

Reconstructing Happiness in the Perspective of Neo Sufism Nurcholish Madjid

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of happiness from the perspective of Nurcholish Madjid through a qualitative, descriptive, and explorative approach. Central to the analysis is the framework of neo Sufism, which is positioned as a response to the crisis of spirituality and mental health in contemporary life. The findings suggest that, for Madjid, authentic happiness is achieved through a balanced integration of material success and spiritual fulfillment. Individuals who transcend the pursuit of mere worldly pleasures by orienting their lives toward transcendental values (manifested through virtuous actions and devotion) are believed to attain holistic and profound happiness. The culmination of this state is *rida* (contentment), a disposition characterized by the conscious and willing acceptance of all divine decrees. The pursuit of happiness, in this view, involves detachment from material attachments and the establishment of an exclusive spiritual bond with God. Madjid's formulation thus offers a reinterpretation of happiness as a form of spiritual and existential restoration in the face of the crises engendered by modernity.

Keywords: Happiness, Neo Sufisme, Nurcholish Madjid, *Rida*

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji konsep kebahagiaan dalam perspektif Nurcholish Madjid melalui pendekatan kualitatif, deskriptif, dan eksploratif. Analisis ini menggunakan kerangka neo Sufisme yang diposisikan sebagai respons terhadap krisis spiritualitas dan kesehatan mental dalam kehidupan modern. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bagi Madjid, kebahagiaan sejati tercapai melalui integrasi yang seimbang antara keberhasilan material dan pemenuhan spiritual. Individu yang mampu melampaui pencarian kenikmatan duniawi semata dengan mengarahkan hidupnya pada nilai-nilai transcendental (yang diwujudkan melalui perbuatan baik dan ketakwaan) akan merasakan kebahagiaan yang utuh dan mendalam. Puncak dari kebahagiaan ini adalah rida (kerelaan hati), yaitu sikap menerima dan menjalani segala ketentuan ilahi dengan penuh kesadaran dan keikhlasan. Jalan menuju kebahagiaan, dalam pandangan ini, melibatkan pelepasan diri dari keterikatan duniawi dan menjadikan Allah sebagai satu-satunya ikatan utama. Formulasi Madjid ini membuka ruang bagi reinterpretasi kebahagiaan sebagai bentuk pemulihan spiritual dan eksistensial di tengah krisis yang ditimbulkan oleh modernitas.

Kata kunci: Kebahagiaan, Neo Sufisme, Nurcholish Madjid, Rida

Introduction

The development of Sufism has undergone a complex and winding trajectory, marked by periods of rejection before ultimately gaining broader societal acceptance. Initially, Sufism was criticized for being an impediment to the advancement of modernity among Muslims. Furthermore, from its inception, it was perceived by *muhaddithin* (hadith scholars) and *fuqaha'* (jurists) as a doctrine incompatible with the sunnah of the Prophet, deemed excessive and speculative, particularly in matters concerning the Divine (Rif'I & Mud'is, 2010). In essence, Sufism is a mystical path that teaches individuals to embrace their experiences as integral to the human spiritual journey, rather than perceiving worldly occupations as obstacles to spiritual practice (Frager, 2014).

The term "*tasawuf*" (Sufism) is believed to originate from several sources. First, *Ahl al-Suffah* refers to a group of companions who migrated with the Prophet from Mecca to Medina. Second, *shafā'*, meaning "purity," denotes that a *Sufi* is one who has attained spiritual purity. Third, *ṣūf* (wool), symbolizes the coarse wool garments traditionally worn by Sufis as an expression of simplicity (Fahrudin, 2016). Fourth, *ṣaff*, meaning "row," signifies those who stand at the forefront before God due to their intense yearning for Him. Lastly, some scholars suggest a Greek origin, *sophia* (wisdom), implying that Sufism shares roots with philosophical notions of wisdom (Rif'I & Mud'is, 2010). From these etymological explanations, it can be inferred that Sufism linguistically refers to the path of individuals seeking closeness to God.

