ISLAMIC RATIONALISM

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ISLAMIC RATIONALISM: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF HARUN NASUTION'S THOUGHT

By

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ABSTRACT

Harun Nasution is an important name in the reformation of religious thought in Indonesia. The idea of reformation in religious thought of Harun Nasution is by introducing a new theology known as Islamic rationalism modelled along the lines of the classical rational thought of Mu'tazilah. It is noted that Harun Nasution was not really concerned directly with reformation in the political or social order in Indonesia. His approach via education had to a certain extent exerted considerable influence on the development of contemporary religious thought particularly at IAINs (some have been upgraded to be UIN – Universitas Islam Negeri). This study examined the theology of Islamic rationalism promoted by Harun Nasution, as the only means to change the attitude of Muslims. Harun Nasution believes that the cause of the backwardness of Muslims is theological in nature and thus can be resolved by the introduction of a new theology called Islamic rationalism. Harun Nasution's rationalism focuses on the relationship of human reason to human action, that is, while God gives the capacity, man has the free will to determine the shapes and forms of actions. A new system of values under a new theology in Islam is needed to enable Muslims to understand and interpret their environment and act accordingly. Thus, if Islamic teachings are taken as static and permanent, then Islam detaches and alienates itself from the development of human process and modernization. The study also examines the impact of Harun Nasution's Islamic rationalism in religious education at IAINs and the great influence theology had so far exerted in the development of intellectual and religious thought in IAINs institutions in Indonesia. The study arrived at the following conclusions: *First*, Harun Nasution's idea of rationalism has similar resemblance to Western liberalism, which presents itself conducively to the changes and demands of the contemporary world. *Second*, Harun Nasution's liberalism had opened the door for ideology of suspicion towards anything that comes from established doctrines, which can be dangerous and harmful as it tantamount to an absolute scepticism of Islam. *Third*, Harun Nasution's influence can be felt by the presence of large networks of liberal thinkers whose opinions and writings have tremendous impacts on the Muslims in Indonesia.

