

# **Re-Assessment of Ash'arism in Modern Indonesia: Comparing Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid's Perception**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Islamic Studies at the  
Faculty of Islamic Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of**

**Master of Arts (M.A.)**



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## ABSTRACT

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Since Islam was first transmitted to Indonesia, the Islamic teachings received by the Indonesian people were based on Sufism theories. This necessarily indicates that the Islamic belief system adopted by the Indonesian Muslim community at that time was sunnī-Ash'arī. However, over the years, this doctrine became the object of criticism by a number of modernist thinkers because of its tendency towards fatalism, which was considered to be the cause of the Muslims' backwardness. With regard to the Indonesian context, Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid are two modernist figures who paid attention to such a situation. Although both figures live in the modern era, the fact that they have different arguments on the matter of Ash'arism—Nasution strongly criticizing it while Nurcholish tends to defend this theology—makes their ideas interesting to be explored further. The importance of this study lies in observing the transition of Ash'arism belief through two figures who have several backgrounds in common yet draw conflicting conclusions. Through a comparison of both figures, it can be understood how theological issues are not the only factors contributing to the backwardness of Muslims. As a result, the assumptions surrounding the doctrines of fatalism and irrationality ascribed to Indonesian society remain academically debatable. Ultimately, this research will contribute to the academic debate regarding the perception of Ash'arism and its challenges in the modern and (post)modern period where the religious, social and faith crisis faced by Muslims in Indonesia is no longer the same as in previous periods. This study attempts to identify several factors causing them to have different arguments in repositioning the Ash'arism beliefs within the modern context. By utilizing content analysis method with relational type, this research will analyze the conception of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid's thoughts that lead them to different opinions on Ash'arism. This method works by presupposing their thoughts as 'windows' that can be viewed to produce an assessment of the emergence of their conceptions of theological thought in the same time and space (modern). The aim is to find a relation known as a concept matrix or a collective ideas interconnected and bound either in a positive or negative way. This research argues that the difference in their assessment of Ash'arism is not solely through the condition of Indonesian society as a representation of the Muslim backwardness, but also due to the influence of two enormous other factors: Islamic reform in the Middle East and the development of Islamic studies within Western academia. This argument will implicate one's understanding of a particular theology, especially Ash'arism. Following this argument the research, one will be more aware of their perception of other possibilities affecting their assessment of certain theologies.

**Keywords:** *Modernist; Islamic Theology; Ash'aris; Harun Nasution; Nurcholish Madjid*

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## ABBREVIATION DIRECTORY

FPI	: <i>Forum Pengkajian Isklam (Islamic Studies Forum)</i>
GPI	: <i>Gerakan Pemuda Islam (Islamic Youth Movement)</i>
HIS	: <i>Hollandsch Inlandsche School</i>
HMI	: <i>Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (Islamic Student Association)</i>
IAIN	: <i>Institut Agama Islam Negri (State Islamic Institute)</i>
ICMI	: <i>Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim se-Indonesia (Association of Muslim Scholars in Indonesia)</i>
IIFSO	: <i>International Islamic Federation of Students Organizations</i>
KKA	: <i>Klub Kajian Agama (Religious Studies Club)</i>
KMI	: <i>Kulliyatul Mu'allimīn al-Islāmiyya</i>
LP3ES	: <i>Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan, dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial (Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education, and Information)</i>
MIK	: <i>Moderne Islamithsche Kweekschool</i>
MULO	: <i>Nahdlat al-<u>U</u>lamā</i>
NU	: <i>Revue des Etudes Islamiques</i>
PEMIAT	: <i>Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Asia Tenggara (Southeast Asian Islamic Student Association)</i>
PII	: <i>Pelajar Islam Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic Student)</i>
PMKI	: <i>Perkumpulan Membangun Kembali Indonesia (Association for Rebuilding Indonesia)</i>
TIM	: <i>Taman Ismail Marzuki (Ismail Marzuki Park)</i>

# Chapter I

## Background of The Research

### 1.1 Introduction

The theological aspect in every religious community is one of the fundamental factors in directing the actions of the believer. Classical Islamic theologians from various schools, such as *Khawārij*, *Qādariyya*, *Mu‘tazila*, *Shī‘a* and then end up with *Ash‘ariyya* have a very significant role in defending the faith of Muslims and shaping their attitudes. Historically speaking, the rupture of several theological schools was caused by several internal and external factors.<sup>1</sup> However, the main focus of this study is not to explain this matter. I mention it here due to emphasizing the point that the birth of Islamic theology as a discourse—as Alessandro, Sabine Schmidtke, and Ahmad Amin have argued—was surrounded by socio-political factors<sup>2</sup>, and its development potential is very possible to be reconstructed.