Terminologically, while Sufi scholars and enthusiasts offer varied definitions of Sufism, their essence converges. Al-Junayd al-Baghdadi, for instance, defines Sufism as the embodiment of noble character and the renunciation of all reprehensible traits (Isa,

2005). For Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Sufism describes one who refrains from seeking aid and remains untroubled by deprivation (Said & Dkk, 1981). Abu al-Hasan al-Nūrī posits that Sufism is not constituted by ritual practice or scholarly knowledge but by moral character (Zaprulkhan, 2016). Meanwhile, al-Taftazānī describes Sufism as a philosophy of life and a distinct mode of human conduct aimed at achieving moral perfection, understanding the essence of reality, and attaining spiritual well-being (Al-Taftazani, 1974). In its evolution, the concept of neo-Sufism emerged, coined by contemporary Muslim thinker Fazlur Rahman in his book *Islam* (Rif'i & Mud'is, 2010). Rahman's neo Sufism emphasizes engagement with worldly realities and addresses moral, social, and economic challenges rather than focusing solely on eschatological concerns. He advocates a form of Sufism oriented toward social responsibility and the moral development of both the individual and the broader society (F. Rahman, 1984).

A similar perspective is found in the thought of Indonesian Sufi intellectual Hamka. He defines Sufism as the abandonment of immoral behavior and the cultivation of virtuous character (Hamka, 2015). For Hamka, the spirit of Islam is one of struggle, sacrifice, and industriousness, not lethargy. He asserts that Islam encourages its followers to seek sustenance and to assume leadership on earth based on principles of justice, while also permitting the pursuit of lawful pleasures. In his seminal work *Tasawuf Modern*, Hamka envisions a model of Sufism that enables individuals to draw nearer to God and seek ultimate truth, while remaining actively engaged in the various dimensions of societal life (Hamka, 2015). Nurcholish Madjid, one of the leading figures of Islamic modernism in Indonesia, has also articulated his perspective on *tasawuf* (Sufism). His writings exhibit a strong undercurrent of neo Sufist thought, which is interwoven across various works. Madjid's stance on Sufism is notably positive, he acknowledges that although Sufism has historically been among the most controversial dimensions of Islamic thought, its persistent relevance and vitality testify to its enduring significance (Madjid, 1997). For Madjid, Sufism constitutes a form of spiritual discipline that emphasizes the experiential realization of the Divine through inner practices grounded in intuition (Madjid, 1997).

One of the core neo Sufi concepts developed by Nurcholish Madjid concerns the idea of happiness. This theme holds significant relevance in the socio-cultural context of contemporary society, marked by crises of meaning, psychological pressure, and spiritual yearning amid material advancement. Within Madjid's neo Sufi framework, happiness is not understood as a fleeting emotional state, but as the culmination of a spiritual journey that integrates ethical and transcendental values. His thought offers a unique and holistic approach to understanding happiness by merging Sufi teachings, modern rationality, and universal humanistic values. While much of the existing scholarship on Madjid focuses

on his contributions to political thought, democracy, or pluralism, the theme of happiness within his neo Sufi outlook remains relatively underexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by highlighting Madjid's significant contribution in formulating a paradigm of happiness that resonates with the spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of modern human life.

The concept of happiness has long been a central theme in both Sufism and Islamic philosophy. Classical Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Miskawayh paid substantial attention to the notion of *al-sa'ādah* (happiness), each approaching it from distinct philosophical perspectives. Al-Kindī viewed happiness as the pinnacle of intellectual life. In his view, true happiness is not found in bodily pleasures or material luxuries but in the soul's capacity to perceive truth through reason. A soul liberated from the bondage of desires and worldly attachments can access the realm of intellect and attain eternal happiness (Al-Kindi, 1974). Building upon this tradition, al-Fārābī presented a more systematic and political interpretation. In his work *Tahṣīl al-Sa'ādah*, he argued that ultimate happiness could only be achieved when an individual perfects both theoretical and practical intellect (Al-Farabi, 1970). For al-Fārābī, happiness is not solely an individual pursuit but also a collective one. He integrated personal ethics and political governance as dual pathways toward human perfection (Al-Farabi, 1964).

