

THE CONCEPT OF PARADISE AND HELL IN ISLAMIC ESCHATOLOGY FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF HARUN NASUTION AND NURCHOLISH MADJID

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Abstract :

The concepts of paradise and hell are central themes in Islamic eschatology, reflecting Islamic beliefs about the afterlife and their ethical implications for human life. This study aims to analyze the concepts of paradise and hell from the perspectives of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid and to identify the similarities and differences in their interpretations. This research employs a qualitative library research method with philosophical-theological and comparative approaches by examining the primary works of both scholars and relevant academic literature. The findings indicate that Harun Nasution interprets paradise and hell through a rational theological framework influenced by Mu'tazilite thought, emphasizing divine justice, human freedom, and moral responsibility as the basis of reward and punishment in the hereafter. In contrast, Nurcholish Madjid understands paradise and hell not only as eschatological realities but also as symbols of spiritual closeness to God and the moral quality of human life. Although both scholars affirm the theological significance of paradise and hell, they offer different interpretative emphases that complement one another. Their perspectives demonstrate that Islamic eschatology extends beyond beliefs about the afterlife by providing an ethical and spiritual foundation that encourages responsible, meaningful, and morally conscious human conduct in worldly life.

Keywords : Islamic Eschatology, Heaven, Hell, Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid, Islamic Theology

Abstrak :

Kajian mengenai surga dan neraka merupakan tema penting dalam eskatologi Islam yang berkaitan dengan keyakinan terhadap kehidupan setelah kematian serta implikasinya terhadap pembentukan moral dan spiritual manusia. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis konsep surga dan neraka dalam perspektif Harun Nasution dan Nurcholish Madjid serta mengidentifikasi persamaan dan perbedaan pemikiran keduanya. Penelitian menggunakan metode kepustakaan (library research) dengan pendekatan filosofis-teologis dan komparatif melalui kajian terhadap karya-karya utama kedua tokoh serta literatur yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Harun Nasution memaknai surga dan neraka dalam kerangka teologi rasional yang dipengaruhi pemikiran Mu'tazilah, dengan penekanan pada keadilan Tuhan, kebebasan manusia, dan tanggung jawab moral sebagai dasar pemberian pahala dan hukuman di akhirat. Sementara itu, Nurcholish Madjid memandang surga dan neraka tidak hanya sebagai realitas eskatologis, tetapi juga sebagai simbol kedekatan manusia dengan Tuhan dan kualitas moral dalam kehidupan. Meskipun memiliki penekanan yang berbeda, kedua tokoh sama-sama menempatkan surga dan neraka sebagai bagian integral dari ajaran Islam yang tidak hanya berkaitan dengan kehidupan akhirat, tetapi juga menjadi landasan etis dan spiritual dalam membentuk perilaku manusia di kehidupan dunia.

Kata Kunci: Eskatologi Islam, Surga, Neraka, Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid, Teologi Islam

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of life after death is one of the fundamental themes in Islamic teachings, known as eschatology (al-ākhirah). Islamic eschatology examines various issues related to the final journey of human beings, including death, resurrection, the accountability of deeds (ḥisāb), and the concepts of reward in the form of paradise (al-jannah) and hell (al-nār). Belief in the hereafter is an essential element of the Islamic faith system because it is directly related to the belief in God's justice and human accountability for all actions performed during worldly life (Sampurna, 2021). From the perspective of the Qur'an, worldly life is considered a temporary phase, whereas the hereafter is an eternal life in which humans receive the moral consequences of their deeds and actions (Fazrian, 2024).

The concepts of paradise and hell in Islam are not merely understood as descriptions of places of reward and punishment after death but also contain theological, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. Paradise represents the highest form of human happiness resulting from faith and righteous deeds, while hell symbolizes God's justice toward those who commit moral deviations and reject truth. Therefore, the doctrine of paradise and hell serves an educational function in developing human awareness to be responsible for their life choices. Studies of eschatology indicate that the concept of the hereafter in Islam does not only discuss the future after death but also influences the formation of human character, morality, and life orientation in this world (Hamzah, 2020).

Nevertheless, the understanding of paradise and hell does not always follow a single pattern of thought. Throughout Islamic intellectual history, Muslim scholars and thinkers have developed various approaches to understanding eschatological realities. Some interpret paradise and hell textually as concrete realities that will be experienced by humans after the Day of Judgment, while others attempt to provide philosophical and rational interpretations by examining the symbolic meanings and moral values contained within them. These differences arise from the dynamic relationship between religious texts, the use of reason, and the social and intellectual contexts underlying the thoughts of Muslim scholars and thinkers (Ashari, 2020).