Contested debates over Islamic theology, or *kalām*, have continued for centuries. This indicates how each sect stands for the truth and aims to dominate the others. In addition, the ‘fighting’ also indicates the existence of epistemological and methodological struggles in determining the direction of Islamic theological discourse. This has also become one of the serious problems related to Islamic theology which has resulted in the diversity of views on theological issues, not only among the mainstream theologians (Mu‘tazilī, Shī‘ī, Ash‘arī, Māturīdī and Salafī schools), but also among the followers of these schools from among modernist thinkers.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, the dynamic momentum that occurs in the formulation of argumentative propositions in Islamic theology itself becomes apparent, in particular on the issue of human predestination-fatalism contained in the doctrine of Ash‘arism. This doctrine is frequently criticized by modernists because of its orientation regarding the will of God when confronted with the problems of Western modernity demanding the use of scientific approaches and rationality in

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<sup>1</sup> Sabine Schmidtke, -Introduction, in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine

<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Amin, *Duha al-Islam*, 1st ed. (Cairo: lajnat al-taalif wattarjamat wannashr, 1933); Alessandro Cancian, -Islamic Theology, in *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms—Methods—Trends*, vol. 3, 1 vols. (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), p. 58; Sabine Schmidtke, -Introduction, in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Nedžad Grabus, -Islamic Theology between Tradition and Challenge of Modernity, in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (July 2012): 267–77.

addressing religious issues.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I will try to analyze their perception of Ash'arī theology, as the dominant Islamic sunnī theology in Indonesia, through the opinions of two Indonesian modernist thinkers,<sup>5</sup> Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid.

In its development, the Ash'arī theology that represents *sunnī* thoughts were more accepted among the majority of Muslim communities around the world, particularly in Indonesia.<sup>6</sup> According to some scholars, this was due to their teachings being considered the most moderate among other theological sects and it is considered to be more adaptable to the surrounding environment.<sup>7</sup> However, another scholar said that and political power also influenced the persistence of their existence.<sup>8</sup> It is this fact that leads this discussion to concern the two Indonesian modernist figures for their framing of Ash'arī theology as the oldest faith embraced by the Indonesian people.

To see the development of these theological thoughts in the context of Indonesia, It is important to mention briefly the history of the presence of Islam in Indonesia. According to Johns, Alatas, and Azra, Sufis from the Middle East who taught ḥadīth and had majlis ṭarīqahs (Sufi orders) in Mecca and Medina played an important role in the process of Islamization, particularly in the Malay-Indonesian region.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the *majlis ṭarīqahs* (sufi order) that have operated in several regions such as *Khalwatiyya*,

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<sup>4</sup> Fauzan Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia: A Critical Survey* (BRILL, 2001), p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there is a kind of tug-of-war in the terminology of both figures. Budy Munawar-Rachman, for example, in his article entitled 'Pemikiran Neo-Modernisme Islam Di Indonesia/Islamic Neo-Modernist Thought in Indonesia' explains the fundamental difference between Modernist and Neo-Modernist thinking. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that Neo-Modernists, according to Rachman, try to build a vision-mission of Islam in the modern era without ignoring the legacy of Islamic intellectual heritage. Even modernism itself can be obtained through the roots of Islam itself. However, the classification given by Rachman is more directed towards the prototype of their thoughts, while what I mean by 'modernist figures' are those who lived in an era where the hegemony of Western scientific development began to penetrate into the Islamic world, and therefore led to the Islamic reform movement. See: Budhy Munawar Rachman, -Pemikiran Neo-Modernisme Islam Di Indonesia, in *Dekonstruksi Islam: Mazhab Ciputat*, ed. E'dy A. Effendy (Bandung: Zaman, 1999), p. 135. For more details on what and who I intend by these modernist figures, please refer to my explanation in Chapter 2 under the sub-chapter -The Beginning of Modernized Theology in Indonesia.

<sup>6</sup> Saleh, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Suleiman Nadwi, —Al-Imām al-Ash'arī Rā'id al-Manhaj al-Wasath Fi Mazāhib Kalāmiyyal, in *Al-Imām Al-Ash'arī Imam Ahl Al-Sunna Wal Jamā'a*, ed. Ahmed Al-Thayyeb, 1st ed., vol. 3 (Cairo: Dar al-Quds al-Arabi, 2014), p. 321.