ملخص البحث

يمثلُ هارون نسوتيون شخصية مهمة في مشروع تجديد الفكر الديني في إندونيسيا. إنّ فكرة تجديد الفكر الديني عند هارون نسوتيون تبدأ من خلال تقديمه علما لاهوتيا حديثا عرف بالعقلانية الإسلامية يقترب إلى حدّ ما من العقلانية الكلاسيكية للمعتزلة. ويلاحظ عدم اهتمام نسوتيون بالفكر السياسي والاجتماعي في إندونيسيا بشكل مباشر، إلا أن مقاربته من خلال التربية والتعليم تركت إلى حد ما تأثيراً ملحوظاً في مسيرة الفكر الديني الحديث في إندونيسيا خاصة عند IAINs (وقد تمّ تطوير بعضها إلى "الجامعة الإسلامية الإقليمية". وفي هذه الدراسة محاولة لتقويم الجانب اللاهوتي للعقلانية الإسلامية التي نادى ا نسوتيون باعتبارها الحل الوحيد لتغيير سلوك المسلمين. يعتقد نسوتيون أن سبب تخلف المسلمين يكمن في الفكر العقدي، ويمكن علاجه من خلال تقديم فكر عقدي أو لاهوتي جديد، وسماه بالعقلانية الإسلامية. إن العقلانية الإسلامية عند نسوتيون تعطي الأولوية للعلاقة بين الإنسان وفعله من جانب، وبين فعل الإنسان وعلا قته بالإرادة الإلهية. ومع أن الله أعطى الإنسان القدرة ـ يقول نستيون ـ إلا أن الإنسان حر في تقرير مصيره واختيار أفعاله وسلوكه. ويقول نسوتيون إننا بحاجة إلى نظامٍ قيمي حديث من خلال اللاهوت الإسلامي الحديث، لتمكين المسلمين في فهم وتفسير الأفعال والوقائع بشكل صحيح. ويرى أن فهم التعاليم الإسلامية مجرد خطابات ثابتة دون استيعاب وإدراك حقيقي لمعانيها، يؤدي إلى فصل وإبعاد الإسلام عن مسيرة الحياة البشرية. وفي هذه الدراسة أيضاً محاولة لتقويم أثر العقلانية الإسلامية لنسوتيون في التربية الدينية عند IAINs وفي مسيرة التفكير العقلي والديني من خلال معاهد IAINs في إندونيسيا. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى نتائج عدة: **أولها،** هناك أوجه تشابه بين الفكر العقلاني لنسوتيون وبين اللبرالية الغربية التي قدمت نفسها كأداة قابلة للتكيف مع متغيرات العصر الحديث ومتطلباته. **ثانياً**: إن لبرالية نسوتيون فتحت الباب على مصراعيه أمام أيدلوجية التشكيك في كل ما جاء في المعتقدات الثابتة في الإسلام، وهو أمر له خطورته لكونه يؤدي إلى الشك المطلق تجاه التعاليم الإسلامية. **ثالثاً**: يمكن معرفة أثر التفكير العقلي لنسوتيون بوجود شبكات فكرية لبرالية من أولئك الذين لهم آثار ملحوظة على مسلمي إندونيسيا.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DDII	*Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic Dakwah Council
Demokrasi Terpimpin	Guided Democracy under Sukarno
Golkar	*Golongan Karya* (Government party under Suharto)
HIS	*Hollandsch Inlandsche School* (modern primary school during Dutch colonial rule)
IAIN	*Institut Agama Islam Negeri* (State Islamic Religious Institute)
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
Masyumi	*Majelis Syuro Muslim Indonesia* (Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims)
MIK	*Moderne Islamietische Kweekschool* (modern secondary Islamic School during the Dutch colonial rule)
MULO	Modern secondary school established during the Dutch colonial rule
NU	*Nahdlatul Ulamā'* (Indonesian largest Islamic organization)
"New Order" regime	The government under Suharto
Pancasila	The five(*panca*) guiding principles (*sila*) of the Republic of Indonesia
pesentren	Religious boarding-school for Muslim students
STAIN	*Sekolah Tinggi Agama Indonesia* (Indonesian Secondary Islamic School)
(SAW)	Peace be upon Prophet Muḥammad
OIC	Organization of Islamic Conference
UIN	Universitas Islam Negeri

TRANSLITERATION

CONSONANTS

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

VOWELS

	Short Vowels			Long Vowels	
Fatḥa	ـَ	a	Long *fatḥa*	ا+ـَ	ā
Kasra	ـِ	i	Long *kasra*	ي+ـِ	ī
Damma	ـُ	u	Long *ḍamma*	و+ـُ	ū

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Preface

Islamic Rationalism[1] is a term used by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to describe the role of reason with reference to theological issues of Islam. Traditionally, the Islamic perspective of rationalism first appeared as an intellectual discourse in Islamic religious thought when Islam came into contact with Greek philosophy as early as the ninth century. The Greek spirit of inquiry dominated the religious and intellectual spheres of early Muslim theologians and scholars and gave rise to several interpretations of the religion and often marred by intense and controversial debates on certain theological issues.

Rationalism[2] was an ideal method of logical argument used by Muslim theologians and scholars in defense of the religion when Islam faced the impact of the discovery of Greek science and philosophy as well as certain theological issues brought by Christianity. The Muslims became interested in the Greek method of argumentation when substantive Greek philosophical and scientific works were translated into Arabic. The chief aim was the application of reason to revelation and the reconciliation of Greek thought with the tenets of Islam.[3] *The*

[1] It means the tendency to consider reason the principal device or one of the principal devices to reach the truth in religion, and the preference of reason to revelation and tradition in dealing with some theological matters, mainly when a conflict arises between them, see Benyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic theology*: *Traditionalism and rationalism,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), x; George F. Hourani, *Islamic rationalism*: *The ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbār,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 10.

