

Reimagining Secularism for Indonesia: Contextual Approaches Based on Madjid, Bhargava, Thiemann, and Taylor

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ABSTRACT

The concept of secularism has undergone significant transformation in modern postcolonial societies, particularly those grappling with religious diversity within democratic frameworks. Classical European secularism models, based on strict church-state separation, often prove inadequate for highly religious societies like Indonesia. This research explores the feasibility of implementing a contextual form of secularism in Indonesia by synthesizing the ideas of four major thinkers: Nurcholish Madjid, Rajeev Bhargava, Ronald Thiemann, and Charles Taylor. It argues that secularism, particularly in religiously plural societies like Indonesia, should not be understood as the exclusion of religion from the public sphere. Rather, it should be reframed as a political and ethical framework that promotes justice, inclusivity, and democratic coexistence among diverse religious communities. Employing a qualitative approach with comparative and interpretive design, this research analyzes primary texts from the four figures, compares their conceptual frameworks regarding religion-state relations, and validates findings through Indonesian contextual literature. The analysis reveals that all four figures reject radical secularism while offering contextual alternatives that accommodate religious values in democratic public spaces. Their synthesis produces a "Contextual-Inclusive Secularism" model characterized by (1) non-hostility toward religion, (2) emphasis on justice and equality, (3) openness to religious participation within public ethical bounds, and (4) responsiveness to historical and social contexts. Indonesia, with its strong religious traditions and constitutional framework upholding religious freedom, possesses significant potential to develop this model. This model offers a viable alternative to both secular and theocratic extremes, aligning with Pancasila principles while respecting Indonesia's pluralistic reality.

KEYWORDS Contextual secularism, Political theology, Religion and state, Religious pluralism, Secularization



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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and the state remains one of the most contested issues in contemporary political philosophy, particularly in postcolonial societies striving to balance religious identity with democratic governance (Borup, 2021; Gangopadhyay, 2023; Hwang, 2021). Globally, the implementation of strict secular models has generated significant tensions. In Turkey, for instance, the rigid Kemalist secularism (*laiklik*) has

increasingly faced resistance from religious conservative movements, leading to constitutional debates and social polarization since the early 2000s (Yildirim, 2025). Similarly, France's *laïcité* model, while protecting state neutrality, has sparked controversies over religious expression in public spaces, particularly regarding Islamic headscarves and symbols, raising questions about religious freedom and minority rights (Cesari, 2025; Hennette-Vaucher, 2020; Maris, 2018). Tunisia's post-Arab Spring constitutional struggles further illustrate the difficulty of implementing Western secular models in Muslim-majority contexts, where religious identity remains deeply embedded in social and political life (Li & Wu, 2025; Situmorang, 2025).

In Indonesia, this tension manifests in various forms. Data from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) indicates an increase in religious intolerance incidents from 184 cases in 2014 to 265 cases in 2018, with conflicts often centering on house of worship permits and blasphemy accusations. The role of religious institutions such as Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Muhammadiyah in issuing fatwas and influencing public policy demonstrates the complex interweaving of religious authority with state governance (Hasyim, 2023; Mohiuddin, 2023; Ronaldi et al., 2023). Regional regulations (*Peraturan Daerah Syariah*) implemented in several districts, while constitutionally questionable, reflect ongoing negotiations between Islamic aspirations and Indonesia's pluralistic constitutional framework (Ahmad, 2021; Rofii, 2019). Furthermore, debates surrounding the Jakarta Charter, blasphemy laws (*UU Penodaan Agama*), and the Constitutional Court's rulings on religious freedom cases reveal persistent tensions in defining the appropriate relationship between religion and the state (Raza, 2020).

Empirical studies demonstrate that these tensions are not merely theoretical but have real sociopolitical consequences (Jetten et al., 2021; Thaler, 2017). Bourchier (2019) research on Indonesian Islam reveals how religious tolerance operates through 'godly nationalism' rather than Western-style secularism. Hamzah (2025) analysis of sharia regulations shows that their implementation often results from elite bargaining rather than grassroots religious sentiment, suggesting that institutional frameworks matter significantly in mediating religion-state relations. Survey data from Pew Research Center 2019 indicates that 72% of Indonesian Muslims favor making sharia the official law, while simultaneously 79% believe in religious freedom for minorities, revealing complex and seemingly contradictory attitudes that standard secular models fail to accommodate (Modood & Sealy, 2021). These empirical realities underscore the urgency of developing contextual models that can navigate Indonesia's unique religious-political landscape.

