process of analysis, explanation and interpretation with outsiders' eyes.

An influx of these scholars into Muhammadiyah was possible by the fact that qualifications of leaders in Muhammadiyah differ sharply from those in traditional Islamic organizations in Indonesia. It does not emphasize hereditary status from a family of establish scholars and learning experiences in *pesantren*. Instead, what are important are zeal and sincerity in carrying out Islamic teachings in practice. A capability to interpret religious teachings rightly, which requires linguistic proficiency in Arabic and extensive knowledge on Islamic traditions, is regarded as important, but in a limited sense. It is considered a prerequisite for those working in *Majlis Tarjih*, but an extra merit for others. One's previous affiliation with Muhammadiyah also matters, but not as a precondition to be an activist.

The qualifications discussed above show that achieved status is more important than ascribed

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<sup>5</sup> For more about internal discussions in this period concerning the stagnancy of Muhammadiyah, see Karim (1985: 67-83), Sujarwanto et al.(1990).



one. Although one is not borne into a Muhammadiyah family, is not active in Muhammadiyah's Youth Association, is not educated in Muhammadiyah schools, and does not master Arabic, one can be an activist and get a leadership position insofar as one actively participates in its activities and his or her sincerity is appreciated by others. These conditions make it far easier for a newcomer to enter into a leadership, a situation that is hardly realized in such Islamic organization as NU.

New ideas brought by these scholars were not homogenous. In general, however, they emphasized the role of Muhammadiyah as an organization of 'renewal' (*pembaruan, tadjid*). For the renewal, it was thought to be necessary to revive the original spirit of Muhammadiyah, as had been exemplified by Dahlan. Of various teachings of Dahlan, what were pinpointed were his painstaking and continuing efforts to reinterpret Islamic teachings in light of modern contexts and to reinstate the importance of rational thoughts in religious exegesis.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of context was not new to Muhammadiyah, but was understood differently by the new scholars. For them, the meaning of context includes two dimensions. First is the context in which Muslims live their lives. The context in this sense was adopted by Dahlan and his followers to rationalize the acceptance of modern developments from the West. Secondly, the context can be related to the time when the Prophet Muhammad was alive. It points out that religious teachings, as are embodied in the Quranic passages and the exemplary behavior of the Prophet, were directed at His contemporaries. As social conditions of the past and the present are different, to interpret Islamic teachings should include the process of contextualizing them in terms of the circumstances where His contemporaries lived their life.

The inclusion of the context in the first sense does not highlight its potential clash with literal interpretations. As no passages in the Scriptures say, for example, whether Western-style schools are in congruent with Islamic teachings or not, an inclusion of the context of the 19th and early 20th century does not oppose directly to the results of literal interpretations.

The use of the context in the second sense, however, is different, in that it raises interpretive questions concerning what are written down in the Scripture. By taking the context in which the teachings were revealed into account, interpretations of the Scriptures can be more flexible, looking for meanings beyond literal ones. In this respect, the argument for the

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Munir Mul Khan (1990).



context in the second sense has a higher possibility to be in conflict with literal interpretations.

The two contexts proposed by the new scholars were in line with 'neo-modernism' that was proposed by Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid. Although their rhetoric differed, both shared a view that literal interpretation is not enough to understand real meanings of the Scriptures and that more flexible and contextual interpretations are required.

The new ideas were introduced into Muhammadiyah without open debates or harsh criticisms, which may be attributed to several factors. First, the new scholars, proposing their neo-modernist views, did not raise their voices to criticize the literal trend in Muhammadiyah. It is likely that they adopted a strategy of gradual diffusion rather than of rapid dissemination. Second, their activities were carried out mainly on an individual basis. A lack of a 'container (*wadah*)' blurred their identity and helped to avoid an accusation that their activities were to advance sectarian interests or to bring cleavages in Muhammadiyah. Third, their activities were carried out mainly through seminars, conferences and committee meetings. This made their influences to be restricted to those working at the central board (*pusat*) of Muhammadiyah. As the grassroots were relatively intact from neo-modernist ideas, oppositions and criticisms from the mainstream were not intense.