<sup>8</sup> Mahmoud Ismael, *Sosiolujia Al-Fikr al-Islami*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Cairo: Sina li al-Nashr, 2000), p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> Syed Farid Alatas, -Notes on Various Theories Regarding the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago, in *The Muslim World*, 75, no. 3-4 (October 1985), p. 34; Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern —Ulamāll in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 1. publ, Southeast Asia Publications Series (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2004), p. 18; Anthony H Johns, —Sufism as a Category in Indonesian Literature and History, in *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961), p. 9.

*Shattariyya*, and *Sammaniyya* also reinforce this argument.<sup>10</sup> Azyumardi Azra emphasises the relations between Muslims in the Middle East and Malay-Indonesia have been established since the 11th and 12th centuries, the early days of Islam being present in the archipelago through traders from Persia, Arabia, and the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore, in the 13th century onwards, the spread of Islam in Indonesia was more dominantly conveyed by Sufis and scholars.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the Islamic teachings brought by the *ṣūfīs* influenced the style of Islam in Indonesia until the end of the 19th century<sup>12</sup>, or rather before the era of colonialism began<sup>13</sup>, including its influence on theological matters. As such, primordial Islamic teachings in Indonesia have influenced the process of polarizing Islamic belief systems that are heavily associated with the Sufism theories.<sup>14</sup>

In this case, Ricklefs gives his opinion that the concept of mysticism embedded in Malay society is prominent elements that 'bring together' the spiritual element of Islam and the element of Hindu-Buddhist mysticism that has long been implemented in the archipelago. Eventually, the Indonesian people could adapt well to the polarized teachings of Islam with its *suḥfī* spiritualism teachings.<sup>15</sup>

Increasingly, the era of modernity has given Muslims the space to rethink their religious beliefs for their relevance to the current social order. The emergence of various problems in society, and the very dynamic progress of science have led Muslims to the reconstruction of theological principles. Along with the return of Indonesian thinkers educated in the West in the 20th century, this shift in the paradigm of Islamic-sunnī theology became an object of study actively discussed by Islamic scholars in the Indonesian context. This situation has caused Indonesian Muslims to re-articulate their religious beliefs covering the levels of thought, appreciation, politics, and social systems. Such diversity causes the vulnerability of the internal environment of religious communities in relation to a wider and more complicated life. With Harun Nasution and

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Francis Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton [N.J.]; Oxford [England]: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*; Carool Kersten, -Cosmopolitan Muslim Intellectuals and the Mediation of Cultural Islam in Indonesia,|| *Comparative Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1–2 (September 20, 2012): 105–36.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony H Johns, -The Role of Sufism in the Spread of Islam to Malaya and Indonesia,|| *Journal of The Pakistan Historical Society* 9, no. 3 (July 1961), p. 18; Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam*, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from The Fourteenth to The Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Norwalk: East Bridge Signature Books, 2006), p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*; Alatas, —Notes on Various Theories Regarding the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago; Carool Kersten, *A History of Islam in Indonesia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from The Fourteenth to The Early Nineteenth Centuries*, p. 31.

Nurcholish Madjid as the main pioneers, this phenomenon has shaped the main themes of Islamic theology in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the modern period is a time when Islamic discourse and education in Indonesia was reconstructed by the Western style of thought brought by Indonesian modernist. This period ranged from the early 20th century in which Islamic doctrines experienced a significant shift in the context of theological matters.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that modernity caused by the rise of the West (Renaissance) in the early modern period, 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, has a significant impact on the Islamic scholarly world. One of which is the proliferation of schools of renewal (*tajdīd*) in the Islamic sciences, including the science of Islamic theology (*ilm kalām*). This requires progressive thinkers to reconstruct the postulates of Islamic theological creed, specifically on the issue of rationality. The most important motives for the emergence of these innovative movements among their advocates are to awaken thought from a state of stagnation, to call for religious reform, to affirm the role of reason and science, and to bring the teachings of Islam, especially the science of theology, to the present-day reality.<sup>17</sup> In addition, some modernist thinkers, including Harun Nasution, asserted that existing Islamic theology was heavily oriented towards metaphysical opacity. Its principles were exclusively concerned with liberation in a purely metaphysical sense that was beyond the historical process and could not overcome unavoidable social crises.<sup>18</sup>