Scholarly discourse on secularism in Muslim-majority contexts has produced various theoretical frameworks (Mirza, 2024; Mohiuddin, 2025). Makariev (2022) seminal work on 'public religions' challenged the secularization thesis, arguing that religion can play legitimate roles in democratic public spheres. Hagevi (2017) concept of the 'secular age' shifted focus from religion's decline to the proliferation of belief options in modern societies. Clements (2023) critically examined secularism as a product of specific Christian-European histories, questioning its universalizability. Drerup (2018)

notion of 'twin tolerations' proposed mutual respect between religious and political authorities as essential for democracy.

In the Indonesian context, several scholars have contributed significantly to understanding religion-state relations (Agusalim, 2025; Buckley, 2020; Zahir, 2023). Barton (2021) and Maksum (2017) analyzed the role of civil Islam and Islamic intellectualism in democratization. Sukron (2021) and Zulfadli (2024) examined Islamic modernism's evolution in Indonesia. However, existing studies predominantly focus either on historical analyses of Indonesian Islamic thought or on comparative assessments of Western secular models, rarely attempting systematic synthesis across different intellectual traditions to construct applicable frameworks for contemporary Indonesia (Abbas, 2021; Adiyono et al., 2024; Al-Shuqairat & Aldajah, 2025).

Critical research gaps remain: First, there is limited cross-contextual comparative analysis that bridges Indonesian Islamic modernist thought with contemporary Western political philosophy and non-Western (specifically Indian) political theory. Second, while Nurcholish Madjid's thought has been extensively studied individually (Abdullah, 2021; Muwaffaq, 2023), systematic comparison with figures like Bhargava, Thiemann, and Taylor remains underdeveloped. Third, existing literature lacks comprehensive implementation frameworks that translate theoretical models into actionable strategies for the Indonesian context, considering the roles of state institutions, educational systems, and civil society organizations (Muhdi, 2019; Rusfiana & Kurniasih, 2024; Singgir et al., 2025; Syafriani & Yuliani, 2025). Fourth, temporal dimensions of transformation—realistic timeframes and phased approaches for implementing alternative secular models—have received insufficient scholarly attention (Komlosy, 2024).

This study addresses these gaps through three primary novelties: First, it provides an unprecedented comparative synthesis of four intellectuals from radically different contexts (Indonesian Islamic modernism, Indian political theory, American Protestant theology, and Canadian political philosophy), revealing convergent principles despite contextual diversity. Second, it formulates an original theoretical model—*Contextual-Inclusive Secularism*—specifically tailored to Indonesia's constitutional framework and sociocultural realities, distinguishing it from both imported Western models and purely Islamic alternatives. Third, it develops a comprehensive, multi-sectoral implementation strategy complete with realistic temporal phasing (15–25 years), moving beyond abstract theorizing to practical policy recommendations involving state reform, educational transformation, interfaith coalition-building, and strategic communication. This methodological and substantive contribution bridges normative political theory with empirical contextual analysis, offering both theoretical depth and practical applicability.

The concept of secularism underwent a significant transformation in the modern era, especially in postcolonial societies that faced the challenge of managing religious diversity within the framework of a democratic state (Ruiz Andrés & Sajir, 2025; Sajir, 2023).¹ The classical model of secularism rooted in the European experience—based on the strict separation of religion and state—proved to be not always relevant in a still highly religious society such as Indonesia (Fauzi & Asy'ari, 2024; Nor & Ibrahim, 2023).²

This paper examines the thoughts of four figures: Nurcholish Madjid (Islamic modernism), Rajeev Bhargava (Indian political theory), Ronald Thiemann (American Protestant theology), and Charles Taylor (Western political philosophy). Despite coming from different backgrounds and approaches, all four reject radical versions of secularism and offer a more contextual, equitable, and accommodating form of religious values in a democratic public space.³

The main question raised is: How can the ideas of the four figures be constructed into a relevant model of secularism to be applied in Indonesia? And what are the implementing strategies that allow this model to be accepted by various stakeholders in Indonesia?

