Bringing Rationality Back: Harun Nasution and the Burden of Muslim Thought in Twentieth-Century Southeast Asia

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Abstract: Debates over the purported decline of Muslim intellectual life and scholarship have been featured in the writings of modern Muslim reformers for over two centuries. This article examines the writings of the Indonesian Islamic scholar Harun Nasution (1919–1998), focusing on his interest in the role of rationalism among Muslims in twentieth-century Southeast Asia. I argue that in response to a perceived decline in Muslim intellectual life and discourse, Nasution sought to promote the recovery of what he termed "dynamic Islamic rationality." In his works, Nasution depicted "dynamic Islamic rationality" as a type of rationalism that reconsiders the scope of revelation, rehabilitates received approaches to Islamic interpretive traditions, and promotes a reformed theology responsive to the modern context of twentieth-century Southeast Asia.

Key words: Islamic thought, rationality, Southeast Asia, Qur'ān, interpretive traditions, theology

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Introduction

One of the most fascinating developments in the history of Islam in the last two centuries has been the struggle for the restoration of reason and rationality in Muslim thought. Impressed by the achievements of other civilizations and disenchanted with what was considered to be the intellectual backwardness of traditional Muslim scholars (*'ulamā*), Muslim reformers globally railed against the predominance of intellectual conformity (*taqlīd*) and argued for a restoration of the centrality of reason and the use of independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) in Islamic sciences. Reformers thus advocated for what they characterized as the liberation of the Muslim minds from the shackles of superstition, ignorance, and false understandings of Islam. The continued relevance of Islam in the modern world, so they reasoned, could only be sustained through fresh, innovative and bold reinterpretations of the faith.[1]

Muslim reformers who so ardently promoted the revival of reason and rationality were, however, a diverse group. Three main reformist tendencies emerged in the twentieth century. The first of these were reformists who advocated a form of "scripturalist rationalism." This reformist strain bracketed all forms of reasoning within the parameters of the sacred sources of Islam. For them, the project of regenerating Islamic thought demanded a critical re-evaluation of the meanings and messages of the Qur'ān and the Sunna (i.e., the body of traditions attributed to Prophet Muḥammad) to address contemporary challenges. Their methodology of reasoning was for the most part deductive. The second group adopted a diametrically opposite position, which could be described as "utilitarian rationalism." They used modern theories and methodologies developed by scholars in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to shed new light on pre-modern sacred sources. They placed reason and revelation on equal footing, and at times even privileged rationality over religious scriptures in addressing the unprecedented challenges of modern Muslims.[2]

The thought of Harun Nasution (1919–1998), a respected intellectual and religious reformer in Indonesia, can be located somewhere in between these preceding tendencies, among a third group of reformists. This third reformist tendency included prominent modernist reformers such as Syed Aḥmad Khan (1817–1898), Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905), Muḥammad Shiblī Nu'mānī (1857–1914), Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877–1938), Faẓlur Raḥmān Malik (1919–1988), Ḥasan Ḥanafī (1935–2021), Fāṭima Mernīsī (1940–2015), Naṣr Abū Zayd (1943–2010), and Abdullah Saeed (b. 1960). These reformers envisioned complementary roles for reason and revelation, wherein reason served as the driving force of a once-flourishing civilization that held the Islamic revelation as its guiding frame of reference for civilizational progress. Within this third reformist tendency, the productive complementarity and harmony between

reason and revelation was featured as a leitmotif of Harun Nasution's work. In what follows, I show that Nasution championed "dynamism in thought and rationality within the boundaries of revelation" (*faham dinamika dan kepercayaan kepada ratio dalam batas-batas yang ditentukan wahyu*) as a means of transcending the decline of Muslim intellectual life in Southeast Asia. In short, he called for the return of a "dynamic Islamic rationality."[3]

For Nasution, his concept of "dynamic Islamic rationality" referred to the rethinking of the scope and nature of revelation (*waḥī*). Although the Qur'ān is considered an essential source of divine guidance, the authority of which is beyond any reasonable doubt, Nasution argued that the Qur'ān does not comprehensively address all worldly matters. Rather, it only offers detailed guidelines on devotional, legal, ethical, and theological matters. Other aspects of life, such as statecraft, economics, and social organization, are framed in more general terms. Harun thus distinguished between two types of Qur'ānic verses, i.e., those that are vague or ambiguous in their meaning (*ẓannī al-dalāla*), and those that have clear meanings (*qaṭ'ī al-dalāla*). The preponderance of the former verses, he argued, indicated that Muslims are encouraged to engage in *ijtihād* to address various issues relating their earthly affairs. The Qur'ān itself emphasizes the primacy of the rational faculty, which it states was endowed upon humankind for them to discern the signs of God throughout creation (*al-ayāt al-kawnīyya*).[4]

To recover the original dynamism of Islamic rationalism, rethinking revelation would not itself suffice. Islamic interpretive traditions would also need to be revived. To that end, Nasution considered *ḥadīth* and *ijtihād* of the *'ulamā* to be essential. However, he found that approaches to the Prophetic traditions (Hadith) and *ijtihād* had stagnated. Nasution cast doubt over the applicability of some *aḥadīth* and the scholarship of past *'ulamā* and noted that these interpretive traditions were still open to critique. The contents of some *aḥadīth* could be deemed as dated or even doubtful in light of recent advances in knowledge. There was a similar situation regarding *ijtihād*. The legal opinions of the *'ulamā*, Nasution argued, must not be viewed as binding and should instead be subjected to acute scrutiny toward a renewed form of *ijtihād*. Such *ijtihād*, Harun cautioned, must be guided by deep spirituality and a comprehensive understanding of Islamic intellectual history, otherwise, the objective of elevating a "dynamic Islamic rationality" would be hijacked by Muslims with vested interests and ahistorical views, and this would do more harm than good for the masses.[5]

In fact, "dynamic Islamic rationality" could be realized when Muslims are able to move beyond the theological conundrum in Southeast Asian thought. In pursuit of this, Nasution sought to undo the hegemony of Ash'arite theology, which he felt had given rise to fatalism and apathy among Muslims. The theory

of acquisition (*kasb*), a key component of Ash'arite theology, presumed that human beings have no control over their actions but that they instead "acquire" them from God, who as the sole creator has full control over all things. Harun reasoned that such a theology ushered a decline in creativity and innovation among Muslims globally. As an alternative, he insisted on the recovery of the theology of divine constants (*sunnat Allāh*). Drawing from selected facets of Mu'tazilite thought and the ideas of many Muslim thinkers that subscribed to the ideology of free-will (*ikhtiyār*) and human capacity to reason, Harun stressed that this alternative theology would inject more intellectual and practical vigor among Muslims. Freed from the mistaken belief that God determines all human actions and fate, the theology of divine constants, which is in opposition to fatalist and secularist theologies, would reclaim Muslim agency and induce them to research, invent, and pioneer new ways of thinking and living.[6]

It is obvious from the above that Nasution's project of reinstating "dynamic Islamic rationality" was primarily directed at intellectual elites and secondarily to other strata of the Muslim community, which he also considered important for achieving his reformist goals. Contrary to the assertions of some observers, Nasution was not elitist in his approach to Islamic intellectual reform.[7] Evidence for this is found in the methods with which he presented his ideas and the outlets which he chose to publish his works. Stylistically, Harun's prose is straightforward, jargon-free, and accessible to the literate public. He made sure to include Indonesian translations of technical terms from Islamic religious discourse, which ensured that readers unacquainted with Arabic would be able to grasp his arguments.[8] With the exception of the published edition of his doctoral dissertation, all of Nasution's books were compilations of lectures and seminars delivered in universities, colleges, governmental bodies, and civil society organizations. His most influential book, *Islam Rasional* (Rational Islam), consists of short articles published in various newspapers and popular publishing outlets between 1970 and 1994.[9] He stated that his writings were not only directed to university students, but were intended to "benefit … readers outside the ambit of universities, who yearn to widen their knowledge about Islam."[10] To reinforce his ideas about "dynamic Islamic rationality" among readers from all walks of life, Nasution frequently repeated the same points in multiple publications, and occasionally even reproduced whole passages from one book to another.