The turmoil of modern theological thought as a result of the renewal movement has influenced—to borrow Fazlur Rahman's term—the 'classical modern thinkers' in Indonesia.<sup>19</sup> This influence began with the role of the earliest intellectual reformers in Southeast Asia who were influenced by reformist ideas from South Asia and Arabic-speaking countries, such as Sayyid Ahmad Khān and Muhammad Abduh. They were particularly interested in reviving the authentic Islamic ideas of the —Pious Ancestors

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<sup>16</sup> Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia*, p. 57; Carool Kersten, 'Indonesia's New Muslim Intellectuals,' *Religion Compass* 3, no. 6 (December 2009): p. 85; Carool Kersten, 'Cosmopolitan Muslim Intellectuals and the Mediation of Cultural Islam in Indonesia,' *Comparative Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1–2 (September 20, 2012): p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Abdul Jabbar al-Rifai, 'Nahw Ilm Kalam Jadid,' in *Mukaddima*, ed. Abdul Jabbar al-Rifai (Baghdad: Markaz Dirasa Falsafa al-Din, 2016), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, 'Religion, Ideology and Liberation Theology,' in *Religion and Liberation*, ed. Asghar Ali Engineer (Delhi: Anjanta Publication, 1989), p. 139.

<sup>19</sup> Fazlur Raḥmān, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, 8. impr, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies 15 (Chicago London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 62.

(*al-salaf al-sālih*), or the early Muslim community in seventh-century Medina, to resist the onslaught of western modernity.<sup>20</sup>

Along with the publication of the works of the world's Muslim scholars in the Indonesian language<sup>21</sup>, Indonesian scholars such as Ahmad Dahlan, Agus Salim, Mohammad Natsir, and Deliar Noer also had an awareness of reformulating Islamic teachings after they read some of Muhammad Abduh's works. However, at least in this regard, it was only Harun Nasution who paid more attention to the academic nuances in Indonesia with these ideas in a comprehensive manner.<sup>22</sup> One of his most prominent works and became an academic concern for later scholars was his Doctoral Thesis which reviewed Muhammad Abduh's dependence on Mu'tazila's rationality.<sup>23</sup> With this work, Nasution is considered to have succeeded in reviving critical nuances in the academic world as a result of his influence on Muhammad Abduh's ideas of rationality<sup>24</sup>, so that this led some authors to dub him as a neo-muktazila scholar.<sup>25</sup>

In this paradigm, Clifford Geertz says that this issue became a focal point for Indonesian modernists to reformulate their theological arguments. Geertz then concludes that Indonesian traditionalist Muslims are more likely to attribute everything to God's will, while modernist Muslims attribute it to human action.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Harun Nasution stated that one of the reasons for the backwardness of Muslims in Indonesia is because they tend to adhere to Ash'arism which tends to be fatalistic and extremely focused on the afterlife.<sup>27</sup> However, in contrast to Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid also discusses this matter in the context of modern Indonesia with different point of view.<sup>28</sup>

From the discussion of theological thought discourse in Indonesia as described above, this study will attempt to demonstrate how two Indonesian modernist scholars, Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid, re-articulated the discourse of Ash'arī theology

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<sup>20</sup> Kersten, —Cosmopolitan Muslim Intellectuals and the Mediation of Cultural Islam in Indonesia; B. J. Boland, *The Struggle of Islam in Modern Indonesia* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1971), p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Azyumardi Azra, -Perbukuan Islam Dan Intelektualisme Baru, in *Ruh Islam Dan Budaya Bangsa: Agama Dan Problema Masa Kini*, ed. Aswab Mahasin (Jakarta: Yayasan Festival Istiqlal, 1996), p. 43.

<sup>22</sup> Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia*, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought In The Muslim World Trends, Themes, And Issues*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Saidul Amin, *Harun Nasution Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspek*, First (Pekanbaru: Asa Riau, 2019), p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Grabus, -Islamic Theology between Tradition and Challenge of Modernity; Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia*; Muhammad Arifin, *Teologi Rasional Perspektif Pemikiran Harun Nasution* (Aceh: LKKI, 2021), p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Islam Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan, in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 181.

in the modern Indonesia. By utilizing the methodology of relational content analysis, I will compare the works of these two thinkers as well as several factors that cause them to differ in their perceptions toward Ash'arism.

As an outcome of this comparison, this study argued that the assessment of the inadequacy of Ash'arī theology in dealing with the modern challenges is not purely based on the internal problems of this theology, but rather this assumption is influenced by other external factors which are methodological instruments that he got from the West or his influence on the Islamic reform movement in the Middle East. This fact also strengthens this study's argument. Accordingly, the assessment of the shortcomings of Ash'arism does not necessarily have to be rejected, rather it is possible to develop it further by utilizing the methodological instruments developed in Islamic studies.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

Based on the background described above, my thesis will focus on exploring the main questions below:

1. How do the two Indonesian modernist figures articulate the concept of Ash'arism in the modern context?
2. Why did they differ in their assessment of Ash'ari's theology?