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a comparative and interpretive design to build a conceptual synthesis of various contextual secularism theories based on the thinking of four main figures: Nurcholish Madjid, Rajeev Bhargava, Ronald Thiemann, and Charles Taylor. These figures were selected for their rejection of radical secularism that completely separates religion from the public sphere and their success in offering normative alternatives in their contexts.

The research methodology consisted of five main stages. First, the main works of the four figures were analyzed to explore their definitions of secularism, criticisms of classical models (especially the French and Turkish models), and alternative models they proposed. Key texts included Madjid's *Islam, Modernity and Indonesianness*, Bhargava's *Political Secularism: Why It Is Needed and What Can Be Learnt from Its Indian Version*, Thiemann's *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy*, and Taylor's *A Secular Age*.

Second, the thoughts of the four figures were compared based on definitions and models of secularism, views on the role of religion in the public sphere, socio-political contexts of their thinking, and normative implications for democracy and pluralism. This comparison highlighted conceptual commonalities and methodological differences in addressing religion-state relations.

Third, the analysis situated their ideas in their respective contexts: Madjid in post-New Order reform and inclusive Islam in Indonesia; Bhargava in India's plural and religiously diverse postcolonial secularism; Thiemann on tensions between Protestantism and the liberal public sphere in the United States; and Taylor reflecting critically on the European model amid postmodern secularism and multiculturalism.

Fourth, based on analysis and comparison, the research formulated a hybrid model called *Contextual-Inclusive Secularism*, which combines Bhargava's principles of justice, Madjid's openness, Thiemann's reconciliation, and Taylor's pluralism as a relevant alternative for Indonesia.

Lastly, the model's suitability to Indonesian reality was confirmed through reviews of secondary literature, including studies by Mujiburrahman, Burhanuddin Daya,

and Komaruddin Hidayat, ensuring that the model was both theoretical and practically applicable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis of the Thoughts of Four Figures

Nurcholish Madjid and the Secularization of Contextual Islam

Nurcholish Madjid offers a radical reinterpretation of the concept of secularization. He separates secularization (the process of desacralizing public space from political religious claims) and secularism (anti-religious ideology).¹⁸ In the Indonesian context, secularization is needed to purify religion from the exploitation of power and make religion an autonomous source of ethics, not a political tool. Madjid stated, "Islam yes, the Islamic party no" as a form of criticism of the cult of religious symbols in practical politics.¹⁹

Madjid also prioritized pluralism as a necessity for Indonesian society. For him, religious plurality is not only accepted, but also guaranteed by the principle of monotheism in Islam which entrusts freedom of religion and the ethics of peaceful coexistence.²⁰ Secularization here is not anti-religion, but an attempt to strengthen public ethics from an unpoliticized source of faith.

Rajeev Bhargava and the Principled Distance

Rajeev Bhargava developed the concept of principled distance, which is a dynamic relationship between the state and religion tailored to the context and goals of social justice.²¹ The state can distance itself from a particular religion in cases of discrimination, but it can also move closer to provide protection for minorities or encourage internal religious reform for the basic rights of its citizens.²²

In the context of a very pluralistic India, Bhargava rejected both the Western liberal secularism model and the majority religious dominance model. The Indian version of secularism is not neutral, but actively maintains relational justice among diverse communities.

Ronald Thiemann and Public Theology in Liberal Democracy

Ronald Thiemann saw that American liberal secularism had become too exclusive to religion. He proposed "public theology" as a means of religious participation in democratic moral discourse without dictating state law.²³ For Thiemann, a democratic society requires moral sources from religion, as long as it is conveyed in a rational and inclusive public language.²⁴

Thus, he opposes two extremes: religious fundamentalism and exclusive secularism. Democracy requires freedom of religious expression as well as a legal framework that protects all citizens equally, including those who are not religious.

Charles Taylor and Ethical Pluralism in Secular Regimes

Charles Taylor distinguishes between three models of secularism: eliminative, restrictive, and expressive. He preferred a third model that allowed all citizens, including religious ones, to participate fully in the public sphere.²⁵ In *A Secular Age*, Taylor criticized the assumption that modernity always leads to disenchantment. He shows that secularization actually opens up new possibilities for the search for meaning, including in the religious realm.²⁶

Taylor also emphasized that contemporary secularism must guarantee an ethically plural public sphere in which all worldviews—religious and secular—are valued equally as long as they are not coercive or intolerant.

