

Intellectual Discourse

Volume 31

Number 2

2023



International Islamic University Malaysia
<https://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/id>

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Intellectual Discourse is a highly respected, academic refereed journal of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). It is published twice a year by the IIUM Press, IIUM, and contains reflections, articles, research notes and review articles representing the disciplines, methods and viewpoints of the Muslim world.

Intellectual Discourse is abstracted in *SCOPUS*, *ProQuest*, *International Political Science Abstracts*, *Peace Research Abstracts Journal*, *Muslim World Book Review*, *Bibliography of Asian Studies*, *Index Islamicus*, *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, *ATLA Religion Database*, *MyCite*, *ISC* and *EBSCO*.

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print); ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

<https://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/id>

Email: intdiscourse@iium.edu.my; intdiscourse@yahoo.com

Published by:

IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia
P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Phone (+603) 6196-5014, Fax: (+603) 6196-6298
Website: <http://iiumpress.iium.edu.my/bookshop>

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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		أَ، آَ، إِيَّ	an
أُ	u		أُوَّ	un
إِ	i		إِيَّ	in
آَ، آِ، إِيَّ،	ā		أُوَّ	aw
أُوَّ	ū		إِيَّ	ay
إِيَّ	ī		أُوَّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			إِيَّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

The Philosophical Sufism of Harun Nasution: A Phenomenological-Historical Investigation of The Influence of Neo-Mu'tazilism

Ahmad Farouk Musa*
Piet Hizbullah Khaidir**

Abstract: Sufism is the mystical form of Islam that emphasises spirituality which is commonly seen as irrational. Conversely, rationalism (mu'tazilism) stresses the rational dimension of Islam. Is philosophical or rational sufism then an oxymoron? Surprisingly, Harun Nasution manages to reconcile the two seemingly opposite dimensions in Indonesian Muslims' way of thinking and weltanschauung. Genealogically, his thought emerged in four stages: firstly, his religious upbringing during childhood; secondly, the impact of Muhammad Abduh's rationalism on his progressive thought which challenged the Ash'arite school of theology in Indonesia; thirdly, his sufistic spiritual practices (*riyāḍah*) as he engaged in *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) and embraced a simple lifestyle; and finally, the influence of his much-criticised rational approach similar to the Mu'tazilites on Indonesian Islamic thought. This study uses the historical-phenomenological theory to investigate the influence of neo-Mu'tazilism on Nasution's thought and its impact on the struggle for Islamic reformation.

Keywords: Harun Nasution, sufism, rationalism, Islamic thought in Indonesia, neo-Mu'tazilism

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Abstrak: Sufisme merupakan suatu bentuk mistik dalam Islam yang menekankan perihal kerohanian, di mana ia secara lazimnya dilihat sebagai tidak rasional. Sebaliknya, rasionalisme (aliran mu'tazilah) pula memberi penekanan terhadap dimensi Islam yang rasional. Maka, adakah sufisme rasional atau filsafat sebuah percanggahan? Anehnya, Harun Nasution berjaya mendamaikan dua dimensi yang tampak bertentangan tersebut dengan cara fikir dan sarwa pandang umat Islam Indonesia. Secara genealoginya, pemikiran beliau terbangun dalam empat peringkat: pertama, didikan agamanya semasa kecil; kedua, kesan rasionalisme Muhammad Abduh terhadap pemikiran progresifnya yang mencabar mazhab teologi Asy'ariah di Indonesia; ketiga, amalan kerohanian sufistiknya (*riyāḍah*) yang mana dia terlibat dalam zikir dan mengamalkan gaya hidup sederhana; dan akhirnya, pengaruh pendekatan rasionalnya yang banyak dikritik kerana mirip dengan Mu'tazilah terhadap pemikiran Islam Indonesia. Kajian ini menggunakan teori sejarah-fenomenologi untuk menyelidik pengaruh neo-Mu'tazilisme terhadap pemikiran Nasution dan impaknya ke atas perjuangan ke arah reformasi Islam.

Kata kunci: Harun Nasution, sufisme, rasionalisme, pemikiran Islam di Indonesia, neo-Mu'tazilisme

Introduction

Harun Nasution was a well-known presence in the Sufi circle in Indonesia. Donned in his white clothes and thick glasses, he was an unmistakable sight every Friday right before the congregational Jumu'ah prayer at the Fathullah Mosque of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta. Huddled in the left corner of the first row of attendees, Nasution could be seen completely dissolved in *dhikr* or solemnity of remembrance of Allah.¹ Since *dhikr* is the embodiment of Sufi practice, Nasution's embrace of sufism certainly raises eyebrows given that his Islamic thought is widely known to be aligned with the *Mu'tazilite* camp.