## **1.3 The Significance of This Study**

In the light of the above formulated problems, this research aims to explore the opinions of both Indonesian modernist figures on their understanding regarding the epistemological framework ascribed to the traditional theology of Ash'arism in Indonesia. Afterwards, I will compare and analyze their approaches through their respective works. Thus, from the comparison, I can assess the underpinning factors behind the construction of their thoughts and the extent of the objectivity in their assessments which led to their different perceptions of this theology.

The importance of this research lies in looking at the transition of Ash'arism understanding through the two figures with similar educational backgrounds, modern Islamic boarding schools and western-oriented education. For several progressive thinkers, not limited to Indonesian thinkers, the understanding of Ash'arism is often considered challenging due to the strong connection to fatalist doctrine and its irrational behavior. However, through the comparison of these two figures, we can understand how theological issues were not the only factor contributing to the Muslims'

underdevelopment. Consequently, the assumptions surrounding the fatalism doctrine and its irrationality can be academically debated. In addition, this transitional understanding can also lead to the significance of acculturation in terms of Islamic beliefs and local cultures in developing human resources for the civilizational development.

Eventually, this research will contribute to the academic debate on the perception as well as the transition of Ash'arism and its development within the modern and (post)modern periods where the religious, social, and faith crises confronted by Muslims on the Indonesian continent are no longer similar to those of previous periods.

#### **1.4 Scope And Limitation**

This study only focuses on two Indonesian thinkers, Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid. I opt to focus on these two figures mainly due to their central position in the academic sphere in Indonesia. In a sense, both figures have had a tremendous influence on the academic inner dialogue surrounding the formation of what Thomas Kuhn calls the 'new paradigm' of Islamic discourse in Indonesia.<sup>29</sup> Despite the similarities in their backgrounds, the fact that both figures have different perceptions of Ash'arism suggests a range of other factors causing these differences, making this research significant to go further than their methodologies.

In saying this, I am also limiting Ash'ari theology, not other theologies, as a belief system embedded in Indonesian society for a long time and predominantly practiced by them. These long-held beliefs have certainly undergone a process of acculturation and customization resulting in their becoming flexible and adaptable to the surrounding local culture. Therein also arises the significance of this research to answer questions around: Is it true that Ash'arism is no longer relevant? Doesn't its long existence in Indonesian society provide an opportunity to adapt in the modern age? Accordingly, the process of comparing these two figures' perspectives is expected to be analyzed as objective as possible in order to provide proportional answers to the above-mentioned questions.

#### **1.5 Literature Review**

Many scholarly studies have discussed the two modernists, Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid, by Indonesian academics. However, in general, most existing studies in this context are presented by separating them without any critical comparative study.

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 11.

Even if there is a comparison, the object of their study does not necessarily concern with its Ash'arism aspect, but instead on their main ideas concerning secularism, pluralism, justice, and rationalism. Vice versa, even though some studies review the relevance of Ash'ari's theology, the scope remains largely insulated from their perceptions regarding this theological context.

Muhammad Arifin's research entitled 'Teologi Rasional Harun Nasution/Rational Theology in the Perspective of Harun Nasution'<sup>30</sup>, for instance, investigates Nasution's ideas of rational theology as the main basis for understanding the human dimension. He also discusses several factors that led Muslims to decline and remain underdeveloped in many ways. Arifin sees Nasution's rational thinking as referring to the rules of logical, radical, coherent, and holistic reasoning. He reviews Nasution's framework as an attempt to re-explore the understanding of Mu'tazilah through Muhammad 'Abduh's point of view. Regrettably, his research has not addressed Nasution's attitude towards Ash'arism. At the very least, he only mentions that theological systems in favor of development must be reformulated in accordance with the demands of the times.

Another important and comprehensive study is Fauzan Saleh's discussion in his work 'Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia'.<sup>31</sup> He explored the development of Islamic theological discourse in Indonesia from the beginning of the 19th century to the latter part of the 20th century. He observed how modernist Muslims, including Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid, re-articulated their theological notions over the course of the century. Furthermore, he mentions the thoughts of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid as a new style of modern theology in Indonesia based on the rationality of Mu'tazila.<sup>32</sup> As a study of the development of Islamic theological discourse in Indonesia, his research relies only on some of the efforts made by modernist thinkers in formulating their theological thinking throughout the 20th century. In general, what Saleh presents illustrates a complete continuum of progress, starting with the very simple elaboration of the basic beliefs of Muslims contained in Muhammadiyah's Tarjih Decisions, to the more sophisticated expositions presented by two influential Indonesian thinkers; Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid.