Nasution's choice to address difficult ideas in ways that were accessible to the layman was partly connected to his own intellectual formation. Born in North Sumatra on September 23rd, 1919, to parents who were conversant in the Arabic language, his early education was spent in Dutch elementary and secondary schools. He was later sent for further studies in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 1936, to fulfil his parents' wish that he become a religious scholar. The conservative

environment that he encountered in Mecca, with its emphasis on rote learning and aversion to collaborative discussion, exasperated him. He cut short his studies and moved to Egypt, to pursue his bachelor's degree in the Faculty of *Uṣūl al-Dīn* (Principles of Religion) at the prestigious Al-Azhar University, in Cairo. Nasution was equally disappointed with the teaching environment at Al-Azhar, which he felt was too conservative, even medieval. He finally obtained his degree at the American University of Cairo in 1952. Sometime during his education in Egypt, Nasution became conversant in French.[11]

Nasution's presence in Cairo at this time played a major role in his own intellectual formation. It was during this period that the conservative and reformist intelligentsia of Cairo rediscovered and extensively debated the ideas of the medieval Mu'tazilite school.[12] Consequently, Nasution read extensively from various streams of Islamic rationalist thought that were emerging among Cairene thinkers at this time. Among the thinkers that left the deepest impression on him by virtue of their captivating writing style and acute analyses of Islamic history were Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954), Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā (1889–1963), Muḥammad Abū Zahra (1898–1974), and ʻAlī Sāmī Al-Nashshār (1917–1980). Nasution was particularly animated by the writings of the Mu'tazilites and modern Muslim reformists, an enchantment that followed him throughout his scholarly career.[13] A brief spell as a diplomat for the Indonesian embassies in Cairo and Brussels in the early 1960s, ended abruptly as Nasution fell victim to the fractious political climate that was emerging in Indonesia at that time. He subsequently returned to Egypt and was offered a scholarship to further pursue his studies at McGill University, in Montreal, Canada. There, Nasution finally found the freedom and resources to pursue his interests in Islamic rationalism and completed his master's thesis on ideological contests among Muslim activists and politicians in postcolonial Indonesia. Soon thereafter, in 1968, he completed a Ph.D. dissertation on rationalism in the theology of the Egyptian reformer, Muḥammad ʻAbduh, where he questioned whether ʻAbduh was indeed a Mu'tazilite and surmised:

> According to al-Khayyāṭ, no one deserves the name of Mu'tazilism unless he believes in the five Mu'tazilī principles, namely God's unity, justice, the promise and the threat, the intermediary position of capital sinners, and the command of the good and the prohibition of evil. … In other words, he [ʻAbduh] cannot be considered a Mu'tazilī according to the Mu'tazilah's [sic] own criterion. What then is ʻAbduh if he is neither a Mu'tazilī, nor an Ash'arī, nor a Māturīdī? Has he an independent theological system and specific theological views just as the other theological schools have? Obviously, he does not. In general, his system is that of the Mu'tazilah [sic], and his principal theological views are, almost all of them, similar to those of the Mu'tazilah [sic]. If he cannot be accepted as a Mu'tazilī, at least it must be said that he has a Mu'tazilī theological system with almost identical theological doctrines. In other words, his theology is to a great

> degree a Mu'tazilī theology … The Mu'tazilī theology which affirms man's active role in life, not the Ash'arī theology of passivity, provided the essential intellectual and religious basis for ideas of reforms that could bring about necessary change in outlook and way of life among his ['Abduh's] co-religionists.[14]

Indeed, 'Abduh's approach to Mu'tazilism was a specter that never left Nasution's mind, and he eventually took it upon himself to embed 'Abduh's style of rationalism in Indonesia. The elective affinities between the two men's ideas are so self-evident it can be said that Nasution continued and expanded 'Abduh's reformist project in the Southeast Asian context. In that regard, Nurcholish Madjid has opted to describe Nasution's true ideological position as one of *Abduhisme* ('Abduhism), indicating an intellectual commitment to indigenize Muhammad 'Abduh's ideas in Indonesia specifically and, by implication, throughout Southeast Asia.[15] From this point of view, characterizing Nasution as a neo-Mu'tazilite theologian (*mutakallim*) loses sight of the fact that he did not fully accept most of the fundamental tenets of Mu'tazilism.[16] Rather, following 'Abduh's lead, Nasution selectively utilized aspects of Mu'tazilism that did not depart too far from mainstream Sunni thought. He even went so far as to censure the Mu'tazilites for certain authoritarian acts, which he concluded were partly borne out of their logic of reasoning.[17]

Considering these facts, I choose to characterize Nasution as a methodological Mu'tazilite. He was a scholar-reformer who selectively and strategically utilized Mu'tazilite ideas to provoke a reassessment of the status of reason in contemporary Islamic thought. To that end, he saw Mu'tazilite ideas as a useful means of encouraging Muslims to greater reliance on reason and free will, especially in connection to reforming Islamic societies. As far as my reading of his works reveals, he did not profess a dogmatic belief in Mu'tazilism, nor was he in favor of such thinking at the expense of mainstream Sunni Islam. To borrow from Binyamin Abrahamov, Nasution was by all counts a rationalist "who attacked the traditionalists and their doctrines on the basis of reason, claiming that much, but not all, of religious knowledge can be known through reason."[18] Alongside his written works, the primary way that he put this perspective into practice was by enacting educational reforms. In 1969 he returned to Indonesia to take up a lecturer position at the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic Institute (IAIN), in Jakarta. He quickly rose up the university ranks and was appointed its rector from 1974 to 1982. With Nasution in charge, the university became known as a "reformist campus" (*kampus pembaharu*), the influence of which helped transform the curricula of other Indonesian Islamic universities.[19]

In this official position, Nasution remained wary of potential detractors, which were plentiful both during his life as well as posthumously. Cognizant of the dominance of traditionalist and conservative thinking in Indonesian universities, Nasution admitted that he had tactically delayed the publication

of his Ph.D. dissertation by almost two decades.[20] His other books were republished several times and exposed students, scholars and the public alike to an array of Islamic thinkers and alternative articulations of Islam. The educational reforms that he introduced shaped the thinking of a new generation of Indonesian Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and activists who were just as conversant in Islamic scriptures as they were in social scientific theories, concepts, and methods. Nasution's unwavering commitment to avoid co-optation by political elites and Islamic movements earned him the respect of many Muslim intellectuals throughout Indonesia and Southeast Asia.[21] In this regard, Nasution accomplished his goal of making "dynamic Islamic rationality" an increasingly accepted current in Indonesian universities, where he hoped it would help to analyze and redress many challenges facing Muslims.[22]

Rethinking Revelation

How relevant is the Qur'ān in modern life? What kinds of knowledge can be derived from this foundational Islamic source? The responses of modern Muslim intellectuals to these questions can be grouped into a few scholarly positions. These are a Qur'ān-as-comprehensive approach, a Qur'ān-as-discursive approach, and a Qur'ān-as-constitutive approach. As Massimo Campanini states, all three positions aim "at discovering the Qur'ān's practical dimension, which is to say its function [is] in modifying the structure of reality and revolutionizing human relations."[23] Or, as Farid Esack neatly puts it, the intellectuals representing these three approaches are all scholarly and critical lovers of the Qur'ān[24] who nonetheless differ in substantial ways.