One of the Indonesian Muslim thinkers who paid significant attention to theological issues and Islamic rationality was Harun Nasution. His thought was strongly influenced by rational theological traditions, particularly Mu'tazilah theology, which emphasized the important role of human reason in understanding religious teachings. According to Harun Nasution, God possesses absolute justice, meaning that every human action will receive a corresponding reward or punishment based on their deeds. Within his framework of thought, the concepts of paradise and hell are closely related to divine justice and human freedom in determining life choices. Humans are granted the ability to use reason in distinguishing between good and evil; therefore, the consequences of the hereafter represent moral responsibility for actions committed in worldly life (Saputra et al., 2022).

For Harun Nasution, the existence of paradise and hell cannot be separated from the relationship between God's will and human freedom. He

rejected an understanding that excessively emphasizes God's absolute determination to the extent that it eliminates human involvement in determining actions. Instead, humans possess free will to choose between good and evil actions, making the granting of rewards and punishments in the hereafter based on rational moral principles. Therefore, eschatological concepts in Harun Nasution's thought function not only as religious doctrines but also as foundations for developing human beings who are responsible for their social and moral lives.

In addition to Harun Nasution, thoughts regarding the relationship between religion, humanity, and the afterlife were also developed by Nurcholish Madjid. As one of the prominent figures in Indonesian Islamic reform, Nurcholish Madjid emphasized the importance of understanding Islam substantively and contextually. He argued that religious teachings should not be understood merely through symbols and formal aspects but should embody divine values, humanity, and morality in real life. His thoughts on Islam emphasized the relationship between faith, reason, and human values (Vera, 2022).

From Nurcholish Madjid's perspective, the concepts of paradise and hell possess meanings broader than merely descriptions of places of reward and punishment in the afterlife. Paradise can be understood as a symbol of human closeness to God, reflected through a life filled with peace, virtue, and spiritual harmony. Conversely, hell represents the condition of human alienation from divine values due to actions that contradict moral and humanitarian principles. Through this approach, Nurcholish Madjid sought to connect Islamic eschatological doctrines with human realities, making the understanding of the hereafter directly relevant to human behavior in worldly life.

Previous studies have examined Harun Nasution's rational theology (Ashari, 2020), Nurcholish Madjid's Islamic reform and humanistic thought (Vera, 2022), and Islamic eschatology from broader theological perspectives (Hamzah, 2020; Fazrian, 2024). However, these studies primarily examine each scholar independently or discuss Islamic theology and eschatology in general. Few studies have specifically compared Harun Nasution's and Nurcholish Madjid's interpretations of paradise and hell within a single analytical framework. Consequently, there remains a significant research gap concerning how both thinkers reinterpret Islamic eschatology in contemporary Indonesian Islamic thought.

Accordingly, this study offers a comparative theological analysis of paradise and hell from the perspectives of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid. Unlike previous studies that discuss each thinker separately, it comparatively examines their theological foundations, philosophical reasoning, and ethical implications. This comparative approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how modern Indonesian Muslim thinkers reinterpret Islamic eschatology.

Based on the foregoing discussion and the identified research gap, this study aims to examine the concepts of paradise and hell in Islamic eschatology from the perspectives of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid. The study seeks to contribute to contemporary Islamic intellectual discourse by providing a comparative analysis of their theological perspectives. Furthermore, it demonstrates that Islamic eschatology extends beyond metaphysical beliefs and serves as an ethical and spiritual framework for human life.

The findings are expected to enrich contemporary discussions on Islamic theology

and eschatology while providing a broader understanding of the ethical relevance of belief in the hereafter within modern Islamic thought.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a library research method using qualitative-descriptive, philosophical-theological, and comparative approaches. The selection of this method is based on the research object, which focuses on the concepts of paradise and hell in Islamic eschatology from the perspectives of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid. Library research is appropriate for examining the ideas of Islamic thinkers because their intellectual contributions are primarily documented in books, scholarly articles, and other academic publications. Through this method, the study systematically analyzes written sources to understand, interpret, and compare the theological ideas of both scholars (Aswandi et al., 2024).