[2] The basis of rationalism is the notion that God and the world can be perceived through intellect which God creates in man. Concerning God, this perception means that God's existence, His unity and His attributes can be known through reason. Concerning the world, it means that the creation of the world and its structure, man and actions can be logically understood, see Abrahamov, 32.

[3] M.S. Khan, "Ibn Sīnā and rationalism," *Islam and the modern age*, vol. 17, no. 2, (May 1984): 115.

Muʿtazilah[4] learned and acquired the rational methods of Greek philosophy and used it as a handmaid of religion.[5] But soon they began to develop their own taste of rational method of argument and there were ingredients of rationalism in their theology. Their basis of rationalism was the notion that God and the world can be perceived through the faculty of intellect which God creates in man.[6] What set *Muʿtazilah* so alluring to many Muslim scholars at its height of its theological activity was the appeal to substantiate intellectually the use of reason without necessarily repudiating the authority of the scripture. Especially significant in this regard was their contention that good and evil are not conventional concepts whose validity is rooted in the dictates of God, as the traditionalist (Sunnī or *Ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamaʿah*) and later *Ashʿariyyah* held, but are rational categories that can be established through unaided reason.[7]

Muʿtazilah rationalism had enjoyed considerable patronage of several caliphs during the ʿAbbasid Caliphate, but al-Maʾmūn (198-218 AH/813-833 CE) was the greatest patron of intellectual endeavour, whose reign brought about a distinctive profound interest in Greek philosophy and science. Undoubtedly, his keen interest in theological discussions and his encouragement and support of intellectual activity renders the development of rationalism to become the decisive resources of his administration. Under his patronage and tutelage, *Muʿtazilah* had sought to apply the Greek rational

[4] The name of the school was founded by Wāṣil bin ʿAṭāʾ (d. 748 CE), subsequently becoming one of the most important theological schools of Islam. The origin of the term came from the term *iʿtazala* which has the sense of "those who separate themselves, who stand aside". The Muʿtazilah are incontestably rationalists, in the true sense of the term, in that they consider that certain awareness are accessible to man by means of intelligence alone, in the absence of, or prior to, any revelation, see ʿAbd al-Karim al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal,* (Cairo: Muʾassasah al-Ḥalabī, 1967), 48; translated by A.K. Kazi and J.G. Flynn, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 45.
[5] Saeeda Iqbal, *Islamic rationalism in the subcontinent,* (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1984), 38.
[6] Abrahamov, 32.
[7] Majid Fakhry, *A history of Islamic philosophy,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 47.

method of argument to Islamic doctrines in defense of the religion while at the same time consolidating their theological position.

Theological rationalism of the *Muʿtazilah* soon had a disintegrating effect on the Muslim community when their rational thought led them to advocate the *miḥnah* or 'Inquisition', the doctrine of the createdness of the *Qur'ān*, of which public profession had to be made.[8] The traditionalists, spearheaded by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (164-241 AH/780-855 CE), waged a rigorous resistance against this controversial theological issue.[9] *Muʿtazilah* dominance soon began to wane and towards the end of the tenth century witnessed a far-reaching effect. Al-Ashʿarī (260-324 AH/873-935 CE),[10] a *Muʿtazilah* and student of al-Jubbā'ī (234-304 AH/848-916 CE),[11] renounced Muʿtazilism and relentlessly attacked its doctrines employing similar rationalistic method of argument.[12] While in Egypt, al-Ṭaḥawī (236-321 AH/850-933 CE)[13] issued his *Bayān al-sunnah wa al-jamāʿah*, and in Transoxiana, al-Māturīdī (256-319 AH/870-944 CE)[14] attacked the *Muʿtazilah* in the person of al-Kaʿbī, Abū Qāsim al-