Those who view the Qur'ān as a comprehensive text uphold the scripture as an ultimate and all-encompassing document and consider it as the foremost source for the formulation of new forms of knowledge and the reformation of existing ones. For them, the Qur'ān is a complete and comprehensive text that addresses the full range of human life, knowledge and action.[25] One of the principal movers of this group was the late Ṭaha Jabīr al-Alwānī (1935–2016). He saw the Qur'ān as:

> the primary source and basis of all knowledge in the areas of human *fitrah* [sic] (innate nature) and of social and applied sciences. Indeed, every Muslim with specialist qualifications in any field of knowledge must turn to the Qur'ān for inspiration and guidance. A conscious and contemplative reading of the Book of Allah will enable him to amend, add to and reshape his store of knowledge. This will enable Muslims to rebuild the true Ummah [sic] of the Qur'ān.[26]

This Qur'ān-as-comprehensive approach forms the basis of various ideational undertakings that aimed to uncover modern scientific elements or information in the scripture. Another offshoot of this approach is the Islamization of

Knowledge (IOK) movement that experimented with transposing an Islamic worldview onto modern systems and structures of knowledge. Together, these two overlapping movements have produced textbooks and treatises in many disciplines that incorporate and are interpreted by means of Qur'ānic verses, the end-goal of which is the creation of a modern generation of Muslims that will live by, think by, and eventually be governed by the dictates of the Qur'ān.[27]

The Qur'ān-as-discursive approach takes a radically different stance. Sometimes characterized as a postmodern approach, it views the Qur'ān as a culturally laden and aesthetically significant text. The Qur'ān, according to this point of view, is a literary artifact to be approached hermeneutically. Scholars adopting this approach maintain that the Qur'ānic text addresses the context in which it was revealed and express deep reservations about antiquated interpretations, which they see as ill-suited for modern life. Accordingly, they question modern exegetes who do not acknowledge the limited utility of Qur'ānic injunctions in the contemporary age. This interpretive movement advances a reconsideration of what they view as problematic issues found in the Qur'ān, such as polygamy, slavery, the treatment of women, and the implementation of the Islamic corporal punishments (*ḥudūd*). This, of course, is primarily accomplished through the use of modern theories, methods, and ideologies to elucidate fresh analyses of scripture. Muḥammad Shaḥrūr (1938–2019), a prominent albeit controversial proponent of the Qur'ān-as-discursive approach, explained it accordingly:

> We do not treat the legal verses of *the Book* as codified law but as signposts or ethical-legal markers that Allah asked human beings not to overstep. Traditional *fiqh* jurisprudence has regarded the legal verses as absolute law which allowed neither mitigation nor adaptation to changing social and cultural circumstances. Our theory of limits aims to regain the flexibility and elasticity in human legislation that was originally built into the divine text but which was removed by an overly rigid system of *fiqh* jurisprudence.[28]

The third approach, Qur'ān-as-constitutive, stands midway between the two other positions. This line of thinking considers the Qur'ān as an indispensable guide for Muslims, both as an authoritative ethical canon and a fundamental source of revelation. Nonetheless, this group of scholars does not consider the Qur'ān as an exclusive source of guidance for human knowledge and activity; instead, it is considered as one among other sources of divine inspiration. This does not however imply that the Qur'ān is relegated to a secondary or marginal position. Rather, scholars taking on the Qur'ān-as-constitutive approach emphasize the scripture's undisputed standing as God's definitive revelation to humanity, without necessarily over-exaggerating its intended function. They argue that there are other complementary signs (*ayāt*) of God alongside the Qur'ān, which although not of equal stature to the latter must, nonetheless, be

seriously considered in order to provide interpretations of the Qur'ān that are more sensitive to historical context.[29]

Harun Nasution fits comfortably into this third strain of thought. Although he was not an exegete (*mufassir*) by training, his insights stimulated new ways of thinking about the Qur'ān in Indonesia that diverged from traditional approaches.[30] In this regard, he argued that it was impossible for someone like Prophet Muḥammad, living as he was in a pre-modern society, to have authored a scripture like the Qur'ān, which contains within itself vast repositories of knowledge: "X-rays had not been discovered, the same with microscopes, cameras and other instruments of knowledge were unavailable for anyone to do scholarly research. Hence, there was no way Prophet Muḥammad could have known all this [knowledge found in the Qur'ān] by his own accord."[31] Coupled with its linguistic beauty, Nasution agreed with the mainstream Muslim belief that the Qur'ān is unmistakably God's word, free from any corruption or alteration from human beings. Consequently, he also agreed with the conventional view that no translations of the Qur'ān can be viewed as an equal to or a substitute for the original Arabic text. All scholarly engagements with the Qur'ān, he argued, must therefore be based on the original text and not translations.[32] Nasution would have therefore agreed with another modernist scholar, Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988), who stated that "the Qur'ān is very much conscious that it is an 'Arabic Qur'ān,'" and hence, "a full understanding of the meaning [of the Qur'ān] depends upon the linguistic nuances" of the original Arabic text.[33] This stress on the Arabic origins and integrity of Qur'ān is linked to the mainstream Sunni doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān. This is a significant point, as it meant that despite his interest in medieval Islamic rationalism, Nasution would nonetheless remain silent about the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'ān (*khalq al-qur'ān*). This seemingly neutral posturing can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it may imply that he did not agree with the notion that the Qur'ān was created. Alternatively, he may have remained silent on the issue to avoid possible attacks from traditional scholars. Either way, it indicates that, like Muḥammad 'Abduh before him, Nasution's primary focus was on how the Qur'ān ought to be understood and applied in the world, rather than theological and philosophical debates on whether it was created or eternal.[34]

Repeatedly throughout his works, Nasution stressed that the absolute, eternal, and immutable nature of the Qur'ān does not imply that the scripture addresses all of the finer aspects of human life. In stressing this point, Nasution was not suggesting that the Qur'ān is incomplete or deficient. Rather, he intended to illuminate an oft-neglected aspect of the text, namely its encouragement of the use of reason. To that end, Nasution employed a "textual holistic" reading to build his argument, according to which the Qur'ān is treated as a unified and integrated text.[35] Most persuasive is his breakdown of the types of verses in the

Qur'ān. Out of 6,236 verses, only five hundred address principles of faith, ritual, and social life. One hundred and fifty verses address issues of knowledge and the natural environment. Nasution highlighted that no specific injunctions, models, or templates are given in such crucial areas as governance, finance, agricultural life, and science and technology.[36] Rather than providing detailed instructions in these areas, Nasution instead argued the Qur'ān's major task is to provide general ethical, legal, and philosophical principles through stories, parables and select commandments and prohibitions. The minutiae involved in the application of these principles, he argued, could instead be found in the Prophetic *Sunna* and through human reasoning. Nasution believed that by offering general rather than specific directives, the Qur'ān could remain relevant for all times and contexts.[37] In the same vein, a noted expert on the Qur'ān, Muhammad Abdel-Haleem (b. 1930), agrees that the majority of the Qur'ānic text is concerned with the issue of creed (*aqīda*).[38]