The new scholars do not seem to have had a desire to transform Muhammadiyah radically by challenging established ways of religious exegesis, nor did they want to establish a platform for collective actions. This attitude made it possible for them to be considered as a 'fresh breeze' by the mainstream members.

The neo-modernist views spread silently and slowly in the 1990s until it positioned itself as a part in religious discourse of Muhammadiyah. Their influences were clearly visible when the National Congress in 1995 dealt with the concept of 'local culture'. Given that strong opposition to local culture had been a trademark of Muhammadiyah, the proposal to reconsider its position was revolutionary in itself. Behind this concept lay a more fundamental demand to reappraise the key problem of how to approach and interpret Islamic teachings properly. The *Majlis Tarjih*, in which the neo-modernist scholars were positioned the most and from which the debates were initiated, had intensively examined other approaches to the Scriptures than literate and textual one. Later, it puts forward a trichotomy of Islamic exegesis, proposing that rational (*burhani*) and Sufistic (*irfani*) approaches are equally valid





and important as textual (*bayani*) one.<sup>7</sup>

The influences of the new scholars on younger generations were more direct and intense, in that most of them worked in institutions of higher education. The fact that their books, articles, columns in newspapers were published *en masse* reflects high demands for their ideas in the intellectual circle. To youngsters who were close to Muhammadiyah and attracted to neo-modernism, the new scholars were the sources on which they could rely without losing their religious identity. A political freedom after the fall of Suharto has also facilitated the spread of their ideas to youngsters, who, with heightened political awareness and pride in social activism, were thirsty at looking for new religious thoughts challenging established ones.

A gradual spread of neo-modernist views, growing suspicions and antagonism of the mainstream members toward them, political freedom and social activism since the late 1990s constituted the backgrounds where young activists in Muhammadiyah launched 'Network of Young Intellectuals in Muhammadiyah'.

### **III. NYIM and its Orientations**

NYIM was organized in 2003. Its core members are about 30. The majority of them are students or half-unemployed and just a few have jobs in universities. Most of them do not have a leadership position in Muhammadiyah, although all had an experience of participating in Muhammadiyah. NYIM does not have any financial sources, making it almost impossible for it to initiate programs by itself. Compared to the grandeur of Muhammadiyah, it can be said that NYIM is almost nothing.

In spite of this weak position, NYIM has brought extraordinary repercussions in Muhammadiyah and in Indonesian Islam. For several months after its establishment, national newspapers have carried articles on its activities. For months, its abbreviated name have been heard in official and unofficial discourse of Muhammadiyah to the extent that it is used as frequently and naturally as such terms as NI and IMM having a long history in Muhammadiyah. Even an international seminar was held to discuss issues related to NYIM, and a bulletin published by one of the most central committees has dealt with it extensively.

A factor bringing NYIM into public attention may be its members' shrewdness in mobilizing

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<sup>7</sup> This formulation has not yet officially approved of by Muhammadiyah, due to fierce objections and criticisms from the mainstream members.



printed media that, due to intense competitions, seek after something controversial. Its members have been also active in writing for newspapers. Their columns carried in national newspapers have outnumbered those written by other Muhammadiyah members.

Another important factor is that NYIM is the first open and semi-official group in Muhammadiyah where those sharing neo-modernist views gather. Consequently, it symbolically represents new religious views that have been disseminated by the neo-modernist scholars of Muhammadiyah. As these scholars have carried out their work individually, those who oppose to them also have not had an object of expressing their concerns. As soon as established, NYIM becomes a locus where critiques of neo-modernism can articulate what they have long wanted to do.

To the core members of NYIM, its foundation is remembered as something trivial. They said that the idea of NYIM came suddenly when Mas May from Yogyakarta visited his friends in Jakarta in early 2003. While they were having a chat, someone suggested to make a network among those living in different regions. The proposal was received positively by others, and names of people who might be interest in their ideas were enumerated randomly. At that time, Mas May added, they did not expect the proposal could be realized. Contrary to his assumption, however, the process of forming a network proceeded quickly. Within a few months, a workshop was organized where the name, NYIM, was officially pronounced. In the next month, a conference was held in Malang, which received an intensive media-coverage.