Cross-Contextual Comparisons and Normative Implications

Although these four figures come from different contexts (Indonesian, Indian, American, European), there are a number of fundamental similarities in their views:

1. Rejection of eliminative secularism or the model of absolute separation of religion and state.
2. Recognition of religious values as a source of morality in a democratic society.
3. The importance of a flexible and fair contextual approach to the relationship between religion and the state.
4. Commitment to pluralism and equality of citizens without religious discrimination.

Differences arise in the specific dimensions of implementation and context. Madjid focuses more on the process of desacralizing religious political symbols in Muslim countries, Bhargava on the protection of minorities in plural countries, Thiemann on the revitalization of religious contributions in secular public spaces, and Taylor on the establishment of ethical public spaces in postmodern societies.

Thus, the synthesis of these four thinkers paves the way to a more inclusive, equitable, and contextual model of secularism—especially relevant for countries like Indonesia.

Contextual-Inclusive Secularism: A Synthesis

Referring to the framework of the previous four figures, this paper formulates the model of "Contextual-Inclusive Secularism" as an alternative approach for Indonesia. This model does not follow a radical secularism that demands a total separation between religion and state, but rather rearranges the relationship between the two based on the values of justice, pluralism, and religious freedom in the context of a pluralistic religious society.

Contextual Elements

This model is contextual because it considers the historical, cultural, and sociological realities of Indonesia. The state cannot be neutral in the abstract, but must actively uphold the principle of interreligious justice, acknowledge the fact of the Muslim majority while guaranteeing the rights of minorities. This is in line with Bhargava's idea of "principled distance", in which the state maintains a selective—not symmetrical—distance for the sake of relational justice.²⁷

On the other hand, as Madjid points out, there needs to be secularization in a positive sense: the desacralization of power, not the release of religious values. Religion should not be an instrument of power, but a source of transcendent ethics that guides citizens in public life.²⁸

Inclusive Elements

This model is also inclusive because it encourages the equitable participation of all religious groups—and even non-religious—in public spaces. Referring to Thiemann and Taylor, a democratic state must provide an arena for discourse that accommodates religious narratives as a source of moral contribution as long as they are delivered within a deliberative framework and are not self-imposing.²⁹

Taylor emphasized the importance of an "ethically plural public sphere", i.e. a public space that is open to all worldviews, provided that no one ideology dominates coercively.³⁰ In the Indonesian context, this means building a multicultural public space that does not oppress religious or secular expression.

Main components of the model

This model of Contextual-Inclusive Secularism includes:

- a) Recognition of the plurality of values and beliefs in the public space, not the imposition of a single narrative.
- b) Interreligious relational justice, not abstract neutrality.
- c) A functional separation of religion and state, not an existential separation.
- d) Ethical participation of religion in the public sphere, not the dominance of religious law.
- e) Protection of religious minorities, as a measure of democratic civility.

Relevance for Indonesia

Indonesia has a constitutional and cultural framework that allows this model to be applied. Pancasila is not radical secularism, but a form of political civility that recognizes the role of religion in the framework of pluralism and democracy.³¹ This model is in line with the spirit of Pancasila and can be a bridge between Islam, other religions, and the modern state.

However, this transformation requires time, cross-sectoral work, and a strategic approach. Therefore, the next section will outline the strategy for implementing this model in the context of contemporary Indonesia.

Implementation Strategy in Indonesia

Implementing the Contextual-Inclusive Secularism model in Indonesia cannot be done instantly. It requires a long-term approach, a cross-sectoral strategy, and a process of recontextualizing national and religious narratives. This strategy is divided into four main areas: state politics, education, civil society, and religious discourse.