In his works, Nasution built upon these observations to argue that the purpose of the Qur'ānic revelation is to stimulate dynamic engagement with life precisely by leaving particulars to be deliberated by ethically responsible human beings. Therefore, he criticized the Qur'ān-as-comprehensive approach as being grossly inaccurate in its assumption that "the Qur'ān contains everything and explains everything."[39] For Nasution, those who viewed the Qur'ān as a source of all knowledge lost sight of the texture of the Qur'ānic verses themselves. While the Qur'ān is without doubt God's revelation, many of its verses have ambiguous meanings (*ẓannī al-dalāla*). These ambiguities are not meant to mislead or confuse readers. Rather, it is God's way of challenging human beings to think and reflect on these verses and thereby devise practical solutions.[40] The famed Indonesian exegete Hajjī 'Abd al-Malik Karīm Amrullāh, aka Hamka (1908–1981), a contemporary of Nasution's and a scholar to whom he was exposed in his youth, concurred with this assertion. Both Hamka and Nasution shared similar views about the necessity of reviving rationality through engagement with the Qur'ān. To that end, both men drew upon the exegesis of the Mu'tazilite thinker, Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī (1074–1144 CE) to promote their views about the importance of rationality in interpreting the Qur'ān. However, Hamka was, more subtle on this point than Nasution, and stressed that the Qur'ān was not revealed as comprehensive or encyclopedic text, but instead encourages and exhorts its readers to research all branches of knowledge.[41]

As for Nasution, he took Hamka's point a step further by outlining forty-eight verses in the Qur'ān that touch on epistemological concepts. He identified such Qur'ānic terms as *ulū al-albāb* (those who think), *ulū al-'ilm* (those who are knowledgeable), *ulū al-abṣār* (those who possess insight), *ulū al-nuhā* (those who are intelligent), *iqrā* (read), *'allāma* (teach), *al-qalam* (the pen), *ya'lam* (knowing), *tafakkara* (thinking), *fahima* (understand), *tadhakkara* (reflection),

naẓara (observation) and *'aql* (reason). All of these concepts and terms have been incorporated into the Malay-Indonesian languages, and they collectively emphasize the importance of reason, rationality and the esteem that learned and insightful people possess in God's eyes. With reference to this epistemological vocabulary, Nasution assailed the traditionalist *'ulamā* for downplaying the role of reason. This attack was, however, somewhat misleading. In actuality, the traditional *'ulamā* continued to use their rationality to unpack questions relating to theology, jurisprudence, and their scriptural exegesis (*tafāsīr*).[42] In fact, the premium they sometimes unconsciously placed on rationality is evinced in the use of jurisprudential tools such as *ijtihād*, *al-ra'ī* (rational discretion), *qiyās* (analogical reasoning), and *istiḥsān* (juristic discretion).[43]

Nasution's rationalistic tendency extended even beyond the Qur'ānic text. He argued that not only could reason aid in the interpretation of ambiguous Qur'ānic verses, but it could moreover, serve to uncover and interpret signs of God in nature, also known as the *ayāt kawnīyyā* (existential signs of God). Nasution saw these two hermeneutical fields as complementary to one another; he was, after all, convinced that the Qur'ān could only be more deeply understood when interpreted in tandem with natural phenomena. In this regard, there is a clear resemblance between his thought and those of the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), whom Nasution cited several times in his works. In his own writing on the subject, Nasution chose to adopt Nasr's idea that "nature is a fabric of symbols, which must be read according to their meaning and that the Qur'ān is the counterpart of that meaning in human words."[44] Nasution extended these insights by arguing that just as interpretation of the Qur'ān benefitted from investigation of nature, similarly nature could only be fully appreciated through the insights offered by divine revelation. In his view, reason stood midway between nature and revelation, and functioned as a bridge for interrelating the various signs of God.[45] In making this argument, Nasution indirectly downplayed an aspect of the Qur'ān-as-discursive approach that reduced the Qur'ān to a literary text with little value for modern sciences. Instead, Nasution viewed the ability to research and promulgate modern sciences as a fulfillment of the divine injunction for Muslims to serve as vicegerents (*khalīfa*) of God on earth. In his view, the decline of the Muslim civilization only occurred when the Qur'ān, the investigation of nature, and rationality were disregarded and forsaken.[46] He expressed his perspective accordingly:

> … it can be concluded that reason occupies an elevated place in Islam and is widely used, not only in the development of knowledge and culture, but also in the development of Islamic teachings. The Qur'ān decrees the use of reason. It is not baseless then for writers, be they Muslims or non-Muslims, to hold the view that Islam is a rational religion. Some have termed it 'Islamic rationalism.'… At the same time, it is necessary to stress here that the use of the terms 'rational,' 'rationalism,' and 'rationalist' in Islam

> must be differentiated from the original usages of these terms, that is, pure rationality that is heedless of revelation, or placing reason higher than revelation, to a point that revelation can be nullified by reason. Within Islamic thought, as described above, be it in the fields of philosophy and theology, especially so in jurisprudence, reason can never negate revelation. Reason conforms to revelation. Revelation is considered as the absolute truth. Reason is used only to understanding revelation and never to counter revelation.[47]

In sum, Nasution's perspective on reason and revelation was one that included confessional, critical and dialogical elements.[48] He expressed his firm belief of the ultimate importance of the Qur'ān in any attempt at reforming Muslim intellectual life. This clearly positioned him as a critic of predominant ideas about the Qur'ān, which to him did not accurately reflect the original function of revelation. As such, scholars representing the Qur'ān-as-comprehensive and Qur'ān-as-discursive strains of thought remained his intellectual *bêtes noires* throughout his career. Even though he appreciated their commitment to analyzing the Qur'ān, he saw both groups as unable to fathom the dialogical character of revelation. To Nasution, revelation must be internalized and contemplated with the aid of reflexive reason for Muslims to reap the most out of the signs of God, both in the form of a canonical text and in realm of nature. His revisionist view of revelation is perhaps partly explained through Andrew Rippin's remark that many Muslim modernists seek to view the Qur'ān "not as a static text but as a dynamic entity constantly being (re-)formed by the community that interacts with it."[49] It is clear that Nasution believed that the Qur'ān needs no (re-)formation. Its formation was, after all, completed during the Prophet Muḥammad's lifetime. The dynamism of its interpretative tradition instead depended on the willingness of Muslims to read it with fresh eyes and with a receptivity to new interpretations.

Islamic Interpretive Traditions

Nasution's rationale for reinvigorating Qur'ānic exegesis naturally extended to a reassessment of Islamic interpretive traditions. By "interpretive traditions" I am referring to the discursive traditions surrounding the Sunna, Hadith, and *ijtihād*, to which Muslims refer to for their religious praxis and which are central to any understanding of Islam, as discussed by Jonathan Brown.[50] These interpretive traditions, in Nasution's estimation, have long been sanctified and ossified to the point of losing their vitality. In response, Nasution attempted to re-evaluate Islam's interpretive traditions in light of historical exigencies and the changing present. He first directed his attention toward the Prophetic Sunna in a way consistent with the works of other modern Islamic reformers. As Daniel Brown sharply notes, "because of the stature of the *Sunna* as the symbol of the authority of Muḥammad and as a source of continuity with the past, no doctrinal

dispute, no legal controversy, no exegetical discussion can be carried on without reference to it. Even for those who seek to reject its authority, *Sunna* has proved too important to ignore."[51]