Mu'tazilism was a theological movement that appeared in early Islamic history and flourished in Basra and Baghdad (8–10th century). Mu'tazila school developed an Islamic type of rationalism based around

¹ Testimony of Piet Hizbullah Khaidir, one of the authors of this article, who attended several Friday prayers at the Fathullah Mosque when he was a student at the Faculty of Usuluddin, IAIN Jakarta, in the 1990s.

five fundamental principles (*Al-Usul Al-Khamsa*): (1) *At-Tawhid* – Divine Unity, (2) *Al-'Adl* – Divine Justice, (3) *Al-Wa'd wal-Wa'id* – the promise and the warning, (4) *Al-Manzilah bayna al-Manzilatain* – the intermediate position, and (5) *Al-'Amru bil-ma'ruf wa an-Nahyu 'an-al-Munkar* – advocating the good and forbidding the evil. Mu'tazilites are best known for rejecting the doctrine of the Qur'an as uncreated and co-eternal with God. In defending the doctrine of *at-Tawhid*, the Oneness of God, they claim that the Qur'an must be created and cannot co-exist with God, which would make it a duality. (Cf. Christians with the Doctrine of Trinity). They asserted that if the Qur'an is the literal word of God, then logically, *God must have preceded his own speech*. This went against the orthodox Sunni position followed by the Ash'ari, Maturidi, and the Traditionalist (Athari) schools, which argued that with God being all-knowing, His knowledge of the Qur'an must have been eternal, hence uncreated just like Him. Furthermore, adherents to the notion that the *Qur'an is created* believed that the Qur'an, and by extension the Sharia, was created for a certain time and place only—in this case only during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad. This ultimately meant that the Sharia could potentially change in time and place, especially if a certain law is not in line with *'aql* (reason). The Mu'tazila school worked to resolve the theological problem of evil, arguing that since God is just and wise, He cannot command what is contrary to reason or act with disregard for the welfare of His creatures; consequently, evil must be regarded as something that stems from errors in human acts, arising from man's divinely bestowed *freewill*. Mu'tazilites opposed secular rationalism, but believed that human intelligence and reason allowed man to understand religious principles; that good and evil are rational categories that could be established through unaided reason.

In essence, Nasution's rational orientation has positioned himself as the icon of neo-Mu'tazilism in Indonesia. How then could a rational Islamic thinker have such a strong sufistic tendency? Is it possible to reconcile what is allegedly two diametrically opposed positions? This paper attempts to answer these questions.

Research Methodology

To examine the dynamics of rationalism and sufism in Nasution's thought, this article adopts a phenomenological-historical approach

which emphasises subject analysis. It posits that the subject is fully conscious and aware of motives, vocabulary choices and diction in exploring ideas (Hasbiansyah, 2008). To start with, a definition of phenomenology is warranted:

It is the motive of questioning back to the last source of achievement of knowledge, of reflection in which the knower reflects on himself and his knowing life. In which all the scientific constructs which have validity for him occur teleologically and as permanent acquisitions are kept become freely available to him. (Lyons, 1985, p. 634)

In Husserl's phenomenological insight, the subject has the authority and autonomy to constantly assess his own knowledge (1965, pp. 71-192). The motives of Nasution's Islamic thought can be traced to his meticulous choice of diction and themes in his scholarly works. The term historical in this study refers to the temporal context in which the subject's thought emerged. More concretely, it situates Nasution's thought in the constellation of Islamic renewal thought in Indonesia as well as its influence on Indonesian Islamic academic circles.

The early development of Harun Nasution's thought

Nasution grew up in a devout religious environment. His family was the religious elite or aristocrat of his neighbourhood. His father 'Abd Jabbar, besides being a trader from Mandailing, was also a chieftain (*qāḍi*) in Simalungun Regency, the Siantar challenger during the Dutch East Indies government. His mother Maimunah was the daughter of a descendant of a Meccan alumnus scholar. Thanks to his easy access to original Islamic literature and books written in *pegon* Arabic-Malay script, he could attain a good level of religious literacy (Mujani, 1994, p. 72).

In Nasution's family, it was a tradition to educate the children in religion strictly, diligently, and with discipline. But for the young Nasution, the religious knowledge imparted by his parents was not the *best practice* of religious education. Dissatisfied with the predominantly traditional religious pedagogy, he embarked on a search for a better method that was more in touch with modern realities. So huge was Nasution's curiosity and thirst for knowledge that he did not shy away from questions that were unorthodox if not taboo in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) such as the permissibility of a Muslim to keep a dog,

to touch the Qur'anic *mushaf* without ablution, or to perform prayer without reciting the intention (*niyyāt*) (Thahir, 2003, p. 26).