[8] William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic philosophy and theology,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1962), 48.
[9] Abū Ḥusayn ibn al-Farrā', *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah,* (Damascus: Maṭbaʿah Iqtiḍal, 1930), 32 and Walter N. Patton, *Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and the miḥnah,* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1897), 2.
[10] He was a descendent of Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, one of the appointed arbitrators at the Battle of Ṣiffīn. He spent some time during his youth to study jurisprudence and later a major part of his education to study Muʿtazilah theology under al-Jubbā'ī (848-916 CE). At the age of 40, he renounced the teachings of Muʿtazilah in favor of the doctrines of Sunnī. Among his important works are *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn, Kitāb al-luma'* and *al-ibāna 'an uṣūl al-diyānah*, see Abū-al-Ḥassan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, *Al-Ibānah 'an uṣūl al-diyānah,* (Medinah: Al-Jamiʿah al-Islāmiyyah, 1989), 7, and translated by Walter C. Klein, (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1940), 26.
[11] He was one of the most celebrated of the Muʿtazilah. Born at Jubbā'ī in Khūzistan, he attended the school of Baṣrah of Abū Yaʿkūb Yūsuf al-Shahhām. He holds a place in the line of the Baṣrah Muʿtazilah, especially over the question of human action, see al-Ashʿarī, *al-Ibānah 'an uṣūl al-diyānah,* 167; trans., 21.
[12] Ibid., 14; trans., 27.
[13] Born in Egypt, a place called Ṭaḥāwī. He stands out as a prominent follower of the Ḥanāfī legal school. His monumental works include *Sḥarḥ ma'ānī al-āthār, Muṣkil al-āthār* and *al-'Aqīdah,* commonly known as *al-'Aqīdah al-Ṭaḥāwīyyah,* see Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad al-Ṭaḥāwī, *'Aqīdah al-Ṭaḥāwīyyah,* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1997), 55 and translated by ʿAbd al-Munʿīm Ṣaleh al-'Alī al-'Izzī, (Dammam:WAMY, 1999), ii.
[14] The founder of a theological school called Māturīdiyyah. The school was commonly called that of the scholars of Samarkand or of Transoxania. It claimed to represent the doctrine of Abū Ḥanīfa, sometimes identified as *Ahl al-sunna wa al-jama'ah,* see Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad ibn Maḥmud al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd,* edited by Fathallah Kholeif, (Beirut: Dār al-Masriq, 1970), xiii.

Balkhī (d.319 AH/ 931 CE),[15] the leader of the *Muʿtazilah* in his time, and brought about the triumph of Sunnism.[16]

The victory of Sunnism did not emphatically wiped out the theological rationalism completely, as in Yemen there was greater intellectual activity among the Shīʿites, namely in the works of al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (170-246 AH/785-860 CE)[17] and al-Ḥasan bin Zayd (d. 271 AH/884 CE),[18] whose doctrines were close to those of the *Muʿtazilah* but not identical.[19] By the time of al-Ghazālī (450-505 AH1058-1111 CE),[20] religious thought took a different twist. In his chief work of theology, *Al-Iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād,* al-Ghazālī made use of syllogism while retaining the main ingredients of Ashʿariyyah school of thought. However, he employed the syllogistic reasoning to a more devastating effect in *Tahāfut al-falāsifah,*[21] his attacks on the philosophers had almost brought an end to the rational thought of the philosophers.

On the whole, it was observed that al-Ghazālī had utilized the vast arsenal of the *Ashʿariyyah* dialectic arguments to the most devastating effect,[22] that the efforts of

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[15] He was the leader of Baghdādī school of the Muʿtazilah, who claimed that *ʿaql* is not to be separated from the *shar*ʿ, see Abū Faraj Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*: *A 10th Century AD Survey of Islamic culture,* translated by Bayard Dodge, Chicago: Great Books of Islamic World Inc., 1970), 82.

[16] Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad ibn Maḥmud al-Mātūrīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd,* xiii.