In his reassessment, Nasution preserved the status of the Sunna as the second most authoritative source in Islam. He argued that the straight path (*ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) of Islam included only those schools of thought that embraced the Qur'ān and Prophetic Sunna as authoritative sources.[52] To reject the authority of the Sunna, especially the textualized version of it recorded in the Hadith collections, was tantamount to heresy. Curiously, however, Nasution was willing to include as authentic Muslims those groups that both Sunni and Shi'ite *'ulamā* had traditionally viewed as heterodox. Among which are the Kharijites (*Khawārij*) and the Mu'tazilites. In a bold way, he explained that these groups' interpretations of Islam were legitimate insofar as they did not reject the authority of the Qur'ān and Sunna of the Prophet Muḥammad.[53] Placing these groups within the fold of Islam predictably attracted strong criticism. The former Indonesian Minister of Religious Affairs, Mohamad Rasjidi (1915–2001), emerged as Nasution's most aggressive interlocutor. Rasjidi described his unconventional views as a byproduct of orientalist training. He questioned Nasution's grasp of Islamic teachings and warned that his ideas would "endanger the young generation of Muslims."[54]

A closer examination of Nasution's standpoint regarding the Sunna indicates, however, that he did not in fact radically digress from the orthodox Islamic view. The Qur'ān and the Sunna were, to him, consistent with and mutually supportive of one another. Any apparent contradictions between them could, in his view, be attributed to two problems: either with the authenticity of particular *ḥadīth* traditions and/or a faulty opinion on the part of a given scholar. Nasution directed his criticism towards both problems. He upheld the Sunna as Qur'ān's primary *tafsīr* (exegetical source).[55] Nonetheless, he decried the constrictive paradigm that considered the Sunna as something to be venerated and not rationally scrutinized. He lamented the excessive attention given by scholars to ritualistic, devotional, and customary aspects of the Sunna and their indifference toward other aspects that had universal philosophical, and humanistic significance.[56]

Nasution traced the root cause of this limiting paradigm to a defective conception of the Hadith. While he defended the Hadith as a textual embodiment of the Sunna, even so he considered the Sunna to be something broader than what was eventually textualized in written *ḥadīth* collections. The Prophetic Sunna included not only these recorded sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad, but also the interpretive processes of his companions and the *'ulamā* who had, from time to time, made sense of the wider meanings, principles, and lessons that can be drawn from his life, words and actions. In this

regard, Nasution shared in Fazlur Rahman's critique against the fixed idea that the Sunna is to be derived not only from *ḥadīth* traditions. "The living Sunnah [sic]," Fazlur Rahman contends, "contained not only the general Prophetic model but also regionally standardized interpretations of that model, thanks to the ceaseless activity of personal *ijtihād* and *ijmā'*."[57]

Following Rahman's lead, Nasution took issue with the content of the Hadith as well. This was in keeping with the introduction of new research methods during this period, by means of which Islamic scholars began to probe the methodology and substance of the Prophetic Hadith. From the issue of fabrication and forgery to the problem of historical specificity, modern Muslim scholars cast a shadow over the sophisticated methods that had been used in the early centuries of Islam to ascertain the veracity of particular *ḥadīth* reports. They advanced fresh approaches to the Hadith that enabled scholars to differentiate between those traditions were authentically part of the Sunna from those that were false, unreliable, illogical and scientifically absurd.[58] Harun allied himself with this new trend. He cited Aḥmad Amīn extensively, whom in his *Fajr al-Islām* (Dawn of Islam) put forth a factious challenge regarding the authenticity of many *aḥadīth*, even those found in the otherwise canonical compilations, such as that of Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (810–870 CE).[59] By building upon Amīn's work, Nasution was therefore not categorically rejecting the Hadith nor did he intend to demolish all of the methods of *ḥadīth* authentication (*'ilm al-ḥadīth*). Rather, he attempted to sensitize Muslims to the historical and personal subjectivities found in *aḥadīth*, from criticism of the chain of narration (*isnād*), to that of the text itself (*matn*), as well as the complex historical contexts in which *aḥadīth* were narrated and the manner in which they were compiled by later scholars. Advances in modern linguistics offered modern Muslim scholars the tools necessary to scientifically compare the language used in various *aḥadīth*, and Nasution appealed his readers to consider these tools as a means of sifting out falsehoods and dubious narrations in the Hadith literature.[60]

Broadening Aḥmad Amīn's provocative challenge to modern Hadith scholars to totally reconstruct the science of Hadith, Nasution also challenged Muslim scholars to introduce new criteria of *ḥadīth* verification. Besides pointing to the merits of modern linguistic tools, he did not however propose any criteria of his own. Instead, Nasution merely stated: "If this idea [i.e., the introduction of new verification criteria] is accepted, the science of Hadith will continue to develop. The critique and investigation into the narrators by Islamic scholars in the classical age can be supplemented by contemporary critiques and investigations of Hadith. We will then be able to filter out the authentic from the inauthentic *aḥadīth*, or those that are doubtful."[61]

This example highlights the irony that, in many ways, Nasution did not always measure up to the rigorous standards he himself maintained in criticizing

other scholars. In arguing that different theological, jurisprudential, and sectarian branches of Islam all occupy "the plane of truth" (*berada dalam kebenaran*) so long as they hold fast to the Qur'ān and Sunna, he cited a weak *ḥadīth* ("Differences of opinion among my *umma* is a mercy.") which the Mu'tazilites, Ẓahirīs, Ḥanafīs, and modern Hadith scholars all brushed aside as fabricated.[62] This oversight was more than just an isolated instance of his careless citation of Prophetic traditions. Like the scholars whom he had derided, Nasution also utilized effective *aḥadīth*, regardless of their provenance, to bolster his arguments. Unlike some Hadith scholars who were often uncritical toward their sources, Nasution's primary failing was his frequent cherry-picking of those *aḥadīth* that were useful to his project of freeing the Sunna from outdated methodologies.

In Nasution's view, however, the onus of reinterpreting of the science of Hadith and the Sunna lay not on him, but on the *'ulamā*, whom he considered to be resistant to all efforts at renewing Islamic thought (*pembaharuan pemikiran Islam*), a condition that had persisted for centuries. Why was this so? Nasution located the source of the problem in their reservations regarding the use of *ijtihād*. They placed strict limits on its use and saw it as only applicable for select jurisprudential matters. Nasution disagreed with the widespread concept of *ijtihād* as the "capacity to exert oneself to produce a legal opinion … [either by a jurist] devising an opinion … [in response to] an inquiry, or … through conveying a recorded opinion this jurist has the authority to convey, customized as it may be to the case of the questioner."[63] To Nasution, *ijtihād* instead meant the use of a variety of reasoning techniques and tools to analyze texts in relation to contexts. He conceptualized *ijtihād* as the third source of Islam (*sumber ketiga ajaran Islam*), after the Qur'ān and the Sunna. Therefore, he did not provincialize it within the sphere of Islamic law, but instead made the enterprising proposition that *ijtihād* is applicable to all areas of human knowledge and experience.[64]

This different conception of *ijtihād* points to how the term was more broadly contested in modern Islamic discourse. According to Anver M. Emon, "there are two kinds of *ijtihād* in the modern world: "scholarship that addresses *ijtihād* in particular social settings or *ijtihād* as a reform strategy."[65] For his part, Nasution felt that the latter was underutilized. Most modern scholars considered the doors of *ijtihād* to be closed (*insidād bāb al-ijtihād*) throughout the Muslim world and that traditional scholarship had remained inert for centuries. Harun Nasution explained that the concept of the "closure of the door of *ijtihād*" was an exaggerated description rather than an accurate reflection of the development of Islamic intellectual history.[66] He argued that contrary to popular opinion, attempts at revival and reform were evident throughout Islamic history, as evinced both in the writings of medieval Islamic scholars, such as Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymīyya (1263–1328 CE) and Shams al-Dīn Abū 'Abdullāh Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya (1292–1350 CE), and many other modern reformists.