The swift process of founding NYIM was possible, in that its core members in Jakarta were affiliated with the same institution. Supports from Muhammadiyah chairperson, Syafii Maarif, and some of its leaders were also important. Intellectual and personal relationships, including lecturer-student relations in universities, common religious orientations, and shared urgency to break down the status quo in Muhammadiyah prompted the positive response. Their support to NYIM was expressed when some participated in the workshops and conferences held by NYIM.

NYIM consists of core members and sympathizers. The core group of NYIM, which may not outnumber 30<sup>8</sup>, consists of members who are involved in almost day-to-day interactions and in planning various activities. They were recruited on a personal basis by those who initially

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<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to assess exactly the number of the core members. Being asked about, a member said that core activists were roughly 30. In a preface of a book which publishes articles from NYIM members (Pradana Boy & Hilmi Faiq, 2004:iv-v), the editors enumerated 26 names, which show approximately the composition of its core members: five members in its presidium, five from Jakarta, six from Yogya, two from Solo, two from Surabaya and six from Malang.

proposed the idea of NYIM. Accordingly, their educational, organizational and religious backgrounds reflect more or less those of its founders. The sympathizers are those who are invited to the workshops and conferences of NYIM and after it, attend to routine activities of NYIM on an irregular basis. Due to this, their number cannot be counted. In the case of Yogyakarta branch, for example, routine meetings could draw maximum 25 participants, one third of whom were the core members.

As the name NYIM denotes, its core members consist of young university students and graduates. Their characteristics can be assessed by examining six persons who were originally designated as members in the presidium.

All of them are in their 20s and early 30s. They studied religion in universities specializing in Islamic studies (IAIN), while four of them pursue their post-graduate study in disciplines other than religious studies. Only one of them is a lecturer in university, while others are a part-time researcher, post-graduate students and freelancers.

They have been engaged actively in intellectual pursuits, which is shown by numerous books and articles published by them. Most of them are also energetic in writing for newspapers. A member said that one of the aims of NYIM was to make writings of its members to appear in national newspapers at least once in a week. Although spoken jokingly, his remark was not totally unfounded. Since its establishment, tens of columns appeared in newspapers whose writers introduce himself or herself as a member of NYIM.

Their personal histories in Muhammadiyah are different. One of them took a position of chairperson in one of Muhammadiyah's association for youth. Two had positions in the regional branch of Muhammadiyah, while others participated in the branch of university students' association. Their relatively low profiles in the official structure of Muhammadiyah, however, do not make them hesitate to comment that their goal is to renew Muhammadiyah, to which they are attached rationally and emotionally.<sup>9</sup> The ways they propose to revitalize Muhammadiyah can be summed up in three pillars: hermeneutics, social theory and new social movement.

Hermeneutics as is understood by NYIM is in line with what the scholars of neo-modernism have proposed, namely inclusion of the two contexts in interpreting the Scriptures. The adoption of the term, hermeneutics, was influenced by its recent popularity in national

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<sup>9</sup> Some described their emotional connection by saying that they were born to be a member of Muhammadiyah.



religious discourse. Although the frequent and extensive use of this term has made its meaning vague, this ambiguity seems to be appropriated as a medium to integrate people who support liberal and non-literate interpretations of the Scriptures but disagree with the details. As NYIM's members have not had chances to study religion together and their previous religious backgrounds and orientations were different, hermeneutics seems to be the best option to highlight their common religious orientations.