Meanwhile, Ibn Miskawayh emphasized the ethical dimensions of happiness. In his influential work *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, he posited that happiness results from the harmony and regulation of the soul's faculties (reason, desire, and anger) (Miskawayh, 1968). True happiness is attained when an individual cultivates a balanced and just character, wherein each aspect of the soul functions in its appropriate measure. Thus, moral education and the habituation of virtuous conduct serve as key instruments for achieving a fulfilled and harmonious soul (Miskawayh, 1968). Unlike classical Muslim philosophers, Nurcholish Madjid developed the concept of happiness within the framework of modern Indonesian Islam, incorporating not only metaphysical and ethical dimensions but also existential and social aspects. Rather than constructing a metaphysical-philosophical system like al-Kindī or al-Fārābī, Madjid articulated happiness as the culmination of a living and dynamic awareness of *tawḥīd* (divine unity) that manifests within everyday human experience (Madjid, 1992a). For him, happiness is not merely the product of self control or rational achievement, but the fruit of spiritual freedom and openness to divine meaning. He critiqued legalistic rigidity in religious practice and emphasized the importance of a faith that is autonomous, rational, and inclusive (Madjid, 1992b).

Moreover, Madjid defined happiness as an inner state illuminated by divine consciousness and social responsibility. In his view, *tawḥīd* is not merely a doctrinal

affirmation of God's oneness, but a declaration of human freedom (the ability to think, choose, and act for the common good) (Madjid, 1992a). True happiness, therefore, cannot be realized when individuals are alienated by oppressive social structures or bound by restrictive religious interpretations. In response, he advocated for a reinterpretation of Islamic teachings aligned with the values of democracy, justice, and pluralism. In this regard, Madjid aligns with both Sufi mystics and Islamic philosophers, yet occupies a distinct position, he bridges spirituality and humanity, inner consciousness and social engagement, intellectual freedom and transcendent obedience (Effendy, 2003). His conception of happiness represents a synthesis of Islamic spiritual heritage with the imperatives of modernity. Rather than remaining confined to abstract metaphysical frameworks, Madjid offers a contextual, open, and emancipatory approach to happiness. For him, happiness is not an escape from the world, but a full engagement with it through the lens of *tawhīd*.

In the contemporary context, humanity faces a crisis of meaning amidst technological advancement and the ease of information access. Despite the conveniences of modern life, individuals may suffer from spiritual emptiness and a loss of direction in the pursuit of authentic happiness. The central issue addressed in this study is the disorientation in understanding and attaining happiness, which is often reduced to material and instantaneous gratification, neglecting its spiritual and transcendental dimensions. This issue is increasingly relevant in today's world, where high levels of stress, economic competition, and consumerist lifestyles contribute to existential anxiety. Within this context, Nurcholish Madjid's thought offers a compelling subject of inquiry, as it presents a religious-philosophical approach to happiness rooted in Islamic values, particularly the concept of *riḍā* (contentment) as the key to true happiness.

This research employs a qualitative approach through library research, utilizing descriptive and explorative methods. This approach is well suited to examining the thought of a key figure and analyzing the conceptual construction of happiness within the framework of neo Sufism as developed by Nurcholish Madjid. The study focuses on textual interpretation of Madjid's ideas as found in his various works, including books, articles, and religious speeches. Primary data are drawn from Madjid's original writings that are relevant to the topic, while secondary data include previous studies, academic books, journal articles, and literature discussing Sufism, neo Sufism, and the Islamic philosophy of happiness. Data collection is conducted through systematic literature review using documentation techniques, encompassing the identification, classification, and codification of key themes related to happiness, *riḍā*, and neo Sufism. Data analysis is carried out qualitatively using a hermeneutic approach, interpreting texts within both the historical and conceptual contexts of Madjid's thought. The researcher aims to

uncover the deeper spiritual and existential meanings behind the texts, taking into account the socio cultural and religious backgrounds that shaped Madjid's ideas. Through this method, the article seeks to reveal the depth of Nurcholish Madjid's concept of happiness and assess its contribution to the development of neo Sufism in addressing the challenges of modernity.

The Concept of Happiness in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism

According to Ihsan et al. (2023), happiness in both classical and modern Sufism is closely associated with the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), which encompasses both internal (*takhalli*) and external (*tahalli*) dimensions, culminating in the journey toward nearness to God. Arroisi et al. (2023) emphasize that, for al-Ghazali, the human being comprises both material and transcendental dimensions. True happiness can only be attained through purification and the acquisition of knowledge and spirituality. Wiliasih et al. (2023) distinguish between two forms of happiness in Islam, worldly (temporary) happiness and ultimate (eternal) happiness. Religious factors such as faith and Sufi practices are regarded as key to achieving inner tranquility and stable peace of mind. In a cross-traditional study, Belhaj (2024) explains the integration of Greek philosophy and Islamic wisdom literature, illustrating how virtue, *ḥikmah* (wisdom), and happiness are interrelated in contemporary Islamic tradition. Terminologically, *sa'ādah* in Islam continues to denote "blessedness" or the ideal human state aligned with the *fiṭrah* (primordial nature) and the purpose of human creation.