Many of these self-styled reformers were directly inspired by the *ḥadīth* that predicted a renewer (*mujaddid*) would emerge at the beginning of each century in the Islamic calendar, who would bring new life into the religion of Islam.[67] Even so, during Nasution's life, the reality of the situation in Southeast Asia was that intellectual conformity (*taqlīd*) reigned supreme, even if some reformist *'ulamā* did produce some innovative works. Nevertheless, these reformist *'ulamā* chose to enclave *ijtihād* specifically within the Shafi'ī school of jurisprudence and narrowed their attention to other selected themes.[68]

The decision to marginalize *ijtihād* has attracted the attention of notable scholars of Islamic law, such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, who characterized it as emblematic of the authoritarian habits of Islamic interpretive communities. In his view, interpretive habits become authoritarian when interpretive communities, in this case the *'ulamā*, believe that their version of truth is exclusive and supreme.[69] In the same vein, Nasution depreciated twentieth-century reformist *'ulamā* in Southeast Asia for the scholarly habits which they cultivated unconsciously. Despite calling for a reformation of Muslim attitudes and practices, these reformers, and especially those linked to the Muḥammadīya movement, were in Nasution's view still limited by ascribing to a narrow and premodern concept of *ijtihād*, which limited their proposed reformation of Islamic thought to peripheral issues. He also argued that the reformist *'ulamā* paid disproportionate respect to the voluminous works of their predecessors, and that they did not choose to look beyond the largely premodern canon of Islamic religious scholarship. In Nasution's view, the trepidation of the traditionalist *'ulamā* concerning *ijtihād* gave rise to parochialism, dogmatism, bigotry, and hostility toward advances in science and technology which they considered to be reprehensible innovations (*bid'a*).[70] In such attacks against the traditionalist *'ulamā*, Nasution tacitly implicated the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (Revival of the Ulama) movement, which remained highly resistant to the practice of *ijtihād* as recently as the 1990s.[71]

To imbue more dynamism into *ijtihād*, Nasution promoted a renewed form of *ijtihād* that possessed the following features. First, it would be guided by the moral principles set forth in the Qur'ān and Sunna. Scholars practicing such *ijtihād* would rise above literalist and legalistic approaches to the Sunna and attempt to situate Prophetic sayings and actions within the scope of modern conditions. Second, this renewed form of *ijtihād* would also engage with premodern instances of *ijtihād*, with a view to producing new methodology of the practice that is divested from past thinking. Nasution advocated this because he viewed premodern *ijtihād* as unduly conditioned by the historical circumstances of the *'ulamā* of the time. Modernity, however, thoroughly diverged from the premodern past and as such required new modes of thinking and reasoning. Third, he proposed that a renewed form of *ijtihād* would also

distinguish between aspects of Islamic thought that are immutable, such as divine unity (*tawḥīd*), the authority of the Qur'ān and Sunna, the importance of moral norms, the prohibition of liquor and all sorts of intoxicants, versus other fields that were variable, such as the role of women in society and the types of political system which Muslims should support and uphold.[72]

Crucially, Nasution also proposed that scholars following his renewed approach to *ijtihād* would celebrate differences in ideas and accept them as equally legitimate, rather than being bound to a singular and exclusive school of thought. They would, he proposed, view all schools of theology, jurisprudence, and branches of Islamic studies as mutable and would seek a functional convergence between them. Analytical lapses and fierce contestations would inevitably arise between thinkers who employed *ijtihād* in different ways, but Nasution maintained that such errors and debates would invigorate the discourse and promote superior scholarship on the road to reforming Islam. He further proposed that the renewed form of *ijtihād* could benefit from the already established dialectical tools from the Islamic legal tradition, such as analogical argument (*qiyās*), inferential argument (*istidlāl*), custom (*'āda*), consensus (*ijmā'*), public good (*istiṣlāḥ*), and equity (*istiḥsān*), all of which could be used to formulate new, modern techniques.[73] Nasution envisaged that the *'ulamā* following the renewed form of *ijtihād* would eventually pay less attention to ancillary issues (*furū'*), such as owning dogs, the permissibility of photography, music, feasting, and determining the end of Ramadan, to instead focus on resolving foundational problems involving educational reforms, addressing poverty, moral decadence, corruption, rampant authoritarianism, and environmental degradation. Engaging with these foundational issues entailed collective rather than individual efforts. The rapid expansion of various fields of study and the increased complexities of modern life demand that every problem must be approached by experts from different fields, including the religious and secular sciences.[74] To borrow from Tariq Ramadan's parlance, Nasution yearned for "text scholars" (*'ulamā al-nuṣūs*)" and "context scholars" (*'ulama al-wāqi'*) to "henceforth work together, on an equal footing, to set off this radical reform."[75]

Finally, Nasution asserted that a renewed form of *ijtihād* must rest on the twin foundations of deep spirituality and a strong sense of history. Muslim scholars guided by pure hearts and possessing virtuous characters would naturally direct their attention to pioneering universally beneficial ideas for the sake of happiness in this world and the hereafter. Conversely, Muslim scholars guided by purely selfish materialism and the love of power would inevitably produce negative consequences. Nasution offered this dynamic to the Mu'tazilites as an example to illustrate how their attempt during the ninth century to force their rationalist doctrines upon the wider Muslim community led to their downfall and marginalization from Islamic history. The same can be applied to the

Kharijites, whose campaigns of violence and radical ideology that declared all other Muslims as unbelievers led to their own marginalization. These examples were not only historical but also highly rhetorical, considering that in Southeast Asia, both groups were looked upon as despised heretics.[76]

In line with this, Nasution emphasized the importance of Islamic intellectual history as a contextual prerequisite for his renewed form of *ijtihād*. His books are replete with references to major breakthroughs in the sciences by the greatest Muslim minds who practiced *ijtihād* from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries CE. Nasution was aware of the fact that such histories were not purely academic pursuits. He correctly understood that promoting these histories can bring about real change in contemporary approaches to Islamic interpretive traditions. He attributed Islam's past intellectual supremacy to the premium Muslim thinkers placed on the role of spirituality and ethics, which he viewed as a guide to their use of reason and urged his contemporaries to recognize this lost intellectual heritage (*turāth*). He further enjoined them to recognize that Islamic civilization historically encompassed not just the spheres of law, social regulation, philosophy, aesthetics, politics, and culture, but also included mystical and ethical dimensions (*akhlāq*), all of which must be studied to reform and revive "dynamic Islamic rationality" in modern times.[77]

Muslim Theology Reconsidered

Disputes over theology (*'ilm al-kalām*) have raged among Muslim scholars since the earliest days of Islamic history. With the advent of modernity and European colonialism in the eighteenth century, modern Muslim reformers espoused new theologies as a means of freeing the *umma* (Muslim nation) from the negative effects of mysticism and superstition that were perceived as weakening Muslims' political power. From the vantage point of the reformers, Muslims were stifled by a pervading sense of fatalism and the notion that the downfall of once-mighty Islamic empires was divine punishment. The prevailing belief, so powerful among Muslims from the eighteenth century onwards, was that God was the sole cause of this drastic turn of events, and that attempts at adopting modern knowledge would do little to alter what had been divinely preordained. In response to these popular attitudes, modern Muslim reformers promoted a theology of liberation, empowerment and rationality as a means of responding to the political decline of Muslim lands.[78]