Was it not for his parents' insistence, Nasution could have turned out to be a historian or a scientist. After studying at *Hollandsch-Inlandsche School* (HIS), he developed more interest in history and the natural sciences instead of Islamic studies. The reason is not because of a loss of interest in religion, but rather because of the approach to teaching religious sciences in his immediate environment which he felt was regressive. Only after studying at *Moderne Islamietische Kweekschool* (MIK), a modern Islamic high school located in Bukit Tinggi, West Sumatra, did he feel motivated to deepen his knowledge of Islam. Unfortunately, that private school soon ran into financial difficulties, and the young Nasution thought of moving to Solo to continue his education (Mujani, 1994).

Nasution's initial plan to study at a Muhammadiyah school in Solo was not approved by his parents who wanted him to pursue religious studies in Saudi Arabia. Even though only a handful of Indonesian Muslims could dream of studying in Makkah, Nasution had a predilection for Egypt instead; the learning environment in Cairo, he felt, was more conducive to his unorthodox temperament. However, after his parents adamantly opposed this idea, a defiant Nasution left them with two choices: either they allow him to study in Egypt, or he will take up a job as a local taxi driver. Nasution eventually moved to Egypt where he could immerse himself in the thoughts of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Thereafter, after a career in the diplomatic world, Nasution went to McGill University in Canada to further his studies. At McGill, in his search for religious truth, he explored the significance of the faculty of reason in Muhammad Abduh's thought. To him, Abduh was a prominent Islamic reformer who agreed with the Mu'tazilite doctrine and was even more radical than the Mu'tazilites themselves. Nasution's PhD dissertation titled *The Place of Reason in Abduh's Theology: Its Impact on His Theological System and Views* attests to this (Ali, 2019).

Nasution's dissertation became the initial milestone of his rationalist line of thought. He affirmed that Abduh's thought was even more progressive than the Mu'tazilites in correcting the theology of the Ash'arites, the predominant school of theology in the Malay world

that believes in the uncreated Qur'an and predetermination. But it must be stressed here that Nasution's rationalism did not compromise his obedience and submission in worship to Allah. In the end, he was able to reconcile the rationalism of a very progressive religious thought with a strong practice of sufism. In a way, Nasution's thinking is similar to Ahmad Amin—another Egyptian rationalist thinker and student of Abduh—who always used a rational approach in understanding the Qur'an and the *sunna* (traditions of the Prophet) (Peta, 2022).

Islamic Rationality and the Rational Thought of Harun Nasution

Nasution believed that the dominance of fatalism, especially in Ash'arite theology—the predominant position of the Malay Muslims of the *Nusantara*—hampered Islamic rationality to such an extent that Muslims are unfazed by change, engage awkwardly with modernity, and lack the ability to develop science and technology. Historically, during the Abbasid period, the Islamic civilisation could progress thanks to the rapid development of science in various fields. This was enabled theologically by the acceptance of the primacy of reason. The state theology at that time was the Mu'tazilite, a school of *kalām* that favoured reason in understanding Islam. As a result, Islam became a beacon of world civilisation for advancing in science and technology (Watt, 1985, pp. 33-55). This explains Nasution's emphasis on the importance of embracing a theology that favours rationality. His dissertation upholds the urgency for Muslims to adopt rationality in their lives in order to achieve progress (Nasution, 1987).

Nasution contends that Abduh's theology went beyond the theology of the Mu'tazilites with its focus on human autonomy and the use of reason. Abduh, according to him, transcended the Mu'tazilites by discussing the ability of reason in making social *laws* that can be obeyed by the public. Therefore, for him—like Muhammad Abduh—the rational theology as developed by Mu'tazilites serves not merely as an intellectual exercise and academic discourse, but as a theological basis for Islamic reform and modernism (Mujani, 1994, p. 101).

This confirms Nasution's position as a reformer with a rational ethos, a commitment to scientific pursuit, and the courage to question what is traditionally established in religion. He firmly believed that the advancement of Islam is premised on its belief in science and religion as a tool for the modernisation of the Muslim community in Indonesia.

It is therefore no wonder that when offered the mandate to become the head of *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* (IAIN, State Institute for Islamic Studies), he accepted it and earnestly embarked on a process of curriculum change together with institutional and thought reforms. His goal was to turn IAIN into a model Islamic educational institution—the beacon of modern Islamic thought and progress that could be felt reverberating within the archipelago (Ali, 2019, pp. 6-7).

In this regard, Nasution's rational thought is distinctive in at least three aspects, namely: (1) his emphasis on rational theology of the Mu'tazilites and Muhammad Abduh, borrowing the latter's views on absolute and relative terminology, (2) his efforts to develop a broader understanding of Islam including but not limited to the Qur'an and Hadith, and (3) his understanding of the inextricable relationship between reason and revelation.