Classical philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle developed the idea that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the ultimate goal of the good life. In their view, engaging with ethics necessarily entails a discussion of happiness as the highest human attainment (Machek, 2023; Woodruff, 2024). Socrates (469–399 BCE), known primarily through Plato's writings, placed the care of the soul (*epimeleisthai tēs psychēs*) at the center of human flourishing, famously asserting that "the unexamined life is not worth living" as the foundation of virtue (Woodruff, 2024). This notion formed the basis of the virtue ethics tradition in Western philosophy, which remains influential in contemporary moral philosophy (James & Lemoine, 2023). More recently, Smith (2024) has argued that what Socrates referred to as "moral knowledge" resembles practical wisdom, gained through habitual practice and reflection rather than rigid definition. This explains why Socrates' disciples developed their own distinct conceptions of happiness. Additionally, Woodruff (2024) underscores that Socratic teaching emphasized soul care and the cultivation of moral virtues through a reflective process that leads to ethical maturity and inner peace.

Following Socrates, two major schools of thought emerged, the Cynics and the Cyrenaics. The Cynics, led by Diogenes, asserted that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is achieved

through simplicity, self control, and freedom from worldly desires. They prioritized virtue and inner peace over sensual pleasure, and rejected material possessions as unnecessary for a life in harmony with nature. In contrast, the Cyrenaics, exemplified by Aristippus of Cyrene, embraced a sensory hedonism, holding that immediate physical pleasure was the only true good. Chen and Zeng (2023) clarify this distinction, noting that a hedonic orientation (as in the Cyrenaics) can undermine long term well-being by disrupting meaningful behavior (*eudaimonic behaviors*), while a eudaimonic orientation, closer to Cynic thought, enhances well-being through self development and positive relationships.

Plato (427–347 BCE), a student of Socrates, argued in the *Phaedo* that the highest form of happiness cannot be realized in bodily life. True happiness, according to Plato, is attained only after death, when the soul is released from the body and reunited with the realm of pure Forms (Butler, 2023). For philosophers like Socrates, the body was considered a "prison" of the soul, an obstacle to philosophical reflection and the acquisition of true wisdom. Virtues such as courage (*andreia*) and self restraint (*sôphrosunê*) were inseparable from the pursuit of higher truths through the purification of the soul. Butler (2023) expands on this, noting that although early Platonic thought in the *Phaedo* posits that wisdom can only be fully attained in the afterlife, a purified soul may already attain partial wisdom in this life. Mythological portrayals of the afterlife, including the soul's journey and purification in Hades, function as rhetorical and ontological devices to affirm the philosophical meaning of transcendent happiness.

After Plato, his student Aristotle argued that the natural purpose of human beings is happiness (Maksum, 2011). For Aristotle, happiness is intrinsic goodness and the ultimate end in itself for every individual. In essence, happiness constitutes a life that is integrated and fulfilling (Solomon, 1987). Thus, well-being can be attained in this world, provided that individuals exert sincere effort to achieve it (Tibby, 2006). In Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* (happiness), rational action aligned with virtue is the essence of a good life. However, he also acknowledged the importance of "external goods" such as wealth, health, and social relationships as prerequisites for the full exercise of virtuous activity (Symons & VanderWeele, 2024).

Following the emergence of the Cynic and Cyrenaic, two additional schools of thought, Stoicism and Epicureanism, came to prominence. The Stoics, influenced by Cynic philosophy, rejected pleasure as the ultimate goal of life. For them, true happiness lies in the attainment of virtue, including wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, while pleasures are considered *adiaphora*, morally neutral and neither inherently good nor bad. The highest human purpose, according to Stoic thought, is to live in accordance with reason and nature, rather than the pursuit of sensory gratification (LeBon, 2023). Though both Stoics and Epicureans addressed happiness, they took divergent paths, one

emphasizing virtue and self discipline, the other rational and moderate pleasure (Smith, 2024).