[17] He was a Zaydī *Imām* and founder of the legal and theological school later prevalent among the Zaydīs in the Yemen, see Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal,* 197-198 and C.E. Bosworth & three others, *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. viii, 453.

[18] He was the founder of the Zaydī amirate of Ṭabaristan. His brother and successor, Muḥammad, was employed as assistance to Abū Qāsim al-Balkhī al-Kaʿbī, see Ibid., 162 and al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist,* 481.

[19] William MontgomeryWatt, *The formative period of Islamic thought,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 273.

[20] His greatest contribution lies in philosophy, logic, theology, jurisprudence and Sufism. His monumental works include *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn, Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl, Tahāfut al-falāsifah, Al-Iqtiṣād fī al-iʿti qād* and many others, see Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-falāsifah,* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Ashʿariyyah, 2001), 25.

[21] Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl,* (Damascus: al-Hikmah, 1994), 48-49 and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Abū Zayd, *Al-Ghazālī on divine predicates and their properties,* (Lahore: Ashraf Printing Press, 1970), xxiii-xxiv.

[22] ʿAbū al-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Rushd, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut,* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Ashʿariyyah, 2001), 33 and translated by Simon Van Den Bergh, (Cambridge: EJM Gibb Memorial Trust, 1954), xii.

Ibn Rushd (520-594 AH/1126-1198 CE)[23] in his *Tahāfut al-tahāfut,* to salvage the pride of rational philosophical thought proved too late and rendered itself as an important academic material only. In his greatest work, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn,* al-Ghazālī's theological discourses encompassed some elements of sufism. It became very clear that he set the trend in which philosophy was gradually absorbed into sufism and was further developed in the form of Islamic mystical (sufism) philosophy by later scholars..

The period called *Renaissance*, spanning roughly the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was a time of discovery and emancipation. The scientists of the Renaissance brought about the most fundamental alterations in the world of thought, and they accomplished this feat by devising a new method of discovering knowledge. Men began to look at the heavenly bodies with a new attitude, hoping to find confirmation in the Biblical statements as well as to discover new principles and laws.[24] They set out to formulate clear rational principles that could be organized into a system of truths from which accurate information about the world can be deduced, which is called modern philosophy.[25] Theology was later revolutionized by modern philosophy and is known as rational theology, which has its origin from Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 CE). Kant's real aim was not to destroy theology, but to replace a dogmatic theology with a critical one: to transform theology from a complacent speculative science into a critical examination of human reason and a vehicle for the expression of moral aspirations under the guidance of the autonomous reason.[26]

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[23] Ibn Rushd made remarkable contributions in philosophy, logic, medicine and jurisprudence. Some of his well-known works include *Tahāfut al-tahāfut, Kitāb Faṣl al-maqāl, Kitāb al-Kulyat fī al-ṭibb* and *Bidāyat al-mujtahid wa al-nihāyat al-muqtaṣid,* see Ibn Rushd, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut,* 33: trans., xii.
[24] Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and problem,* (New York: McGraw Hill Inc., 1982), 210.
[25] Ibid., 227.
[26] Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Rational theology*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), 17.

The feat of rationalism accomplished by the West was quick to find its way to the Muslim World. Muslim rationalistic movement began to spread and became conspicuously evident in Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent. In India, notable rationalist were the likes of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (1817-1898CE)[27] and Sayyid Ameer Ali[28] (1849-1928CE).[29] They were, however, considered as mere emulators and duplicators of Western rationalism. A more constructive trend to the respond to the West was Islamic modernism.[30] As an intellectual trend, Islamic modernism was one response to the Muslim encounter with the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Islamic modernism is usually associated with the names of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1225-1315 AH/1839-1897 CE)[31] and Muḥammad ʻAbduh (1265-1323 AH/1849-1905 CE).[32]

Al-Afghānī propagated the importance of Islamic reform as a prerequisite to the acceptance of modern science and technology and activism needed for self-strengthening,[33] while ʻAbduh saw change as inevitable and beneficial and thus highlights the role of reason in understanding religion and *sharīʿah* with the hope of to

[27] He was the most prominent early leader of the modernization movement among Indian Muslims, noted especially for his advocacy on educational reforms towards ʻa modern version of Islam,' see Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Aḥmad Khān*: A *reinterpretation of Muslim theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 25.