The qualitative-descriptive approach is employed to describe and interpret the concepts of paradise (*al-jannah*) and hell (*al-nār*) within the framework of Islamic eschatology. Rather than measuring numerical data, qualitative research seeks to understand meanings, concepts, and arguments contained in intellectual works. This approach enables the researcher to explore how Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid explain the relationship between worldly life, the hereafter, divine justice, human freedom, and moral responsibility (Saputra et al., 2022). Furthermore, the philosophical-theological approach is used to examine the rational and theological foundations underlying each scholar's interpretation of paradise and hell. The philosophical perspective analyzes the role of reason and rational argumentation, while the theological perspective examines the relationship between these concepts and the doctrines of Islamic faith (Amalia et al., 2024). To identify convergences and divergences between the two scholars, the study also employs a comparative approach.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary materials. The primary sources are the original works of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid that discuss Islamic theology, rationality, and the relationship between human beings, God, and the hereafter. Harun Nasution's ideas are primarily examined through *Teologi Islam: Aliran-Aliran Sejarah Analisa Perbandingan* (Nasution, 1986), while Nurcholish Madjid's perspectives are analyzed through *Islam Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan* (Madjid, 1987) and *Islam Doktrin dan Peradaban* (Madjid, 1992). These primary works constitute the principal basis for understanding each scholar's theological framework and interpretation of paradise and hell. Secondary sources include scholarly journal articles, books, and other academic publications discussing Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid, Islamic theology, and Islamic eschatology. These materials are used to support, contextualize, and critically interpret the primary data.

Data were collected using the documentation technique by identifying, selecting, and reviewing written documents relevant to the research topic. The collected literature was then classified according to the main themes of the study, including Islamic eschatology, paradise and hell, divine justice, human freedom, moral responsibility, and the theological and spiritual dimensions of the afterlife (Hidayatulloh, 2020).

The data were analyzed using content analysis and comparative analysis. Content analysis was conducted by examining and interpreting the main ideas contained in the primary and secondary sources. Comparative analysis was subsequently applied to identify the similarities and differences between Harun Nasution's and Nurcholish Madjid's interpretations of paradise and hell, particularly concerning their theological foundations, philosophical reasoning, and ethical implications (Muhajirin et al., 2025).

The research was conducted through several stages. First, relevant primary and secondary literature on Islamic eschatology and the thoughts of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid was identified and collected. Second, the primary works of both scholars were critically examined to identify their principal arguments concerning paradise and hell. Third, these ideas were analyzed using philosophical-theological perspectives to understand their conceptual foundations. Finally, a comparative analysis was undertaken to identify the similarities, differences, and distinctive characteristics of each scholar's interpretation, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Islamic eschatological thought.

The integration of library research, qualitative-descriptive inquiry, philosophical-theological analysis, and comparative interpretation enables this study to examine the concepts of paradise and hell systematically and comprehensively. By grounding the analysis in the primary works of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid while incorporating relevant secondary literature, the study ensures methodological consistency and provides a more robust interpretation of their contributions to contemporary Islamic eschatology.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Islamic Eschatology and the Meaning of Paradise and Hell in Islamic Thought

Eschatology is one of the important themes in Islamic theological studies that discusses issues related to life after death (al-ākhirah), the Day of Resurrection (yaum al-ba'ts), the accountability of deeds (ḥisāb), and human rewards in the form of paradise (al-jannah) and hell (al-nār). From an Islamic perspective, worldly life is not the end of human existence but rather an initial stage toward a more eternal life. Belief in the hereafter is an essential part of faith because it is closely related to the concept of Allah's justice and human moral responsibility (Sampurna, 2021). Islamic eschatological studies indicate that the concepts of paradise and hell are not only understood as places of reward and punishment after death but also as doctrines that have moral functions in guiding human behavior during worldly life.

Islamic eschatology has also been discussed extensively in international scholarship. Fazlur Rahman (1979) argues that belief in the hereafter constitutes an integral ethical foundation of the Qur'anic worldview, while Smith and Haddad (2002) explain that paradise and hell should be understood not merely as descriptions of the afterlife but also as theological concepts that shape Muslim moral consciousness.

In Islamic intellectual traditions, the concepts of paradise and hell are

often understood through two main approaches, namely the textual approach and the rational-philosophical approach. The textual approach views paradise and hell as realities of the hereafter that are concretely described in the Qur'an and Hadith. Meanwhile, the rational-philosophical approach seeks to understand the deeper meanings of these concepts as manifestations of divine justice, symbols of human spiritual journeys, and moral consequences of human actions. These different approaches have generated various perspectives among Muslim theologians and philosophers, including modern Islamic thinkers such as Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid (Hamzah, 2020).