Instead of concluding and recommending the development of theological discourse in Indonesia, Saleh's research is more likely to see the theological development as the growth of what he sees as 'orthodox Islam', even more orthodox than the earlier

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<sup>30</sup> Arifin, *Teologi Rasional Perspektif Pemikiran Harun Nasution*.

<sup>31</sup> Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia*.

<sup>32</sup> Saleh; Richard C Martin, Mark R Woodward, and Dwi S Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam* (British: Oneworld, 1997).

centuries' paradigm, which is signified by the vertical and horizontal mobility of Muslims in the political, cultural, and economic spheres. The discourse of Islamic theology that became the object of Saleh's study was not limited to individuals, but also extended to social organizations. For this reason, he is not narrowly focused on explaining one or two figures, rather all the thoughts of figures in that century are involved in his research. Notably in the context of Nasution and Nurcholish, Saleh discusses their thoughts under the chapter entitled *'Mu'tazilism and Neo-Modernism'*.<sup>33</sup> He discussed Nasution's rational theology approach and Nurcholish Madjid's cultural engagement. He then associated his discussion with the political situation surrounding them. Thus, although his research covers the main ideas of both figures, his study only deals with their renewal thinking in the 20th century, without any specific attention to their perceptions of Ash'arism.

Richard Martin and Mark Woodward's research also contributed to the hegemony of this modern theological discussion in Indonesia through their work entitled *'Defenders of Reason in Islam'*.<sup>34</sup> Even in his work, Woodward openly recognized Nasution's thinking as a model of modern Mu'tazilism because of his perspective on reviewing issues of rationality and naturalism.<sup>35</sup> Woodward's research focuses on the theological features of the modern context, but he only examines them from the perspective of modernity and renewal theology. Nevertheless, some of Ash'ari's traditional beliefs are reviewed several times in his writings. However, his review was only to be considered as a *'bridge'* to the transition process of theological understanding adopted by Indonesian modernists. He has no further commentary on Nasution's and Nurcholish's perceptions of this traditional Ash'ari belief.

Mujamil Komar in his article entitled *Tathawwur al-Teolujyia fi Andūnisia* (The Dynamic of Islamic Theology in Indonesia) also deals with this issue. He tries to classify the development of Islamic Theology thought discussed by Indonesian thinkers such as Harun Nasution, Nurcholis Madjid, Syafi'I Ma'arif, and so on.<sup>36</sup> This is in line with what Lukman S. Thahir offers in his article entitled *'The New Islamic Theology'*. To reach the thesis of the new theology, Thahir uses Hegel's dialectical approach in reconstructing the

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<sup>33</sup> Fauzan Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia*, p. 197.

<sup>34</sup> Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam*.

<sup>35</sup> Martin, Woodward, Atmaja, p. 191.

<sup>36</sup> Mujamil Qamar, *Tathawwur al-Teolujyia fi Andūnisia*, *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 09, no. 02 (2015).

established epistemological framework of Islamic theology.<sup>37</sup> Yet Qomar's research only relies on classifying theological ideas in general, without focusing on Nasution's and Nurcholish's thoughts in particular, let alone on their perceptions of Ash'arism. Even with Thahir's research, the focus of his research is overly broad so that he does not specifically refer to Indonesian progressive thinkers, instead referring to progressive thinkers in a global sense.

Azhar Ibrahim also made an effort to discuss modern Islamic theology. In his article<sup>38</sup>, he provides a special classification related to the new direction of Islamic theology from several Indonesian scholars. For example, he mentions Harun Nasution's theological style as a rational one, Nurcholish Madjid as a theology of humanity, and Mansour Fakih as a theology of the oppressed. According to Ibrahim, their new theological thinking responds to the conditions of the times, the insights of social sciences, philosophy, and the humanities. In addition, Muhaimin Latif's recent research<sup>39</sup> implicitly emphasizes to expand the dimensions of Islamic Theology towards humanitarian and environmental issues to respond to the crisis of modernity. Unfortunately, as with the previous studies mentioned, Ibrahim and Latif's research is more likely to look at theological aspects in a thematic way. Although Latif provides a detailed review of issues in modern theology, both studies have yet to comprehensively analyze Nasution's and Nurcholish's theological perspectives focusing on their perceptions of Ash'arism.