Nasution contends that the rational theology of the Mu'tazilites brought progress. When the Ash'arites marginalised the Mu'tazilites, Muslims were in decline due to the neglect of science and technology. He believed that Islam is a rational religion created by Allah without any contradiction. As with his emphasis on the rational Mu'tazilite theology, his views on rational Islam were heavily influenced by Abduh (Ali, 2019, pp. 6-7).

After an in-depth study of Abduh's work in *Risālat al- Tawhīd*, Nasution concluded that Abduh's theology is in fact more radical than the Mu'tazilites. In *Risālat al- Tawhīd* (1898), 'Abduh notes in its opening words that *tawhid* refers to "the belief that God is One and has no associates (*lā sharīka lahu*)". This is the fundamental pillar of Islam, the one that every Muslim acknowledges through the *shahādah*, the profession of faith: *la ilāha illa Allah*, "there is no god but God." In fact, since God's oneness and self-sufficiency does not allow for intermediation between the Divine and the human, *tawhīd* becomes the basis for invoking an egalitarian political ethos: everyone is equal before God, and subject only to His will as expressed in His revealed law—any social hierarchy based on class, race, or nationality is illegitimate.

It was an idea that could bring about a backlash from the relatively conservative Indonesian religious landscape. Nasution therefore thought it was wise to delay publishing a translation of his dissertation in Indonesian language until he had a more receptive audience (Mujani,

1994, p. 100). In fact, Nasution does not regard rationalism and sufism as mutually exclusive. He defines sufism as the moral qualities emanating from a rational understanding of revelation, a claim that he defends in his books *Reason and Revelation in Islam* (Nasution, 1982) and *Philosophy and Mysticism in Islam* (Nasution, 1973).

Nasution's rational philosophy was influenced by Abduh, especially with regard to the *muhkamāt* (absolute) and the *mutaghayyirāt* (relative or changing). Abduh neatly divided the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith into two areas: firstly, areas of worship which are unambiguous and immutable (*muhkamāt*); and secondly, areas of social relations that are sometimes ambiguous and mentioned in general terminology whose specific understanding, interpretation and application can be adapted to the time and place (*mutaghayyirāt*).

The absolute (*muhkamāt*) contains monotheism and other fundamental teachings, while the relative (*mutaghayyirāt*) is understood through historical interpretation and application related to economic, political and governmental issues. Thus, the caliphate system of government is considered relative while leadership based on justice is absolute. A good example of this principle is Caliph Umar's decision to stop giving money to converts because he saw no more reason to do so when Muslims had already achieved a reasonable level of prosperity (Ali, 2019). Umar's rational decision is drawn from his understanding of the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* which affirms the use of reason.²

As a riposte to his critics who claim that his rational thinking was influenced by Orientalism, Nasution retorts that they understand neither him nor his thinking (Mujani, 1994, p. 115). He affirmed that his rational theology is influenced by Muhammad Abduh and the Mu'tazilites. Moreover, he reminded his critics that since Islam itself mandates intellectual curiosity, Muslims have a rich legacy of rational thinking—which is not the prerogative of the West—from classical Islamic scholars.

For Nasution, the overarching role of rationality in Islam is not restricted to *fiqh* (jurisprudence), worship, *tafsīr* (hermeneutics) and

² Based on the story told by Faris Pari to the second author (interview, February 25, 2020) in the Postgraduate classroom of UIN Jakarta (S2 and S3).

ḥadīth (transmitted reports attributed to what the Prophet said and did). Rather, it extends to history, civilisation and culture, economics and politics. Therefore, rationality is needed to transform these aspects of Islamic teachings into the theoretical and practical realms. Especially with regard to *fiqh*, he warns that an overreliance on *fiqh* will trap Muslims into futile debates that revolve around traditionalist and textual ways of thinking.

Nasution's views regarding the *text* of the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* are similar to Muhammad Imārah (1931-2020), an Egyptian Islamic thinker. They both believe that insofar as it is properly interpreted through the faculty of reason, the text is never contradictory or incoherent with respect to the Islamic ethos. Hence, contrary to the Orientalist argument, there is no need to cherry-pick and only accept verses that satisfy our whims and fancies. If there is seemingly any discrepancy between the text and *maṣlaḥah* or common good, then *maṣlaḥah* must be prioritised (Imarah, 2020, pp. vii-x).