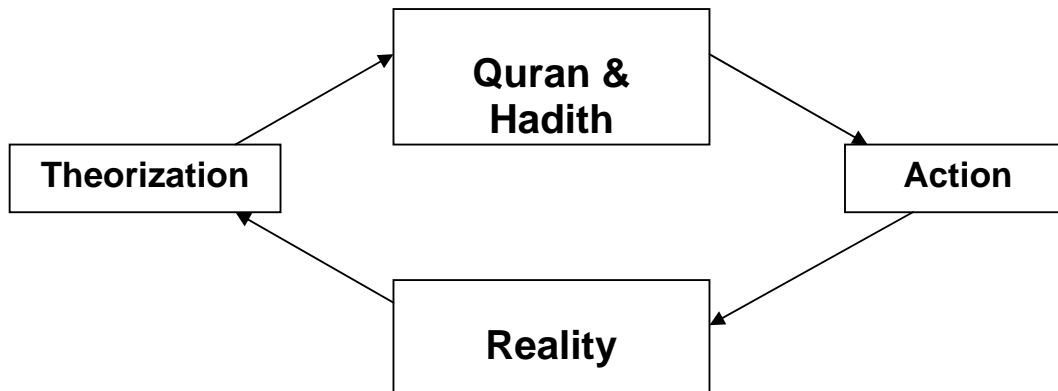
The second pillar, social theory, puts forward that, in order to look for contextual meanings of the Scriptures, NYIM actively appropriates theoretical developments from the West. Social theories discussed by NYIM include such tabooed ones as Marxism and Christian theology. Given that even the use of social theories from, for example, anthropology and sociology, in interpreting the Quranic texts has been controversial, the assimilation of Marxist theories into the rhetoric of NYIM symbolizes its readiness to deconstruct what have been taken for granted by mainstream members of Muhammadiyah.

The third pillar, new social movement, suggests that NYIM is interested not only in intellectual renewal but also in praxis. The social fields thus selected by NYIM differ from those where Muhammadiyah has carried out its activities. NYIM emphasizes the need to take sides with the deprived, who have been marginalized throughout the process of economic development and globalization. An urgency to counteract neo-liberalist trends is also put forward. An emphasis on social praxis plays a pivotal role in forging an identity of NYIM, separating it from other Islamic groups with similar orientations. An organization which NYIM makes every effort to differentiate itself from is JIL (Jaringan Islam Liberal, Network of liberal Islam), which has received, due to their extremely 'liberal' position, extraordinary attentions from Indonesian Muslims. By highlighting its emphasis on praxis, NYIM tries to refute a view that it is an 'offspring' of JIL in Muhammadiyah.

Mas Adi, a member in its presidium, explained that the three pillars are related organically and dialectically. For him, intellectual quests of NYIM, based on accurate analysis of the reality and contextual interpretations of the Scriptures, prompt relevant social actions, which in turn transform the reality. Figure 1 shows how this inter-relatedness of the three pillars is conceptualized by NYIM.



**<figure 1> Circle of an Islamic Theory proposed by NYIM**



Since the foundation, NYIM's programs have not yet covered the three pillars as are expressed in this circle. Workshops have been its main activity, but the focus of these is more on strengthening members' solidarity and on recruiting new members rather than on elaborating their religious views and debating current religious issues. Collaborative works are done to prepare for writing newspaper columns and articles, but the outcomes are published by individuals, not under the name of NYIM.

The reasons NYIM has drawn public attention, therefore, are not related directly to its activities or religious views. Rather, its symbolic meaning is important, namely that it is the first open 'container (*wadah*)' of those sympathetic to the renewal of Muhammadiyah by upholding plural, flexible and contextual interpretations of the Scriptures.

For several months after its foundation, pros and contras on NYIM were expressed mainly in private and within small group meetings, and no noticeable public reactions were visible. An incident in 2004, however, changed the situation dramatically. After NYIM made a statement opposing Muhammadiyah's support to Amien Rais, harsh criticisms and hostility erupted.



#### **IV. Reactions to NYIM: Religious Pluralism in Muhammadiyah**

In February 2004, Muhammadiyah announced that it officially supported Amien Rais for the coming presidential election in June. As issued just before the general election in April, this statement could be interpreted in two ways. Some saw that this statement pronounced in a refined way that Muhammadiyah supported PAN whose leader was Amien Rais. Others maintained that no meanings other than its literal ones should be attached to it.

Two groups publicly expressed their opposition to the statement. One was IMM (university students' association of Muhammadiyah) and the other, NYIM. Their criticisms were based on the view that this move violated the principle of Muhammadiyah not to involve in practical politics.