A recent study on this topic I should mention here is the work of Megan Brankly Abbas. In her book entitled *Whose Islam? The Western Universities and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia*<sup>40</sup>, Abbas seriously discusses prominent Indonesian Muslim scholars who traveled to the West to pursue Islamic studies in the mid-20th century, including Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid. According to Abbas, studying Islam at Western universities gave Indonesian Muslim intellectuals the opportunity for a critical experimentation with Islamic scholarship as well as raising serious questions about whether and how to protect the Islamic tradition from the hegemony of modern Western education. The educational system in the West has succeeded in creating significant new spaces for producing Islamic knowledge and reshaping religious authority.

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<sup>37</sup> Lukman Thahir, -The New Theology: Constructing Critical Islamic Theology Based on Hegel's Dialectic Theory, *HUNafa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 17, no. 1 (June 18, 2020): 88–107, <https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v17i1.585.84-103>.

<sup>38</sup> Azhar Ibrahim, -The Need for Discoursing Social Theology in Muslim Southeast Asia, *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 4, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>39</sup> Muhaemin Latif, *Ragam Paham dalam Teologi Modern* (Yogyakarta: Quantum, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Megan B. Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2021).

The main focus of Abbas's work is to trace the entanglement of Western academia and Indonesian Islam which not only establishes a new transnational connection, but also investigates the interconnectivity between Western academia and modern Islamic thought. Hence, this work will be essential for observing the genealogy of Nasution's and Nurcholish's thought because of their strong influence on Western Academia. However, because this work only examines the relationship between modern Islamic thought and Western academic education in depth, a comprehensive review of Nasution's and Nurcholish's personal thoughts is beyond the scope of this work. By using this work as one of the central references in this study, my research will contribute to completing a particular aspect of the discussion, namely the impact on their thinking of the increasing interconnection between modern Islam and Western academia.

Having mentioned some of the studies related to modern theology and its figures, it seems that this research will contribute to the academic discussion which has not been covered by these research studies, namely a comparative study of two Indonesian modernist figures, Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid, on their perception of the tenets of Ash'arism. In reading their thoughts, this study also tries to review the methodological tools they used and some of the figures on whom they were influenced. So that the factors by which they have different perceptions can be analyzed as objectively as possible. Thus, this research is expected to produce a conclusion which could eventually be used as an academic consideration for upcoming studies on Islamic theology.

## **1.6 Methodology**

Since this research is related to theological texts and thoughts, consequently I will use the analytical content approach to analyze theological ideas through the works of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid as its primary reference. In this analytical content-based research, these ideas considered as a content so that they can be described, analyzed, and then discussed as described by Alan Bryman in his book.<sup>41</sup> In other words, content analysis means a method used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts in some qualitative data. By employing this content analysis, I was able to measure and analyze the meaning, theme, or conception of certain theologies<sup>42</sup> underlying the thoughts of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid. More specifically, I used a

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<sup>41</sup> Alan Bryman and Edward Bell, *Social Research Methods*, Fifth Canadian edition (Don Mills, Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 42.

<sup>42</sup> Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 18.

relational type of content analysis that emphasizes the proximity analysis aspect. This method works by presupposing their thoughts as a 'window' that is able to be seen to produce an assessment of the emergence of their conception of theological thought over the same space and time (modern). Thus, the intention is to find a conclusion known as a "concept matrix", or a bunch of ideas interconnected and bound, in either a positive or negative way.<sup>43</sup>

## 1.7 Theoretical Framework

Since this research is concerned with theological beliefs and thoughts, the theory I will use is ideational theory. Ideation means the capacity of a mind to explore something and connect it with certain ideas. In this case, ideation refers to an object whose meaning cannot be directly understood. According to some scholars, this theory has been commonly used to analyze certain thoughts. For example, Charles Adam, in his research on Muhammad Abduh, used this theory.<sup>44</sup> This is also the way Fauzan Saleh used it in his work.<sup>45</sup>

Genealogically speaking, this theory is employed to analyze the issues surrounding populism which is currently being discussed in America. According to Hawkins, this theory conceptualizes that an idea has independent causal power with measurable impacts. These effects must be visible at various levels of analysis, and usually occur in specific time periods and in certain spaces in which these ideas must interact sensibly with other existing ideas, such as political and religious ideologies.<sup>46</sup> By using this theory, I will explore the thoughts of both the figures I have mentioned above, Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid, on their perceptions of Ash'ari theology in a thematic way. Their thoughts in the context of this approach are an 'ideation' that has an independent cause and effect on the conclusions of their thoughts. Therefore, the purpose of this theory is to compare the two ideas or thoughts and find the reasoning behind them.