As one such scholar interested in the restoration of rationality to Islamic religious discourse, Harun Nasution felt that the reconstruction of Muslim theological thought in the twentieth century was far from achieved. He divided Muslim theological thought in Southeast Asia into two trends, namely a secularist theology and a fatalist theology. Both theologies affected how Muslims carried out their daily lives, just as they both affected the ways in

which Muslims imagined their future in a rapidly changing world.[79] Nasution may have well approved of Martin Nguyen's observation that, for Muslims, "theology encompasses the totality of one's being. It is reflected in our very way of living, our thoughts and feelings, our inclinations and dispositions, our intentions and actions, our habits and observances … As such, theology, expressing simultaneously a state of being and the aspiration for faith, determines the nature of one's perpetually changing relationship with God."[80] Since theology affects one's view of God and of life in general, Nasution saw it necessary to discuss the deficiencies inherent in both of these theological trends. As for the former, Nasution castigated secularist theology, with its roots in European thought, for downplaying the role of religion in society. Such theology did not necessarily deny God's existence, but instead tended to view God as inconsequential to everyday life. Religious faith was viewed as a hindrance to progress, and religious scriptures were regarded as having little relevance for modern life. Secularist theology maintained that human beings should define their own ideas of morality and social norms without recourse to divine dictates. Consequently, it privileged the material needs of life over the spiritual and the metaphysical. Nasution inferred that such a theology, would "predictably and soon enough lead to the destruction of societies."[81]

The fatalist theology intrigued Harun Nasution even more. It is a recurrent theme as well as a subject of critical appraisal in almost all of his books. He viewed it as the more influential of the two trends in Southeast Asian Muslim theology, considering it as having had a ubiquitous influence throughout the region since the thirteenth century. At that time, Muslim missionaries introduced a version of Islam to Southeast Asia that was based on Ash'arite theology. As a belief system, Ash'arism provided little room for philosophical and intellectual deliberations while emphasizing the notion that human beings do not act according to their own will. Instead, it maintained that humans acquire (*kasb*) their acts from what God bestows upon them. Nasution attributed this type of thinking to what he called an insularity in thought (*pemikiran sempit*), which resulted in declining creativity.[82] This situation was worsened, in Nasution's view, by the spread of a world-renouncing Sufism. Propagated through the work of organized mystical brotherhoods (*tarīqa*, pl.: *ṭuruq*), this particular type of Sufism popularized the belief that worldly life was the domain of non-Muslims. Conversely, these Sufis emphasized spiritual enlightenment at the expense of material progress. This strain of Sufism also propagated the Jabarīyya school of Islamic theology, which denied man's freedom of choice and affirmed that life was predestined by God.

For Nasution, the popularization of Ash'arism, world-renouncing Sufism, and Jabarī theology had concrete socio-political consequences. For one, he argued that such theological schools made Muslims passive, as trust in God (*tawakkul*) became a sufficient prerequisite for worldly success. He also

denounced the prevalence of authoritarian rulers, who presented themselves as semi-divine figures that justified and enforced this claim through Jabarī theology and alliances with powerful Sufi orders. He further argued that the ill-effects of such fatalist theology were exacerbated by the rigidities of the Shafi'ī school of jurisprudence taught by traditionalist scholars across Southeast Asia. Despite their apparent juridical pluralism, Nasution had a dim assessment of modernist Muslim movements, such as those associated with *Al-Irshād al-Islāmīyya* and the Muḥammadīya, which in his view did not sufficiently negate the influence of Jabarī theology. After all, although these movements were generally inspired by Muhammad 'Abduh's reformist thought, they chose to sidestep 'Abduh's rational theology.[83]

In examining these critiques offered by Nasution in his books, it is clear that his analysis of theological trends is often reductionist. While it is true that the Ash'arite, Jabarīyya and Shafi'ī ideas permeated Southeast Asian Islam, these ideas did not, in fact, lead to the decline of Muslim societies in the region. From the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Islam grew rapidly in Southeast Asia, transforming the region into the home of one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Powerful Muslim empires known for their cosmopolitan cities, advanced technology, state-of-the-art infrastructure, and vibrant commercial activities flourished. Moreover, and contrary to the thrust of Nasution's argument, the emergence of fatalist theology coincided with the production of large quantities of philosophical and scientific writings.[84] Therefore, although theology may have been a factor in the decline of Muslim empires and societies, it was certainly not the determinative factor, as presented in Nasution's work.

Putting aside the question of the historical accuracy of Nasution's account, it can be safely argued that he intended his narrative of fatalist theology as justification for a new, alternative theology which he felt could reinvigorate intellectualism among Muslims. He chose to call this, *teologi sunnatullah* or the "theology of divine constants," he also referred to this as *teologi rasional* (rational theology) or *theologi liberal* (liberal theology). Central to this theology is the recognition of God as the originator of the natural laws of the universe.[85] Referred to as "divine constants," (*sunnat Allāh*) these include sunset and sunrise, the cycle of seasons, aging and death, innate properties of things such as the heat of fire, the coldness of ice, among others. In Nasution's conception, the divine constants governing the universe are timeless and cannot be changed, except by way of miracles or chance, two exceptions that are in themselves acts of God which occur in exceptional circumstances. It follows, then, that as the highest form of creation, human beings are given the freedom to act within the stipulated divine constants and given the power of reason and energies to derive the fullest benefit from the universe that is entrusted to them by God. The

theology of divine constants hence stands midway between determinism and proponents of free will. In advocating such a theology, Nasution reiterated the views of the Andalusian Muslim scholar, Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Rushd, aka Averroes (1126–1198 CE), who as Majid Fakhry explains, rejected "both the libertarian position of the Mu'tazilites and the deterministic position of their rivals. The alleged 'intermediate' position of the Ash'arites is, for him, entirely meaningless."[86] In doing so, Nasution clearly distanced himself from much of Mu'tazilite theology, which to him was excessively influenced by the Hellenistic-Christian philosophical tradition.[87]

Nasution emphasized that the theology of divine constants assigns a high priority to the use of reason. It compels Muslims to uncover the causes and effects behind all occurrences, hence, a more scientific and empiricist approach to life. Adopted as a theological outlook, it would bring about the dynamism of thought and action necessary to construct new theories, methodologies and other research tools to explain how the universe functions. [88] Such intellectual dynamism, according to Nasution, flourished during the classical period of Islamic history. Ibn Rushd, who was the most illustrious advocate of the theology of divine constants, had himself been highly influential in Europe via translations of his philosophical treatises, which in turn, produced the European Renaissance. Despite his posthumous influence, he was tragically persecuted in his own homeland, his ideas suppressed, and the theology of divine constants marginalized.[89]

On the surface, it seems as if Nasution's theology of divine constants lacked metaphysical substance, given its central emphasis on the utilization of instrumental reason and intellectual methods to understand natural laws. In truth, he conceded that reason has its limitations, which should be admitted by all Muslims. The Arabic word for intellect (*'aql*) etymologically derives from the concept of binding something with a rope, implying that reason is linked to the heart and soul, rather than being an independent entity.[90] Hence, for Nasution, reason in Islam is not completely unlimited, but should instead be restrained or guided by external devices. These restraining devices are ethical guidelines and spiritual insight, both of which derive from God. Without these, he argued, purely rational minds would perceive God's creations in purely self-serving ways. He therefore argued that the exertion of the intellect must be coupled with strengthening one's spiritual relationship with God in order to view creation in the fullest sense. Again some parallels can be drawn between Nasution's ideas and those of Hamka.[91] For his part, Hamka promoted the concept of guided reason, a type of rationality that is moderated by the sacred sources of Islam, by good character, as well as by reference to changing material contexts and new forms of knowledge in order for Muslims to adapt effectively to a modernizing world.[92]