Muhammadiyah members in general seemed to be very upset about the action taken by IMM and NYIM. Their annoyance was caused more by the fact that the two groups publicly opposed to collective decision of Muhammadiyah rather than the fact that they did not agree with it. For example, a member of *Majlis Tabligh*, saying that different opinions have always been a part of Muhammadiyah, expressed his dissatisfaction in this way: 'this [the action taken by the two groups] violated the tradition of Muhammadiyah, our unwritten norm. They are lack of etiquette and, therefore, are those whom we cannot discuss with together.'

An unexpected by-product of this incident was that a problem related to NYIM's status came to the fore. From its inception, NYIM was criticized for using the name, Muhammadiyah. It was said that a group or association may use this name only when approved of by the Congress. Judging from this norm, NYIM's use of it could be viewed as a deceptive measure to take advantage of Muhammadiyah's good reputation for its own interests. As NYIM consists of young activists from Muhammadiyah and several Muhammadiyah leaders have attended its official meetings, controversies on the status of NYIM did not appear to the surface. NYIM's public opposition to the statement, however, changed the situation. Its use of the name, Muhammadiyah, began to be challenged openly.

Once started, criticisms to NYIM have been intensified and mushroomed in public discourse. It is likely that people suddenly found out a place to discharge their dissatisfactions that had long been muted. Within a few weeks, oppositions to it began to be materialized. Seminars were held to debate on NYIM and neo-modernist views believed to be represented by it. Criticisms were published in bulletins, articles and books. In several cases, special sessions



were made in official meetings of various levels to deal with the danger of it. Oppositions to it took the form not only of ideological contestations but of concrete actions. A workshop of NYIM carried out near Solo was forced to move into another place by a threat of quasi-military youngsters' group of local Muhammadiyah branch (*Kokam*).

Criticisms to NYIM do not take its theoretical orientations and programs into serious account. In many cases, even its three pillars are not known to its critiques. Their major target is placed on what NYIM generally and vaguely represents. At first, hermeneutics is highlighted by the critiques. They argue that hermeneutics cannot be accepted, in that it denies the very basis of Islam, the sacredness of the Scriptures. They maintain that the Quran and Hadith are not limited to a specific time and space, so that attempts to include the context of the Revelation are permissible only when it aims to understand its literal meanings more deeply, not to find out cultural and historical elements embedded in It or to incorporate conditions of those living with the Prophet into the interpretation. The latter approach should be used, not to deal with the Revelation itself but exegesis developed by the later generations. For example, a member of *Majlis Tabligh*, Pak Amin, limited the use of context strictly:

If what they [those supporting hermeneutics] try to do is to find out the contexts of passages in the Quran, this has been done by Muslim scholars for hundreds of years. Without understanding why certain passage was revealed and what were literal and expanded meanings of words [in it], we cannot understand it fully. There may be no one who denies this.

For Pak Amin, if hermeneutics emphasizes the needs to include the contexts of passages in Quran or to view existing exegesis critically, it is of no value to talking about it further since these have been carried out by Muhammadiyah. Therefore, he argued, hidden religious problems behind hermeneutics should be examined.

Pak Amin's position reflects generally that of Muhammadiyah members critical to NYIM. They argue that problems of hermeneutics are not just how to interpret religious teachings but how to view the nature of Islam and of religions other than Islam, especially Christianity.

Of those proposing this view, two are worth mentioning. First is the position that people who support hermeneutics have been influenced by and ultimately have been taken advantage of by Christians, although unintentionally. The fact that hermeneutics was a method developed by Christians is already an enough condition to demonstrate that they are snared by Christian maneuverings. An article articulates this view in the following way (*Majlis Tabligh* 2004):

In Indonesia, this movement [to spread hermeneutics] seems to be planned and supported by foreign [Christian] NGOs. ... Hermeneutics has been doing well for the purpose of interpreting the Bible. ... [This is because] the Bible was not written with the original language but based on various versions of



different authors. ... Can hermeneutics be successfully when applied to the Quran? Surely, it is impossible.

The second position is more inclusive, saying that knowledge developed from Christians may be adopted on the condition that it is beneficial to Muslims. In spite of this recognition, this position argues that hermeneutics cannot be freed totally from the contexts of its birth, development and decline, namely a pluralist attitude toward religions.