However, in the West, Harun Nasution is more often likened to Abdulkarim Soroush, a radical Iranian thinker who calls for an Islamic reformed theology. Soroush meticulously examined the historical and human nature of religion, religious experience, revelation, the role and place of the Prophet in the prophetic mission, the position of scripture and how these are all interrelated. He then concludes that a viable and meaningful Islamic reform in modern times cannot simply mean posing new questions to an outdated frame of references and working out their solutions by using outdated concepts. Hence, Soroush stresses the need to create new concepts and frames of reference of which rationality is the most important component (Soroush, 2000, pp. xi-xix) (Sadic, 2022).

According to Nasution, only the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* in the category of *mutawātir* (sound hadith with successive narration) can be used as the basis for Islamic creed. While some discern a certain Orientalist influence in this radical view, the Indonesian thinker is simply cautioning against the use of controversial *ḥadīth* when issuing religious edicts. In fact, the history of *ḥadīth* codification itself shows that hadith was not written in the early days of the *sahābah* (companions of the Prophet) because it was feared that it might get mixed with the Qur'an (Jamal, 2020).

Nasution clarifies his stand on rationalism in the concluding chapter of his book *Akal dan Wahyu (Reason and Revelation)*:

In this regard, it is necessary to emphasise that the use of the words rational, rationalism and rationality in Islam must be detached from the true meaning of the word, that is, to merely using reason and to disregard revelation, or to make reason higher than revelation, so that revelation can be nullified by reason. In Islamic thought, some have been seen in the description given above, both in the field of philosophy and the science of kalam, what more in the field of *fiqh*, reason never cancels revelation. The intellect remains subject to the text of revelation. The text of revelation is still considered absolutely true. The intellect is used only to understand the text of revelation and not to oppose revelation. The intellect only gives interpretation to the text of revelation according to the tendency and ability of the interpreter (Nasution, 1982, p. 101).

The above excerpt confirms that Nasution does not subscribe to an unbridled rationalism. Being itself created by God, rationalism cannot be above *kalam Allah* or revelation. Thus, contrary to the Western enlightenment project, Nasution's aim is to modernise Islam through rationalism without secularism, that is, through a rational interpretation of revelation.

Harun Nasution's Sufism

Does the rationality of Nasution's Islamic thought prevent him from practicing sufism? When we examine the book *Philosophy and Mysticism in Islam*, sufi practices (also known as *sulūk*)³ promoted by him is a form of philosophical sufism. Sufi teachings emphasise the knowledge and spiritual application of concepts such as *maḥabbah* (love), *ma'rifah* (interior knowledge or mystical knowledge of God), *fana'* (the complete denial of self and the realisation of God), and *baqā'* (subsistence or permanency which describes a particular state of life

³ *Suluk* In sufism is basically translated as traversing a path. While a *murīd* (Arabic مُريد one who seeks') is a novice committed to spiritual enlightenment by *sulūk* under a spiritual guide, who may take the title *murshid* or *shaykh*. A *sālik* or Sufi follower only becomes a *murīd* when he makes a pledge (*bay'ah*) to a *murshid*.

with God) (Nasution, 1973). They also underscore the importance of *ittihād* (mystical union with God), *ḥulūl* (relation between a body and its place, an accident and its substance), and *waḥdat al-wujūd*.⁴ In sufi virtue, a sufi is a person who is pure of heart, views humans equally, loves Allah through *ḥusnu ḏān* (positive thinking in Islam towards man and also towards Allah). In his book on *Philosophy and Mysticism in Islam*, Nasution condemns Sunni sufism and the *tariqa* system.⁵ He castigated their followers for their aversion to Islamic rationality, and even accused them of closing the door of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) (Nasution, 1973, pp. 70-95). To our understanding, his idea of sufism is more akin to that of the Muhammadiyah's—one of Indonesia's leading socioreligious organisation — “*sufism without tariqa*.”

What are we to make then of Nasution's sufi habits such as always doing *dhikr*, going to the mosque early every Friday, and living a moderate lifestyle? His modesty in living the life of al-Qur'an opens up two possibilities of interpretation. On the one hand, a rational Muslim is not necessarily against sufi practices such as *dhikr*. Indeed, Islamic rationality is intertwined with the worship of Allah. On the other hand, Muslim rationalists are people who are not heretical and far from Allah. They are very different from Western rationalists who, as mentioned by Max Horkheimer, are stuck in instrumental rationality and are confined to technological fetishism (Braun, 2017, pp. 183-190).

A careful reading of *Philosophy and Mysticism in Islam* indicates that Nasution has a strong moral argument to justify the practice of sufism. In his study of Nasution, Saude in his interview with one of Nasution's students named Darun Setiady (d. 2015), a lecturer at Faculty of Theology at *Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Jati*, found that the foundation of mysticism in Nasution's thought was always accompanied by moral and intellectual insights and practices (Saude,

⁴ *Waḥdat al-wujūd* literally means “the Unity of Existence” or “the Unity of Being.” *Wujūd*, meaning “existence” or “presence”, here refers to God. On the other hand, *waḥdat ash-shuhūd*, meaning “Apparentism” or “Monotheism of Witness”, holds that God and his creation are entirely separate. The concept of the relationship between God and the universe is still actively debated both among sufis and between sufis and non-sufi Muslims.