The Epicureans shared some common ground with the Cyrenaics (Amin, 1983). For them, pleasure was considered a natural good and the highest virtue (Singer, 1994). More precisely, Epicureanism defines pleasure as the absence of bodily pain and mental disturbance, a state of tranquility (*ataraxia*) and physical ease (*aponia*) (A. Mangunhardjana, 1997). The Sufi understanding of happiness reflects a profound spiritual experience that transcends hedonistic or materialistic conceptions. Classical Sufi masters emphasized that true happiness (*al-sa'ādah al-ḥaqīqiyyah*) can only be attained through existential proximity to God. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, for instance, in his *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, describes happiness as a spiritual condition achieved when the soul is liberated from the bondage of worldly desires and attains *ma'rifah*, intuitive knowledge of God (Al-Ghazali, 1989).

Al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, known as a moderate figure in Sufism, asserted that happiness is the fruit of *fanā'* (the annihilation of the ego) and *baqā'* (subsistence in Divine attributes). For him, the truly happy Sufi is one who no longer perceives the self, but sees only the will and presence of God in all things (Nasr, 2008). Al-Ḥallāj posited that happiness consists in the complete effacement of personal identity in the ocean of Divine Oneness, a spiritual state that defies ordinary expression (Chittick, 1989). Ibn 'Arabī developed this idea further within the framework of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence). In *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, he explains that true happiness arises from the realization of the absolute unity of God's existence, encompassing all being. According to him, happiness is an inner realization that nothing exists in its essence except God ('Arabi, n.d.).

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī portrayed happiness as the fruit of divine love. In his *Mathnawī*, Rūmī shows that separation from God causes suffering, yet such suffering itself is the path to true happiness, as it refines the soul's longing and leads it to reunite with the Beloved (Rumi, 2007). Finally, al-Suhrawardī, the prominent philosopher of Illuminationism (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*), conceived happiness as the radiance of divine light into a purified soul. He believed that happiness cannot be separated from knowledge and luminous intuition, which can only be received by a soul that has undergone rigorous spiritual discipline (As-Suhrawardī, 1939).

From these various perspectives, it is evident that in Sufism, happiness is regarded as the ultimate spiritual goal, attainable through a lengthy process of self-purification, intuitive knowledge of God, and transcendent love. Happiness is not the end of worldly

life, but rather a spiritual condition accessible only to those souls who have pierced the veil of material reality and reached the divine dimension.

The Foundations of the Concept of Happiness in Nurcholish Madjid's Perspective

Nurcholish Madjid's conception of happiness is fundamentally grounded in Qur'anic verses. First, in Q.S. al-Qashash [28]: 77, Islam is portrayed as advocating for both physical and spiritual happiness, or worldly and hereafter oriented well-being, while still maintaining a clear distinction between the two. Individuals are encouraged to pursue happiness in the hereafter but are also reminded not to neglect their worldly welfare (Madjid, 2007). Bentley (2023) notes that religion and spirituality play a vital role in fostering well-being by navigating the tension between immanence and transcendental connection. Such an approach enriches one's existential meaning and leads to a more integrative understanding of life (Bentley, 2023). Likewise, Ranti Wiliasih et al. (2024) argue that worldly happiness is temporary, whereas ultimate happiness (achieved through faith and religious practices such as Sufism) provides lasting spiritual peace and inner tranquility.

Second, in Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 200, the Qur'an indicates that attaining happiness in the hereafter does not necessarily correlate with worldly happiness, and vice versa. Therefore, human beings are encouraged to strive for both forms of happiness while avoiding spiritual and existential suffering (Madjid, 2007). Still, Islam promises a life of happiness in both worlds for those who believe and do good deeds. Thus, worldly happiness may serve as a prelude to even greater happiness in the hereafter. In summary, true happiness in Islam encompasses both temporal and eternal dimensions (Madjid, 2007). Excessive attachment to the world (*ḥubb al-dunyā*) can obstruct spiritual growth and diminish the quality of afterlife happiness, necessitating a balanced approach to both physical and spiritual needs (Fauziyah & Sutono, 2023). In addition to material factors, systematic studies have shown that faith, Sufi practices, and consistent religiosity significantly contribute to inner peace and spiritual well-being, which are key indicators of authentic Islamic happiness (Wiliasih & et al., 2024). The Islamic conception of happiness includes faith (*īmān*), piety (*taqwā*), patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), and harmonious relationships with both God and fellow human beings, fostering tranquility in this world and salvation in the hereafter (Samani & Latif, 2024; Sofia & Sari, 2023).