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that even though Nasution blamed world-renouncing Sufis for undermining the intellectual spirit of Muslims, he nonetheless, praised Sufi scholars for their ability to produce an equilibrium between reason and spirituality. Although these Sufi scholars were too few to make a significant impact within modern Southeast Asian Islamic thought, in the classical age of Islamic history they had been the driving force behind the growth of "dynamic Islamic rationality." Sufistic concepts of *zuhd* (ascetism), *tawba* (repentance), *wara'* (religious scrupulousness), *ṣabr* (patience), *maḥabba* (love) and *ma'rifa* (gnosis) were, in Nasution's view, essential concepts with which Muslim scholars and the learned public must be acquainted.[93] He summarized their contributions accordingly:

> The Sufis did not view the sharpening of the intellect or *'aql* as a guarantee for making a noble character. Human beings with intelligent minds can use their reason and their knowledge for evil ends. Because of this, they [the Sufis] focus their attention on the sharpening of the faculty that is centered on the heart … Hence, in Islamic teachings, what makes a human being righteous and just is not the sharpness of his reason but the purity of his heart. The pure heart is the guide for the sharp mind toward the straight path. The realization of justice therefore entails a balance between the development of the spiritual powers, reason and the heart.[94]

Conclusion

In his survey of the development of Islamic universities in Indonesia, Azyumardi Azra considers Harun Nasution as a transformational figure who helped broaden Islamic studies, converting it from a field that was limited to a specific school of thought into one that incorporated a diverse range of viewpoints. The upshot of Nasution's contributions was a movement away from ideological sectarianism to a culture of intellectual pluralism. Additionally, Nasution, along with such intellectuals as Nurcholish Madjid and the former Indonesian Minister of Religious Affairs, Mukti Ali, produced a shift "from a normative approach [in Islamic studies] to a historical, sociological, and empirical approach. The normative approach to studying Islam, which tends to neglect human socio-historical realities, has led Muslims to see Islam as an idealistic religion."[95]

Such notable achievements should not obscure Nasution's failures and limitations. For one, he tended to overstate the importance of Mu'tazilite thought in its capacity to effect a dynamic form of Islamic rationalism. Hence, to the extent that Mu'tazilite thought can be a source of inspiration, it could not eradicate backward thinking in the Muslim world. Furthermore, his insistence on the importance of reviving rationalism contributed to the misconception that the early-modern Muslim world failed to progress intellectually and denied the continuing role of rationalism in Islamic discourse, which persisted for many centuries after the marginalization of the Mu'tazilite school. Nasution's

overemphasis on the specific role of the Mu'tazilite school paralleled his similar overemphasis of the importance of modern Muslim thinkers who sought to revive Islamic rationalism. He devoted great attention to reformist intellectuals from the Arab world, Turkey, and South Asia, but very little to those of Southeast Asian thinkers such as Syed Sheikh Syed Aḥmad Al-Hādī, Muḥammad Natsir, and Hamka. Ironically, these same scholars and others not only shared his call for a "dynamic Islamic rationality," but in fact, predated Nasution's work on that same topic. This lacuna in Nasution's work may stem from his perception that the Islamic reformist thinkers in Southeast Asia were not on a par with their Middle Eastern, Turkish, and South Asian counterparts.

An inspiration to many Muslim reformers and, at the same time, a nemesis for traditionalists and conservatives, Nasution's writings cannot be ignored by scholars of Southeast Asian Islam. Like the Mu'tazilites and other Islamic rationalist thinkers whom he admired and selectively drew upon, Harun Nasution was an archetype of the Southeast Asian Muslim reformers who expanded the latitude of intellectual freedom in modern Islam and confronted the burden of decline in Muslim thought.[96] Even though his ideas did not translate into a mass movement, his independent spirit, his disassociation with any political or social movements, and the consistency with which he promoted the concept of "dynamic Islamic rationality" have earned him avid followers among the Southeast Asian Muslim intelligentsia.[97] Today, Nasution's continuing influence is felt in networks of Muslim thinkers, globally and in Southeast Asia, who share his vision of presenting "a balance that could both appeal to the rationalist mind and also nurture the inner spiritual life … [and which would enable] Islam to stay relevant and responsive to the needs of the changing times."[98]

Endnotes

1. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 43–83.

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3. Harun Nasution, *Pembaharuan Dalam Islam: Sejarah Pemikiran Dan Gerakan* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 2003), pp. 206–209.

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5. Harun Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya, Jilid II* (Jakarta: Penerbit Universitas Indonesia, 2009), pp. 113–115.

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35. This is a method common among modernist interpreters such as Farid Esack, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud and Fazlur Rahman. See Shadaab Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 3.

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37. Harun Nasution, *Islam Rasional*, pp. 27–28.

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39. Harun Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam*, p. 31.

40. Ibid., p. 38.

41. Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar Vol. 1* (Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas, 1982). See Peter G. Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), p. 275.

42. Abdullah Saeed pushes back on the supposed anti-rationalism of the *'ulamā* in a bolder way: "We cannot deny that much of the *tafsīr* literature we have today is largely based on reason. If *tafsīr* is to be based *entirely* on tradition, it would be no more than a dry exercise in reading a Qur'anic verse followed by explanatory hadith or reports from the Companions traced back to the Prophet. Accepting this view of *tafsīr* would also mean rejecting much of the *tafsīr* literature." See Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 67–68.

43. Harun Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam*, p. 75.

44. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1987), p. 24.

45. Harun Nasution, *Teologi Islam: Aliran-Aliran Sejarah Analisis Perbandingan* (Jakarta: Universiti Indonesia Press, 2002), p. 102.

46. Nasution, *Islam Rasional*. Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam*, pp. 68–80.

47. Harun Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam*, p. 101.

48. By confessional, I refer here to his unapologetic view of the unaltered, divine, and timeless essence of the Qur'ān as the word of God.

49. Andrew Rippin, "Western Scholarship and the Qur'an," in *The Cambrige Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 246.

50. Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting Muhammad's Legacy* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2014), pp. 15–68.

51. Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 6.

52. Harun Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam*, p. 37.

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54. Haji Mohammad Rasjidi, *Koreksi Terhadap Dr. Harun Nasution* (Jakarta: Penerbit Bulan Bintang, 1977), pp. 24, 145.

55. L. Ali Khan and Hisham M. Ramadan, *Contemporary Ijtihad: Limits and Controversies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 4–5. Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), p. 3. Nasution, 'Kata Pengantar', pp. 3–4.

56. Nasution, *Pembaharuan Dalam Islam*, p. 22.

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58. Gualtherus H. A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), pp. 139–149.

59. Ahmad Amin, *Fajr Al-Islam* (Cairo: Maktaba al Nahza al Misariya, 1955), p. 238.

60. Khaled Abou El Fadl argues with the same tenor about Hadith in *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2001), pp. 192–193.

61. Nasution, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran*, p. 309.

62. Nasution, *Teologi Islam*, p. 152. Rejection of the authenticity of this *ḥadīth* among modern Hadith scholars, as well as pre-modern Mu'tazilites, Ẓahirīs, and Ḥanafīs is discussed in Amr Osman, *The Zahiri Madhhab (3rd/9th-10th/16th Century): A Textualist Theory of Islamic Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 152–153. Muhammad Saed Abdul-Rahman, *Islam: Questions and Answers - The Hadeeth and Its Sciences* (London: MSA Publication Limited, 2003), p. 159.

63. Ahmad Atif Ahmad, *The Fatigue of the Shari'a* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

64. Harun Nasution, "Ijtihad: Sumber Ketiga Ajaran Islam," in *Ijtihad Dalam Sorotan*, ed. Haider Bagir and Syafiq Basri (Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, 1994), pp. 108–16. Harun Nasution, "Menyeru Pemikiran Rasional Mu'tazilah," in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution* (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 56.

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67. Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya, Jilid II*, pp. 15–17.

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