⁵ A *tariqa* (or *tariqah*; Arabic: طريقة *ṭarīqah*) is a school or order of sufism or specifically a concept for the mystical teaching and spiritual practices of such an order with the aim of seeking *ḥaqīqa* which translates as “ultimate truth”.

2011). This shows that he had a strong commitment to spiritual perfection. Saude asserted that Nasution was one of the few intellectuals—not only among Muslims, but also among Indonesian intellectuals in general—who often talks about moral obligation in everyday life.

Criticisms and Appreciations of Nasution's Thought

Mukti Ali was a scholar who appreciated the thought of Harun Nasution, while HM Rasyidi was his main critic. According to Mukti Ali, Nasution's rationalism paved the way to the progress of Islam in Indonesia. On the contrary, HM Rasyidi felt that Nasution's rationalism—which stresses the primacy of the Qur'an—had a pernicious effect with respect to his position on the *hadith*. While subscribing to the absoluteness of *hadith* as the second source of Islam, he was concerned that by following Nasution's thinking, *hadith* might be discarded as unimportant. He added that the *umma* would view the *sunna* as less sacred if *hadith* is considered just a supplementary source. Similarly, in the realm of sufism, HM Rasyidi criticised Nasution's genealogical perspective of Islamic sufism. In HM Rashid's view, the teachings of sufism do not derive from Islam. While Nasution's believes that sufism is an important aspect of Islamic teachings with strong sources in the Qur'an and *hadith*, HM Rasyidi rejects the concept of *ittihad* because it degrades the *Khāliq* or God as equal to a servant while, on the contrary, Nasution views *ittihad* as an important dignifying position of a servant who is close to God (Syakur, 2018, p. 343).

Regarding his views on sufism, Nasution explains:

However, the understanding that God and man, which is based on the basic teachings of mysticism, is found in the Qur'an and *hadith*. So regardless of whether or not there may be outside influences, the verses of the Qur'an can lead to the emergence of sufism in Islam, when you mean sufism are teachings about being as close to God as possible (Nasution, 1985, p. 47).

As described by Muhammad Imārah, Islamic public discourse is now dominated by two strands: admirers of the West and slaves of the Text (Imarah, 2020, pp. 5-7). Admirers of the West are radically rational and not dismissive of everything from the West. On the contrary, slaves of the Text are uncritical and dismissive of reason in understanding the text. Harun Nasution does not fit into any of these two categories.

According to M. Amin Abdullah, religious studies and discourses are split along the lines of normativity and historicity (Abdullah, 1996, pp. 318-319). It should be such that Islam should be understood as a historical reality, which is what Nasution proposes with his project of rationalisation of Islam or rational Islam. Therefore, Islam needs to use a broader and integrative approach incorporating philosophy, anthropology, sociology and so on, instead of an *an sich's* (by itself) religious textual approach.

As we explained in the previous section, opposition to rational Islamic thought or philosophical Islam, in the language of Amin Abdullah, takes the form of thought that has crystallised and fossilised into orthodoxy. This can be traced to two poles of thought: Ghazalian⁶ and Taymiyahan⁷. According to Amin Abdullah, although both al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah use philosophy to attack philosophy, it still shows the authenticity of their thoughts: they are both textual. Al-Ghazali *takes for granted* the *hadith* without wanting to consider the degree of validity, while Ibn Taymiyyah was too literal in his view of the *hadith*, such that anything that deviates from *hadith* was branded as heresy (Nasution, 1969, pp. 263-267).

How do we then answer the challenges of modernity? This concern has preoccupied Muslim intellectuals such as Muhammad Imārah, Abdul Karim Souroush and Harun Nasution himself; their aim was to present a virile Islam which is able to address contemporary problems.

⁶ Ghazalian refer broadly to the followers of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1055 -1011) who contributed significantly to the development of a systematic view of sufism and its integration and acceptance in mainstream Islam. He belonged to the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence and to the Ash'arite school of theology. He is viewed as the key member of the influential Ash'arite school and the most important refuter of the Mu'tazilites. Thanks to his unparalleled mastery of *falsafa* and Islamic Law, al-Ghazali injected a certain repugnance among Muslims for science that ultimately led to its decline.

⁷ Taymiyahan refers to the followers of the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah (January 22, 1263 – September 26, 1328). Ibn Taymiyyah was a controversial Sunni Muslim 'alim, *muhaddith*, judge, traditionalist theologian, ascetic, and iconoclastic theorist. A polarising figure in his own times and in the centuries that followed, Ibn Taymiyyah has emerged as one of the most influential medieval writers in late modern Sunni Islam.