Third, Q.S. an-Nahl [16]: 97, states that those who do good deeds, male or female, and have faith, will be granted a good life (in this world), and they will be rewarded in the hereafter according to the best of their deeds (Madjid, 2007). This verse affirms that

God promises a good life on earth (including tranquility, peace, and blessings) and eternal reward in the hereafter to those who believe and act righteously, regardless of gender. As Fauziyah and Sutono (2023) point out, excessive love of the world can undermine spiritual well-being, emphasizing the need for balance between material and spiritual pursuits. Wiliasih et al. (2024) reinforce that religiosity, faith, and Sufi practices provide inner serenity as key markers of genuine happiness in Islam. Additionally, Sofia & Sari (2023) and Samani & Latif (2024) elaborate that this concept encompasses faith, piety, patience, gratitude, and harmonious relationships with both God and others, all of which contribute to holistic well-being in both realms.

Based on these three Qur'anic foundations (faith, balance between worldly and afterlife pursuits, and righteous action) Madjid conceptualizes happiness as a spiritual and psychological condition derived from the dialectic of negation and affirmation embedded in the *shahada*. He emphasizes that true happiness is not found in material enjoyment, but rather in the continuity of one's relationship with God (vertical), the self (internal), and fellow beings (horizontal), coupled with active engagement in the path of God, driven by hope and awareness of divine accountability. For Madjid, happiness is a synthesis of inner serenity and consistent action within a spiritual and social framework, unfolding as a unified and dynamic whole.

***Rida* in the Thought of Nurcholish Madjid**

Nurcholish Madjid conceives of happiness as a profound spiritual experience that culminates in attaining *rida* (God's pleasure). For Madjid, true happiness does not lie in worldly success or material pleasure, but rather in a deeply rooted spiritual relationship between the human being and the Divine. He associates happiness with the soul's spiritual witness of the *Wujūd al-Ḥaqq* (the Absolute Being), a transcendent experience that renders worldly notions of happiness meaningless because God becomes the supreme source of bliss (Madjid, 1992a). In a later work, Madjid (2010) affirms that spiritual happiness is an eternal state, surpassing temporary psychological emotions. Thus, happiness is not merely an emotional or psychological condition, but a transcendent and enduring spiritual attainment.

Madjid articulates happiness through several interrelated dimensions. First is the spiritual transcendental dimension, an awareness of and spiritual experience with the Divine presence. Second is the moral existential dimension (good deeds, faith, and surrender to divine will) (Madjid, 2008). Third is the intellectual and ethical dimension (human beings' awareness of their role and responsibility as rational and moral agents) (Madjid, 2013). These dimensions intertwine and unfold throughout a Muslim's life journey toward divine proximity. True happiness, in Madjid's view, emerges from this

proximity that a happiness born from the search for life's meaning and spiritual submission to the Creator. Rahman and Yasin (2024) similarly argue that the integration of transcendental consciousness and sincere acceptance enhances Muslim psychological well-being. Fitri et al. (2022) support this view, showing that spiritual experience and surrender to God significantly contribute to holistic happiness, in alignment with Madjid's perspective.

In Madjid's conceptual framework, *rida* (God's pleasure) is not merely one element of happiness, but its pinnacle and highest form. He contends that happiness finds its perfection when the believer attains and feels God's pleasure. Thus, *rida* is both the ultimate result and the essential core of authentic and eternal happiness (Madjid, 1992a). Madjid (2015) further describes *rida* as a state of total acceptance that liberates the soul from all worldly attachments. In this sense, *rida* does not merely accompany happiness, it embodies its deepest meaning. Madjid understands *rida* as a reciprocal value between God and the believer. God is pleased with a servant who is first pleased with Him. This mutual contentment reflects a sincere and voluntary submission to divine will (Madjid, 2010). Madjid outlines several key dimensions of *rida*. First, a theological dimension, involving wholehearted acceptance of divine decrees. Second, a relational dimension, emphasizing the two-way relationship between God and the servant. Third, a spiritual psychological dimension, describing the inner tranquility that arises from complete surrender, liberating the believer from anxiety and worldly desires (Madjid, 2013). For these reasons, Madjid identifies *rida* as the most exalted and supreme form of happiness (Madjid, 1992a).