The Qur'an explicitly affirms the reality of the hereafter and its ethical significance. Allah states:

"Every soul will taste death, and you will only receive your full compensation on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever is kept away from the Fire and admitted to Paradise has truly succeeded." (Qur'an 3:185).

Likewise, Paradise is promised to those who believe and perform righteous deeds (Qur'an 2:25), while Hell is described as the consequence for those who reject faith and persist in wrongdoing (Qur'an 4:56). The Prophet Muhammad also emphasized moral preparedness for the hereafter, stating: *"The intelligent person is the one who controls himself and works for what comes after death"* (Hadith narrated by al-Tirmidhi). These scriptural sources provide the theological foundation upon which later Muslim scholars, including Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid, developed their respective interpretations of paradise and hell.

The Concept of Paradise and Hell from the Perspective of Harun Nasution

Harun Nasution was one of the Indonesian Muslim intellectuals who paid significant attention to Islamic theological issues, particularly regarding the relationship between reason, revelation, divine will, and human freedom. His thought was strongly influenced by the rational theological tradition of Mu'tazilah, which placed an important position on human reason in understanding religious matters. According to him, Islam provides considerable space for the use of rationality, allowing various theological issues to be studied critically and argumentatively (Ashari, 2020).

In the context of eschatology, Harun Nasution understood the concepts of paradise and hell based on the principle of divine justice ('adl Allāh). God, as the Most Just Being, would not arbitrarily determine rewards or punishments for humans. Therefore, the existence of paradise as a place of reward and hell as a place of punishment represents a logical consequence of human actions throughout worldly life. Humans are granted the ability to think and the freedom to choose; therefore, they are responsible for the moral decisions they make (Saputra et al., 2022).

According to Harun Nasution's thought, humans cannot completely avoid responsibility by attributing their actions solely to divine destiny. If humans possess free will, then the granting of rewards and punishments in the hereafter has a rational foundation. Paradise is granted to those who use their freedom to perform good deeds, while hell becomes the consequence for those who choose the path of wrongdoing. This understanding demonstrates that the

concept of the afterlife in Harun Nasution's thought is closely connected to the relationship between human freedom and divine justice.

Furthermore, Harun Nasution argued that the understanding of paradise and hell should not be limited merely to aspects of fear and hope. These concepts should encourage humans to develop moral lives, use reason properly, and fulfill social responsibilities. Thus, eschatology does not only discuss life after death but also serves as a moral educational function for human beings in their present lives.

Harun Nasution's interpretation is closely related to Qur'anic teachings emphasizing divine justice and individual accountability. Allah states, *"Whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it"* (Qur'an 99:7-8). Likewise, the Qur'an declares, *"Every soul is held in pledge for what it has earned"* (Qur'an 74:38). These verses support Nasution's argument that reward and punishment are determined according to human moral choices. This perspective is further reinforced by the Prophet's saying, *"The intelligent person is the one who controls himself and works for what comes after death"* (Narrated by al-Tirmidhi).

Nevertheless, Harun Nasution's rational approach has been criticized by scholars representing the Ash'arite theological tradition. They argue that excessive reliance on rational explanation may reduce the central role of revelation and overemphasize human autonomy. According to this perspective, although human beings are responsible for their deeds, divine omnipotence remains absolute, and all events ultimately occur according to Allah's will. This criticism illustrates the continuing theological debate between rationalist and traditionalist approaches within Islamic thought (Amalia et al., 2024).

The Concept of Paradise and Hell from the Perspective of Nurcholish Madjid

Unlike Harun Nasution, who emphasized rational-theological aspects, Nurcholish Madjid approached religious issues through a more philosophical, spiritual, and humanistic perspective. His thought sought to connect Islamic teachings with universal human values so that religion would not only be understood through formal aspects but also as a source of moral and civilizational development for humanity (Vera, 2022).

In understanding the concepts of paradise and hell, Nurcholish Madjid did not reject their existence as realities of the hereafter. However, he emphasized that these concepts contain broader meanings. Paradise is not merely understood as a place of material pleasure after death but also represents the spiritual condition of humans who achieve closeness to God. Paradise symbolizes human success in attaining moral perfection through faith, piety, and righteous actions.