Nasution's rational Islamic project has become the entry point to the renewal of Islamic religious thought and modernism in Indonesia through institutions such as IAIN.

Islamic Reformism via Neo-Mu'tazilism

Indeed, the main challenge confronting us today is the same one the past reformists faced: intellectual stagnation. As a result of the decline in rationalism among modern Muslims, we witness the decay of the Islamic world today after being a great civilisation at a time when the West was still in the dark ages. We produced thousands of scientists, physicists, mathematicians, chemists, astrologists and physicians, and excelled in many disciplines established at the House of Wisdom (*Baitul Hikmah*) in the Mu'tazilite era. Sadly, those achievements are now fondly remembered only as distant history.

The Mu'tazilites consider *tawhid*—alongside divine justice (*'adl*)—at the core of their theological reflection, defining themselves as *ahl al-'adl wa al-tawhīd* or “the people of justice and unity.” They believed that one of the principal traits of God is justice, which is embodied in their *uṣūl al-khamsah* (five principles) or one of the five principles of their doctrine as explained earlier. Being *Just*, God gave man *freewill* in the form of reason that he could use to differentiate between right and wrong, and to strive to uphold justice.

For the Mu'tazilites, a *Just* God will not respond to good and bad human deeds arbitrarily. Man will receive God's response be it the blessings of heaven or the torture of hellfire as a result of the choices he made based on his own *freewill*. Thus, as the maker of his own actions, man is responsible for whatever response God gives him. This position conflicts with what has been extracted from works of the Ash'arites. For them, God is the most Compelling; He may cast someone who is pious and just into the hellfire and place someone who is cruel and evil into heaven. That, the Ash'arites explain, is the reality behind the power of God who is the most Compelling and the most Powerful.

Conversely, according to the Mu'tazilites, God is *Just* and cannot be an irrational dictator. This theological dispute has been carried to the present day after being passed on from generation to generation. From this perspective, we can appreciate the struggle of Muslim reformists such as Harun Nasution. In fact, this problem was first realised by

Muhammad Abduh in the late 18th and early 19th centuries when he assessed that the *umma* has declined with its thoughts fossilised. According to Abduh, this decline was caused by the abandonment of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) in favour of *taqlīd* (the blind imitation of past scholars). Similar to Nasution in the 20th century, the revival of rational reasoning was Abduh's lifelong goal. In fact, it would not be far-fetched to characterise the emergence of Nasution as a resurgence of neo-Mu'tazilism.

Indeed, Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) had the most profound impact on Nasution's thought. As the latter wrote in his 1968 PhD dissertation on rationalism in the theology of the Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh, Abduh promotes “a Mu'tazili theological system with almost identical theological doctrines” (Nasution, 1969, pp. 263-267). Although Nasution translated his thesis at a much later stage into Indonesian, he took it upon himself to propagate Abduh's idea of rationalism in Indonesia. He somehow managed to spread Abduh's reformist idea far and wide in the Nusantara. Not surprisingly, Nurcholish Madjid's (1939-2005)—a proponent of modernisation within Islam—fitting description of Nasution's ideology as *Abduhisme*, celebrating the latter's intellectual prowess in disseminating the idea of Islamic reformism via neo-Mu'tazilism (Madjid, 1989, pp. 102-110).

In Nasution's mind, the idea that the Qur'an is absolute, eternal and immutable does not mean that it describes everything in detail for human life (Nasution, 1995, pp. 27-28). The absolute and immutable are within the realm of *'aqīda* (creed) and *'ibāda* (religious rituals) or what is known as *al-thawābit* (the absolute, immutable). However, a larger sphere exists that requires human reasoning in the field of *al-mutaghayyirāt* (the changing, relative), which includes economy and politics. Nasution emphasises Qur'an as a revelation that encourages the use of reason or intellect. Of course, the main thrust of the Qur'an is on creed or *'aqīda* but where the Qur'an is silent, we need to use our intellect or human reasoning although some details can be found in the *Sunna*.

Mohammed Abdul Haleem, an expert in Qur'anic studies, also asserted that the main thrust of the Qur'an is on *'aqīda* or creed (Haleem, 2017, p. 243). Hence, Nasution believes that the Qur'an would leave certain particulars to be deliberated by human beings themselves,

based on the concept of *al-thawābit* (the absolute, immutable) and *al-mutaghayyirāt* (the changing, relative) explained above. He criticises those who hold the idea that the Qur'an contains everything and explains everything, a category that includes many contemporary Islamists for whom the Qur'an is a complete text with even the finer details fully elaborated for mankind to implement in their lives and in their country's constitution (Nasution, 1982, p. 31).