Madjid's conception of *rida* resonates with that of classical Sufi thinkers. Rābi' al-Adawīyyah saw *rida* as the purest form of divine love, unmotivated by hope for reward or fear of punishment. Al-Ghazālī viewed *rida* as one of the highest spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*), following *ma'rifah* (gnosis) and *maḥabbah* (divine love), in which the will of the servant fully dissolves into the will of God (Al-Ghazali, 1964; A. Rahman & Yasin, 2024). Madjid brings this concept into a more rational and contextual framework, preserving its spiritual depth while making it accessible and relevant for the modern Muslim (Madjid, 2015).

The Path to Happiness in the Thought of Nurcholish Madjid

According to Nurcholish Madjid, the path to happiness begins with a process of negation (*naḥy*) and affirmation (*itsbāt*), which he interprets as a dialectic of liberation and submission. Negation refers to the release from worldly attachments and ego, leading to affirmation, which guides individuals into a dynamic state of surrender to the Divine (Madjid, 2007). Madjid emphasizes that these two spiritual processes are interdependent.

Negation entails emptying the self from material desires and egoistic tendencies, a concept aligned with the Sufi method of *takhalli* (purification). This process manifests in daily practices such as *muhasabah* (self reflection), not merely as psychological exercise, but as a spiritual cleansing to remove barriers to divine experience.

Controlling desires, especially in consumption and lifestyle, is also an essential expression of negation. Madjid encourages dhikr and *wirid* not only as ritual practices but as tools for weakening egoic impulses and nurturing profound spiritual awareness. Practical implementations include avoiding idle talk, guarding one's speech, and steering clear of arguments driven by anger or pride, behaviors that free the self from false ego centered existence (Madjid, 2007). Following negation, the next stage is affirmation, which involves filling the purified spiritual space with divine values and engaging in ethical and social responsibility. For Madjid, affirmation is submission to transcendent values, expressed through honesty, compassion, justice, and trustworthiness in both private and public life. Spirituality, thus, must be embodied in social participation and not confined to inner experience alone (Madjid, 2015).

Affirmation also includes the integration of faith and knowledge. As a pioneer of Islamic neo modernism, Madjid argues that faith is not opposed to science and urges Muslims to study the Qur'an alongside scientific inquiry. Building a generation that is both spiritual and rational is a key aspect of this affirmative process. His theological inclusivism reinforces this vision, advocating for interfaith dialogue and mutual respect in plural societies. In the political and social spheres, Madjid encourages participation in democratic institutions with a critical, participatory, and humanistic attitude, aiming to embody Islamic values as sources of mercy and enlightenment rather than domination (Madjid, 1992b).

This perspective aligns with Jayana and Siswanto (2024), who note that Madjid's pluralism and inclusive spirituality contribute to the development of multicultural Islamic education. Siroj and Ulfah (2025) highlight his vision of producing critical, pluralistic, and competitive individuals rooted in spirituality and ethics. Likewise, Yufriadi et al. (2023) emphasize how Madjid promotes a rational, open religious consciousness, where negation purifies the self to enable meaningful social engagement. Hasyim and Munasir (2023) affirm the relevance of Madjid's thought in proportionally integrating Islamic values, nationalism, and science. Auliani et al. (2024) add that his ideas are also foundational for shaping harmonious religious moderation based on love and tolerance. Thus, for Madjid, happiness is true and lasting when it arises from spiritual submission and the realization of divine values within human life. His model of negation and affirmation offers a comprehensive spiritual path, first liberating the self from ego and worldly enslavement, then affirming life through divine values embodied in every

dimension of human existence. This path also reflects the logic of *tawhīd* in the *shahāda* (Islamic testimony of faith), which begins with *al-naḥy* (“there is no god”), a negation of all forms of false servitude, and culminates in *al-itsbāt* (“except Allah”), signifying exclusive submission to the One God (Madjid, 2007).