Religious pluralism is viewed to be a natural product of hermeneutical endeavors. If one incorporates the concept of the contexts, which is misunderstood to imply that receivers' limitedness was considered by the Revelation and their ways of life were embedded in the Scriptures, one gets an idea of Its limitation in time and space, denying Its absolute nature. This approach then gives birth to relativism and pluralism which propose that the Revelation might have been made to people living in different times and places in order to make them understand It. In this respect, every religion and even every human ideology can obtain an equal status. This is a wrong understanding of the Revelation, they argue, in that human limitedness in understanding the Scriptures is what is intended by Allah. Islam is not a human-centric but God-centric religion.

Until now, the critiques' attitudes towards NYIM are inclusive. Whatever positions are taken, they see that members of NYIM have been influenced by hermeneutics without a serious intention of renouncing Islam. Some commented that as NYIM's members were young, something fashionable could easily appeal to them. Contrary to this inclusive attitude, their position towards neo-modernism is firm and decisive. It should be eradicated before it erodes the very basis of Islam and Muhammadiyah, spreading like a virus among younger generations. Their inclusive attitude towards NYIM may be understood in this context. As NYIM is not the source of the virus, its members are considered to be liable to correction, if proper measures are taken. This points out that the same inclusive attitude cannot be applied to the source, namely the neo-modernist scholars who, by diffusing heretic teachings, make young Muslims go astray.

The ways criticisms to NYIM are put forward give us a chance to examine the position of neo-modernism in Muhammadiyah. For this, we have to bear in mind that NYIM is criticized for what it does not express explicitly. The three pillars of NYIM do not include directly any attitude toward Christians, although pluralism is visible in the religious outlooks of its members. This points out a presence of a reductionism in the views of the critiques: certain





religious thoughts are evaluated in terms of their perspectives on the absoluteness of Islamic beliefs and on other religions. In this framework, heavy dependences on Western thoughts and methodologies and proposals for flexible interpretations of the Scriptures are questioned not by their relevance for Islamic exegesis *per se* but by their possible connection to other religions, especially, Christianity.

## V. Concluding Remarks

Activists of the neo-Modernist views have contributed a lot to Muhammadiyah during the last decade. They have spread the need for intellectual renewal, have brought contextual interpretations of religious teachings, have played a role in modifying its programs to be more suitable for national and global changes, and have given its members opportunities to think about its *raison d'être* from a different perspective. The impacts of neo-modernism have started to be visible in its programs, such as establishments of a special committee for empowering laborers, peasants and fishermen and a concept of *dakwah kultural*. In spite of these, however, neo-modernism has not been received positively by mainstream members of Muhammadiyah. Behind this disapproval lies a suspicion that it attempts to spread religious pluralism that is thought to erode the basis of Islam, the absoluteness of Islamic truth.

The fact that neo-modernism is assessed in the last instance in terms of its views on other religions implies that antagonistic attitude toward Christianity still dominates mainstream views of Muhammadiyah. Irrespective of whether threats from Christians have been real or not (see Boland 1982; Kim 1998), it is puzzling to see that remarkable growths in Muhammadiyah have not been enough to give it a confidence vis-à-vis Christians. A reply of a member of Majelis Tabligh to my question concerning the 'minority mentality' of Muslims (Wertheim 1980) seems to be relevant to understand this attitude. Contrary to my expectation that he would refute this notion as an Orientalist's prejudicial view on Islam, he quietly admitted that Muslims in Indonesia still have a mentality of the minority. Given that achievements of Muhammadiyah have been put forward proudly by him, his opinion was a surprise to me. It is likely that his view reflects Muhammadiyah's position toward Christians, which has made it almost impossible to propose an idea challenging existing views on Christianity.

The antagonistic attitude towards Christianity has made Muhammadiyah to be less open to new ideas from the West. It has been influenced by and, at the same time, has strengthened an element in Islamic modernism, namely, a separation of the material from the spiritual. Seen



from this dichotomy, the future of neo-modernism does not seem to be bright, especially since the establishment of NYIM. Muhammadiyah is still dominated by modernism and suspicion toward Christians, both of which make it hard for its members to accept or at least to show interests in what seem to be intellectual products of the West.



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