Conversely, hell in Nurcholish Madjid's thought is not only understood as a place of physical punishment but also as a representation of human alienation from divine values. Humans who lose spiritual orientation, neglect humanitarian values, and commit moral wrongdoing are essentially moving away from a state of life that brings peace. Therefore, hell also has a spiritual dimension related to the inner condition of human beings.

Nurcholish Madjid's interpretation is closely connected to Qur'anic teachings concerning spiritual fulfillment and closeness to Allah. The Qur'an

states: "*O tranquil soul, return to your Lord, well pleased and pleasing to Him. Enter among My servants, and enter My Paradise*" (Qur'an 89:27–30). This passage illustrates that paradise is closely associated with spiritual serenity and divine acceptance rather than merely material enjoyment. Likewise, the Prophet Muhammad said: "*Indeed, Allah does not look at your bodies or your appearances, but He looks at your hearts and your deeds*" (Narrated by Muslim). Although Nurcholish Madjid did not deny the literal existence of paradise and hell, he interpreted these scriptural texts as emphasizing the inner transformation of believers. For him, the essence of paradise lies in spiritual proximity to God, whereas hell reflects alienation from divine values caused by moral failure.

Nevertheless, Nurcholish Madjid's symbolic-humanistic interpretation has received criticism from scholars who advocate a more textual or literal approach to Islamic theology. They argue that emphasizing symbolic meanings may weaken the understanding of paradise and hell as concrete realities explicitly affirmed in the Qur'an and Hadith. According to this perspective, although spiritual interpretations may enrich believers' ethical awareness, they should not diminish the fundamental Islamic belief that paradise and hell are real destinations in the hereafter. This debate reflects the continuing discussion between contextual and textual approaches in contemporary Islamic thought.

Similarities and Differences between the Thoughts of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid

Although both Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid affirm the reality of the afterlife as an essential doctrine of Islam, they employ different interpretative approaches in explaining the concepts of paradise and hell. Harun Nasution develops his argument within a rational-theological framework, emphasizing divine justice (*'adl Allāh*), human free will, and moral accountability (Ashari, 2020; Saputra et al., 2022). In contrast, Nurcholish Madjid adopts a philosophical and spiritual-humanistic perspective, highlighting paradise and hell as realities that also convey profound ethical and spiritual meanings related to humanity's relationship with God (Vera, 2022).

These differences illustrate two complementary currents within modern Indonesian Islamic thought. Nasution provides a rational explanation of why divine reward and punishment are consistent with God's justice, whereas Madjid broadens the discussion by emphasizing the transformative moral and spiritual dimensions of belief in the hereafter. Consequently, their perspectives demonstrate that Islamic eschatology should be understood not only as a theological doctrine concerning the final destiny of humanity but also as a moral framework that shapes ethical conduct and spiritual consciousness in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid offer complementary perspectives on paradise and hell within contemporary Islamic eschatology. While Harun Nasution emphasizes divine justice, human freedom, and moral responsibility through a rational-theological framework, Nurcholish Madjid stresses the ethical and spiritual dimensions of eschatological belief

through a humanistic perspective. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that Islamic eschatology is not merely concerned with the afterlife but also provides an ethical and spiritual framework for shaping human conduct and religious consciousness in contemporary Muslim society.

These findings also provide a conceptual foundation for strengthening Islamic education and da'wah by integrating rational understanding with ethical and spiritual values in explaining belief in the hereafter.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of contemporary Islamic eschatology by presenting a comparative analysis of two influential Indonesian Muslim thinkers in interpreting the concepts of paradise and hell. The study shows that rational-theological and spiritual-humanistic perspectives are not necessarily contradictory but may complement one another in explaining the ethical significance of Islamic eschatology. This contribution enriches the study of Islamic thought, particularly in understanding the development of modern Islamic eschatological thought in Indonesia.

This study is limited by its reliance on library research and the analysis of the published works of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid. Consequently, it does not examine how their interpretations are implemented in educational, social, or religious practices, nor does it include the perspectives of other contemporary Muslim scholars.

Future research is therefore recommended to broaden the comparative scope by examining other Muslim thinkers, both in Indonesia and internationally, or by employing empirical approaches to investigate how theological understandings of paradise and hell influence Islamic education, religious discourse, and the moral development of Muslim communities. Such studies would provide a broader understanding of the contemporary relevance of Islamic eschatology.

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