1. Reform of the State Narrative

The first step is to reformulate Indonesia's national narrative to explicitly reject secular and theocratic extremism. Pancasila needs to be reaffirmed as the basis of the state

that guarantees religious freedom and the ethical involvement of religion in the public sphere, not as a tool of domination of one religion.³²

The state must actively bridge interreligious relations based on the principle of relational justice. Bhargava suggested that the state use a "principled distance" to adjust its interventions to religion—engaging if there is injustice, keeping a distance if neutrality is fairer.³³

2. *Education Curriculum Reform*

Education is a strategic arena to form democratic, pluralist, and tolerant citizens. The religious curriculum needs to emphasize the ethical-universal dimension of religion and reduce exclusive dogmatism. The hermeneutic approach and thought of figures such as Madjid, Nasaruddin Umar, and Quraish Shihab can be used as a reference.³⁴

In addition, civic education must introduce contextual secularism models so that the younger generation does not get trapped in the false dichotomy between the "secular state" and the "religious state". Taylor reminds that democratic public spaces require mutual recognition between identity groups.³⁵

3. *Interfaith and Cross-Disciplinary Coalition*

Civil society movements must encourage the formation of interfaith and cross-scientific coalitions that advocate for ethical and plural public spaces. Scholars, religious leaders, intellectuals, human rights activists, and academics must build a collective awareness of the importance of a plural democracy that makes room for all expressions of faith—without domination.³⁶

Thiemann suggests that religious communities should be reflective and not see secularism as an enemy, but rather as a framework that protects their own religious freedom.³⁷ This approach is relevant in the context of Indonesia, which is experiencing a rise in religious conservatism.

4. *Public Communication Strategy*

It is necessary to develop a public communication strategy that emphasizes that contextual secularism does not mean removing religion from the public sphere, but regulating its role so that it does not become a source of conflict and discrimination. This narrative must be conveyed in religious and nationalist language, not mere academic jargon.

Influential figures—whether from scholars, academics, artists, and politicians—need to be involved as agents of change. This is where the importance of a cultural-popular approach to grounding philosophical ideas to the practical and emotional level is important.³⁸

Estimated Time

The implementation of Contextual-Inclusive Secularism in Indonesia is a long-term project that requires structural, cultural, and discursive changes. Based on an analysis of similar socio-political reforms in different countries and the dynamics of Indonesian society, the realistic estimate of time for the implementation of this model ranges from 15 to 25 years, divided into three main phases:

Phase I (1–5 Years): Consolidation of Discourse and Intellectual Advocacy

At this stage, the focus is directed on the formation of an intellectual and normative basis of a contextual secularism model. Universities, think-tanks, and progressive religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama can be catalysts.³⁹

The production of academic works, public forums, and interfaith dialogue need to be encouraged to overcome the resistance caused by disinformation around secularism. As in India, resistance to the term "secularism" often stems from the trauma of colonial history and the narrative of majoritarianism that marginalizes religion.⁴⁰

Phase II (6–15 Years): Structural Reform and Education

This stage involves reforming the national education curriculum, teacher training, and restructuring of state institutions related to religion (such as the Ministry of Religion and the Pancasila Ideology Development Agency).⁴¹

It is also important to start building a coalition of conscience, which is a cross-religious and ethnic coalition that fights for social justice based on common public ethics. Here, Charles Taylor's idea of the ethics of recognition becomes relevant: a democratic society requires equal recognition of the identity of all its citizens.⁴²

Phase III (16–25 Years): Consolidation of Plural Democracy and Inclusive Law

This phase includes legal changes, the consolidation of plural citizenship norms, and the habituation of religious participation within an ethical-secular framework. At this stage, too, there needs to be a reconstruction of the narrative of religious nationalism that is not exclusive and non-sectarian.

Positive cases such as South Africa's successful reconciliation of religious identity with modern constitutionalism through a transcendental approach to secularism provide an important lesson that the transformation of this model requires long-term political will and moral imagination.⁴³

CONCLUSION

This research explored the application of contextual-inclusive secularism in Indonesia by comparing the ideas of Nurcholish Madjid, Rajeev Bhargava, Ronald Thiemann, and Charles Taylor, all of whom rejected strict separation of religion and state while advocating for religious values to contribute to democracy without enabling religious domination. The resulting model emphasizes being non-hostile to religion, upholding justice and equality, allowing religious participation within shared public ethics, and adapting to historical and social contexts. This *Contextual-Inclusive Secularism* aims to balance state autonomy with proportional respect for religion, fitting Indonesia's religious traditions and constitutional protections. Future research could examine practical strategies to foster cooperation among political, social, and religious actors, ensuring a patient, dialogical transformation toward this model's implementation.

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