Interestingly, a renowned Islamic scholar in Indonesia, Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah (Hamka) (1908-1981), the author of the famous *Tafsir Al-Azhar*—an exegesis of the Qur'an in Indonesian language—shared a similar view to Nasution. Both of them believed in the necessity of reviving rationality through the Qur'an, and they drew their ideas from the exegesis of Al-Zamakhshari (1075–1144), a Mu'tazilite theologian and an interpreter of the Qur'an. To Hamka, as to Nasution, the Qur'an was not revealed as an ever-encompassing text. Rather, it exhorts its readers to use their intellect to search for non-revealed truths about life and the universe (Hamka, 1982, p. 275).

During his lifetime, Nasution realised the existence of two trends among Muslims that he found alarming: secularism and fatalism. Both of these theologies have shaped the Muslims' view of their future in a globalised world (Ishak, 2009, pp. 39-51). On the one hand, the secularist theology sidelined God and claimed that the progress of mankind depends on man alone without any guidance from religious texts, a view that Nasution believes would lead to destruction of civilisation itself (Nasution, 1985, p. 41). On the other hand, the fatalist theology, which is the more common ideology among Muslims in the Nusantara who adheres to the Ash'arite school, relies heavily on predetermination such that making any effort to change one's destiny is a vain pursuit: no matter how hard we try, what is fated cannot be changed. This explains why Muslims often end up as the most backward people, if not the most unproductive in their contribution to science and technology.

This is where Nasution offered an alternative theology which he felt could change, especially in the Nusantara, the way Muslims think and act (Nasution, 1982, p. 6). He called it the theology of divine constants, which can also be referred to as the rational theology. It is a theology that recognises God as the originator of the natural laws (*sunnatullāh*) of the universe (Nasution, 1972, pp. 150-151). Divine constants, which

include laws of gravity, entropy and so on, are scientific laws governing the universe; they are timeless and cannot be changed, as ordained by God Himself. This rationalist philosophy brought the Mu'tazilites to contend that God, and the firmaments of His creation, should operate in accordance with rational rules that He himself has created. It was this view that successfully spurred Muslims towards scientific research and to the pinnacle of scientific excellence in various disciplines.

This realm operates through a system that is determinate in as much as it is orderly, where everything functions in an organised manner, from the smallest atoms to the biggest planets and stars that revolve in their respective orbits. All of them revolve in a manner that is neatly arranged by the divine natural rules that are entirely pure, many of them with mathematical properties. Thus, water will boil at 100°C and it will freeze at 0°C; everything that is thrown from above will land on the ground due to the attractive force of gravity. All of these are the natural laws of the universe created by God. Only when we understand and study these natural laws and universal rules can we understand how a particular phenomenon occurs based on scientific knowledge, knowledge that itself originates from God. By pursuing and equipping ourselves with such scientific knowledge, we may bring about civilisational progress.

During their heyday, the Mu'tazilites deeply understood these natural laws. They pursued knowledge from the East and the West, translated new scientific ideas and improved upon them without discriminating against knowledge emanating from people from other cultures, civilisations and belief systems. Accordingly, they excelled in all fields of knowledge which led to the construction of the House of Wisdom. They were the people that held firmly to the rational theory that everything that happens must be in accordance with the natural laws determined by God, which in modern language translates as scientific knowledge.

Sadly, Muslims influenced by the Ash'arite doctrine assume that God can even do whatever conflicts with the natural law simply because He is the most Compelling. Thus, His power does not require Him to abide by the natural laws that He created, in the same manner that He is empowered to cast someone pious into hellfire or to place an evil person in heaven.

Conclusion

Indeed, the advent of Islam shook Arabia and freed its people from endless tribal conflicts. Within the span of a few decades, the Qur'an spread its worldview across the Arabian borders and gave birth to the first ever borderless ideological community in history through its insistence on awareness and knowledge. It enlivened amongst its followers the enthusiasm to seek knowledge based on rationalism and the natural laws, which brought the Islamic world to its zenith. The culture pioneered by the Mu'tazilites penetrated middle-ages European thought in many ways and through many paths. Ultimately, it sparked a revolution in European culture called the *Renaissance*, which played a major role in giving rise to the *scientific age* in which we live today. Only by reigniting the scientific spirit can we return to the glory of our predecessors. Even though Nasution's ideas did not translate into a mass movement, his idea of Islamic rationality has been dearly embraced by some circles of the Muslim intelligentsia in the *Nusantara* (Salleh, 2001, p. 197).

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Nageeb Gounjaria for proofreading and editing this manuscript. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for profit sectors.

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(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

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The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

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