[28] He was one of the most influential and apologists of Muslim India. His fame was due in part to the fact that he wrote in English, explaining Muslim history to Western and Westernized intellectuals. His well known work, *The spirit of Islam,* depicts Islamic rule as enlightened and progressive, see Sayyid Ameer Ali, *The spirit of Islam*: *A history of the evolution and ideals of Islam with a life of the Prophet,* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Trust, 1981), 212.

[29] Majid Fakhry, *A Short introduction to Islamic philosophy, theology and mysticism,* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 121.

[30] This is a reform movement in Egypt from the teaching and influence of Al-Afghānī and ʻAbduh, which attempts to render Islam adaptable to the complex demands of modern life, see Charles C. Adams, *Islam and modernism,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 1.

[31] He was perhaps the most famous proponent of modernist Islam, and has enjoyed the stablest popularity of all modernists in the century since his death, see Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic response to imperialism: Political and religious writings of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī,* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1983), 40.

[32] He was, along with his mentor al-Afghānī, the most prominent figure of modernist Islam, see Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam: 1840-1940,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 50.

[33] Keddie, op. cit., 40.

liberate the Muslim mind from the pattern of stagnation, enabling Muslims to address the requirements of modernization.[34]

The initial impulse to the reform movement in Egypt in the early nineteenth century as a result of the nation facing the onslaught of modernization was indeed a thorough reform developed by Muḥammad ‘Abduh which has persisted until the present and made itself felt in many directions.[35] The course of the discussion of the ensuing study, the theological works of Harun Nasution (1337-1419 AH/1919-1998 CE), is one of such reformation, particularly, in religious thoughts.

Harun Nasution was a notable rational and independent scholar who distanced himself away from any political party or mass-religious organization. His greatest contribution lies mainly in his attempts to introduce the rational theology of *Mu‘tazilah* in Indonesia.[36] Nasution’s model of individual rational thinking gained prominence among young educated Indonesians when he was attached to the State Institute of Islamic Studies (Institute Agama Islam Negeri or IAIN) in Jakarta, where he served as Rector, and then as Dean of Graduate School. In these roles he was able to make considerable contribution to modernist thinking in Indonesia.[37] His rational modernist thinking was largely propelled by the nation’s call to the “New Order” under President Suharto’s stewardship, the notion of guiding Indonesia to greater economic prosperity and modernization.

Extremely influential to the attainment of modern Indonesia, education was considered a vital vehicle to steer the nation to sustain economic growth, to increase productivity as well as to reduce population growth and poverty. Religious education reform was clearly distinguished in Indonesia, and was an agent of social change and

[34] Andrew Rippen, *Muslims: Their religious beliefs and practices,* (London: Routledge, 1993), 87.
[35] Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, 2.
[36] Fauzan Salleh, *Modern trends in Islamic theological discourse in twentieth century Indonesia: A critical survey,* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2001), 197.
[37] Peter G. Riddel, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesia world: Transmission and response,* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 231.

modernization.[38] The "New Order" provided an ideal path to Harun Nasution to promote his rational thinking through Islamic theological discourse that emphasizes rationality, modernization and religious tolerance. The development of religious thoughts apparently reflected the popular interest in and concern with theology of the public in Indonesia then.[39] According to Harun Nasution, theology developed by the *Mu'tazilah* and 'Abduh, is not merely an intellectual exercise or an academic enterprise, but instead has become the theological basis of the Islamic modernism.[40]