Madjid further clarifies this argument by referencing Qur’anic affirmations of divine incomparability, “There is nothing like unto Him” (Q.S. al-Shūrā [42]: 11) and “There is none comparable to Him” (Q.S. al-Ikhlāṣ [112]: 4). Submission to God, therefore, is a dynamic process of sincere and continual striving for truth (Madjid, 2007). Negation (the emptying of ego and worldly chains) can be actualized through structured daily practices. *Muhasabah*, when combined with *dhikr* and spiritual contemplation, serves as a foundation for neutralizing negative energies produced by social competition. Muvid (2023) affirms that *dhikr* is more than ritual, it fosters a conscious system that filters social pressures, enhances self control, and offers inner tranquility amid life’s complexities.

Affirmation becomes a constructive re-filling of the soul with divine values and meaningful social engagement. It does not demand seclusion but rather active participation in society with a spirit of *rahmatan lil ‘ālamīn* (mercy to all creation). Affirmative practices include building *dhikr* based communities and spiritual social initiatives. Rozi et al. (2024) observe that contemporary Sufi communities are increasingly integrating spiritual practice with community empowerment. Arrasyid et al. (2024) add that the Sufi stages of *takhalli*, *taḥalli*, and *tajalli* are integral to santri character education, grounding strong identity while remaining open to scientific progress and diversity.

In Madjid’s thought, the paths of negation and affirmation function both spiritually and socially. This model frees individuals from the constraints of false values legitimated by popular culture and consumer capitalism, reaffirming exclusive submission to God. As Nabilah (2023) illustrates, in Sufism based education, virtues such as humility, patience, and social responsibility are not just normative ideals but are concretely instilled through daily practice, forming a spiritual habitus resilient to modern pressures. For Madjid, happiness is not an emotional or material condition but a spiritual state of being, intimately connected with God and actively engaged in creating meaning in social life. His Sufi strategy offers an authentic middle path, transcending worldly determinism while living a value driven life that is dynamic, inclusive, and progressive. The next stage, according to Madjid, is to embark on the *sabilillah* (path of God) a continual pursuit of truth, which must manifest in one’s personal commitment through earnest effort, resulting in a life of *jihad*, *ijtihad*, and *mujāhadah* (Madjid, 2007). True happiness, for Madjid, does not lie in emotion or materialism, but in sincere spiritual

commitment and steadfastness in following divine guidance. Negation liberates the soul from worldly constraints such as social pressures and materialism, while affirmation fills the purified heart with divine values expressed through ethical and productive action.

In the modern context, individuals can practice negation through *muhasabah*, *dhikr*, and voluntary fasting, acts that heighten self awareness and subdue the ego. Affirmation, on the other hand, involves applying values such as honesty, justice, and responsibility in both social and professional domains. Recent studies affirm that sincerity and religious commitment significantly enhance spiritual resilience and mental well-being (Rofi'i et al., 2024; Sholichatun et al., 2023). *Wirid* and fasting have been shown to improve Emotional Spiritual Quotient (Baihaqiyulloh & Wahyudi, 2023), and Islamic spirituality in the workplace contributes to work ethic and inner satisfaction (Diniaty et al., 2024). Therefore, the attainment of true happiness requires an integration of spiritual *negation* of the ego and worldliness with the *affirmation* of divine values, grounded in sincerity, awareness, and devotion to God.

Conclusion

In Nurcholish Madjid's perspective, true happiness lies in achieving a balance between worldly and spiritual dimensions. Individuals are not merely guided toward external achievements, but are also encouraged to attain inner joy through obedience, righteous deeds (*amal ṣāliḥ*), and a conscious awareness of the afterlife. The pinnacle of this happiness is reflected in *rida*, a wholehearted acceptance of God's decrees with full awareness and willingness, representing the deepest expression of faith. First, Madjid underscores the importance of liberating oneself from various forms of bondage, such as ego, materialism, and socio-cultural pressures, so that one may live authentically, free from misleading external influences. Second, genuine spiritual freedom can only be achieved when God becomes the sole center of one's life orientation, leading to the formation of a dynamic, progressive, and productive character. Third, the path to true happiness must be traversed with sincerity in devotion to God and a continuous commitment to self improvement. This holistic process illustrates that happiness is not merely an emotional state but the culmination of a profound spiritual journey and existential transformation rooted in faith.

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