At the helm of his intellectual and academic discourse at State Institute of Islamic Studies (Institute Agama Islam Negeri or IAIN), Harun Nasution developed a dynamic, modern curriculum, combining studies of the traditional Islamic sciences with subjects drawn from modern western education models, such as Sociology, Anthropology, Comparative Religion and secular philosophy.[41] Harun Nasution's contribution to the development of Islamic rationalism at IAIN could be felt in many perspectives. *First*, as Dean of Graduate School, he determined the directions of academic and intellectual discourse at Post Graduate Level. *Second*, as the principle lecturer for core courses in Islamic thought, he yielded considerable influence over the students of the choice of topics and discussions on their theses and dissertations.*Third*, books written by Harun Nasution are used as official texts for courses involving renewal of Islamic thought.[42]

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[38] Giora Eliraz, "The Islamic reformist movement in the Malay-Indonesian world in the first four decades of the 20th century: Insights gained from a comparative look at Egypt," *Studia Islamika*, vol. 9, no. 2, (2002): 54-55.
[39] Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward with Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from medieval school to modern symbol,* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 169.
[40] Saiful Muzani, "Mu'tazilah Theology," *Studia Islamika*, vol. 1, no. 1 (April-June 1994): 101.
[41] Peter G. Ridell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian world: Transmission and responses,* 231.
[42] Fuad Jabali and Jamhari, *IAIN and modernisasi Islam diIndonesia,* (Jakarta: Penerbit Logos Wacana Ilmu, 2002), 43.

The theological background of Southeast Asia, particularly, the Malay-Indonesian world, was prominently *Ash'ariyyah kalām*. In Indonesia, *Ash'ariyyah* became dominant where many works on *Ash'ariyyah kalām* were available and spread throughout the region with the role of *'ulamā'* through their traditional Islamic learning centers known as *pondok.*[43] The birth of the modernist reformist Pan-Islamism advocated by al-Afghānī and 'Abduh, attracted a vast audience among young students. Cairo, during the colonial times, and particularly in the 1920s, provided a fertile ground for the Southeast Asian students.[44] Harun Nasution was registered as a student at al-Azhar University in 1940 but was forced to interrupt his studies as a result of financial difficulties. He later returned to Egypt after Indonesia achieved independence and studied at the American University in Cairo.[45] The influence of Cairo upon Harun Nasution's rational thought became very strong and the later blossomed into a full-fledge theological discourse when he won a scholarship to McGill University, Canada, where he completed his Master[46] and Doctoral degrees, with a dissertation entitled *The place of reason in 'Abduh's theology: Its impact on his theological system and views,* focusing on the rational thought of Muḥammad 'Abduh.

The shape of Harun Nasution's rational thinking was clearly nurtured and modeled by his learning experiences particularly in Canada. The real essence of rational thought arising from these experiences was the Muslim intelligentsia's fight to create its own rational process. Thus, Harun Nasution advocates the need of Muslims to free themselves from the rigid and fatalistic theologies of the *Ash'ariyyah*

[43] Mohd Fakhruddin Abdul Mukti, "The background of Malay *kalām* with special reference to the issue of the ṣifāt of Allah," *Afkar*, vol. 3, (May-June 2002): 22.
[44] Mona Abaza, *Changing images of three generations of Ash'arites in Indonesia.* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 1993), 3.
[45] Ibid., 7.
[46] For his MA thesis, Harun Nasution wrote *"The Islamic state in Indonesia: The rise of ideology, the movement for its Creation and the theory of Masyumi."*

and *Jabariyyah*.[47] The real character and purpose of his rational thought could only be properly and correctly understood as the research progresses.

Statement of Problem

Harun Nasution was totally committed to a modernist view of Islam, although in his rationalization of Islamic theology gave it a particular outlook of *Mu'tazilah kalām* and that was not always in harmony with other proponents of Islamic modernism, the majority of whom were entrenched with the *Ash'ariyyah* school of thought, in Indonesia. He was firmly convinced that the revival of *Mu'tazilah* thought was essential for the modernization of Islam.[48]

The initial impulse of Islamic modernism was felt in Egypt during the time of al-Afghānī and 'Abduh, the reformers who called for greater rationalism in Islamic thought. The rationalists of the modern times have come to value the importance of *ijtihād* (independence rational reasoning) as interpreters of the doctrines of Islam. Harun Nasution shared a similar stance that the proper way for Muslims to progress in the modern world was to apprehend the truth of religion by reason. Harun Nasution insisted that rational theology as manifested among Muslims in the classical period enabled them to interact and respond to other cultures from Greece and Persia and developed them into genuine civilizations of Islam.[49] When rational theology of the *Mu'tazilah* disappeared and was eventually outmaneuvered by theology of *Ash'ariyyah* or *Ahl al-sunnah*, the Muslim community entered a period of decadence.[50]

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[47] Nasution, *Islam rasional: Gagasan dan pemikiran,* 116.
[48] Martin and Woodward, 159.
[49] Saiful Muzani, 116.
[50] Harun Nasution, *Islam rasional: Gagasan dan pemikiran* (Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, 1995), 163.

The ensuing discussion in the research seeks answers to the following questions:

- First, has theological orientation of the *Ash'ariyyah* caused the Muslims to experience long period of decadence?
- Second, in what manner has the rationalism of *Mu'tazilah* and 'Abduh acted upon Harun Nasution's thought?
- Third, in what manner did Harun Nasution's rationalism challenge the foundations of *Ash'ariyyah* thought in Indonesia?
- Fourth, in what manner the rationalism as propagated by Harun Nasution is relevant to change and modernization in Indonesia or otherwise?

Purpose of Study

The traditionist faction in Indonesia, represented by the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, held that religious truth was contained in the writings of past Muslim scholars, particularly those of several noted jurists and theologians. While some under an association called the Persatuan Islam (Muslim Union), held that new investigation and interpretation of religious fundamentals were necessary rather than relying on the tradition and past interpreters of Islam.[51]

Harun Nasution is considered one of the few contemporary scholars in Indonesia who aspired to revive the spirit of modernization with his rational theology of Islam and who believed that the Muslim community had been in the state of decadence and weak for a long spell. Emphatically, Harun Nasution stressed that the future of the Muslim *Ummah* in the contemporary world which continues to be

[51] Howard M. Federspiel, *Islam and ideology in the emerging Indonesia state,* (Leiden: Brill NV, 2001), viii.

dominated by achievements made by science and technology, depended on their abilities to free themselves from the chained of fatalistic theology represented by the theologies of *Ash'ariyyah* and *Jabariyyah.*[52] With rational theology, there is no theological obstacle to the growth and development of human potential and frees the *Ummah* to express the reality including the principles of religion according to human free will.[53]

The significance of the study will be seen from its perspectives to unfold the following:

- To look into the circumstances that allows the development of religious reformation, particularly of Harun Nasution, in Indonesia.
- To trace the process of identifying Harun Nasution's sympathies for certain aspects of *Mu'tazilah* thought.
- To highlight the impact of Harun Nasution's theology on higher education in Indonesia, particularly, at the IAINs (Institute Agama Islam Negeri or State Institute of Islamic Studies).
- To scrutinize Harun Nasution's thought's and show its relevance to the change and modernization of Muslim community in Indonesia.

Method of Study

The first decision made to the study of this nature is to determine the method of study. This research primarily deals with extensive textual analysis and thus shall employ procedures and methods that help to achieve its objectives. In order to realize the

[52] Nasution, *Islam rasional*: *Gagasan dan pemikiran,* 157.
[53] Abdul Halim, *Teology Islam rational*, (Jakarta: Ciputat Pers, 2001), 181 and Saiful Muzani, "Mu'tazilah theology," 114.