## 1.8 Hypothesis

Harun Nasution succeeded in bringing academic nuances in Indonesia to be more rational. He was the first person in Indonesia to reintroduce Mu'tazilah theology in a more

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<sup>43</sup> Klaus Krippendorff, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1968), p. 59.

<sup>45</sup> Fauzan Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia*, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> Kirk A. Hawkins and Cristobal R. Kaltwasser, -Introduction, in *The Ideational Approach to Populism*, ed. Krik A. Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin, and Levente Littvay (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), p, 6.

comprehensive manner. The same goes for Nurcholish Madjid. While both figures have some differences in their approaches and thoughts, they remain to be the leading role models in the context of a newly emerging Indonesian intellectual paradigm. Moreover, the thoughts of both figures are highly relevant to be discussed in academic circles nowadays.

This research explores the arguments of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid on Ash'arism where they both give different, even contradictory opinions. Nasution's opinion stated that Ash'ari theology was relatively weak and problematic if applied to the modern context, while Nurcholish's opinion saw that this theology should be maintained because it had "integrated" with the Indonesian tradition. According to Nurcholish, Muslims only need to improve their beliefs instead of replacing them. After conducting this research using primary and secondary data, this research assumes that there are two factors resulting in the differences between Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid's views on Ash'arism. The first factor is due to the extent of their influence by the idea of Islamic reform occurred in the Middle East, particularly Egypt. While the second factor is due to their educational background in the West which introduced them to certain methodologies that have significantly influenced their point of view in investigating an object. It can be concluded from this that the reason for their different perceptions is not only because of the doctrinal factors contained in Ash'arism, but also other external variables affecting their opinions.

## **1.9 Structure of The Research**

Systematics of authorship in this study is used to explain the description of the chapters to be presented. The goal is that this research can be easily understood and systematically arranged. Therefore, I arrange it with the following sesitemation:

### **Chapter I: Backround of The Research**

In this chapter, I will explain the background of the problem, literature review, problem formulation, significance of research, methods and the used theories. This chapter is an introduction to make it easier to understand the following chapters.

### **Chapter II: Discussion (Harun Nasution's Theological View)**

In this capter, I will discuss Nasution's attitude towards Ash'arism. Before that, however, I will first discuss Nasution's intellectual project and some of his tools of thought, both of which will give an impact on his perception of Ash'arism.

### Chapter III: Discussion (Nurcholish Madjid's Theological View)

The structure of this chapter will be the same as the previous chapter. I will discuss Nurcholish's major intellectual project, his tools of thought, and finally his attitude towards Ash'arism.

### Chapter IV: A Theological Comparison

After analyzing their thoughts in chapters 2 and 3, in this chapter I will compare the differences and similarities of their thoughts according to the ideation theory I mentioned in chapter 1. Following that, I will analyze several factors affecting their thoughts. Thus, the reason for the contradictions in their perceptions of Ash'arism can be analyzed and drawn as objectively as possible.

### Chapter V: Closing

This section is the last section that includes conclusions and research summaries from the beginning of the discussion to the end.

## Chapter II

### Harun Nasution: Reflecting Sunnī-Ash'arī Theology

This chapter tries to explore Harun Nasution's brief biography as well as to outline some of his main ideas regarding the reformation of Islamic thought. In addition, rationality as the basis of his thinking when describing theological issues is also discussed in this chapter. Nasution's educational landscape and his ideas concerning rationality become two important points in the discussion of this section. I will put all of these things as his logical instruments that will be correlated with his attitude towards Ash'arism. In this chapter, I argue that in addition to his influence on Muhammad Abduh's Islamic reform, Nasution's critical nature that he had since childhood and his dissatisfaction with the Islamic learning system in religious institutions also contributed to one of his personal tendencies in sharply criticizing the Ash'arism beliefs.

#### 2.1 Harun Nasution: A Brief Biography, Life, and His Intellectual Project

Harun Nasution was born in Pematang Siantar, North Sumatra on September 23, 1919. He was the fourth of five children. His father's name was Jabbar Ahmad, a cleric and also a merchant. Meanwhile, his mother was also an *ustādha* (Islamic preacher) and the daughter of an *ustādh* and Mandailing.<sup>47</sup> Both of his parents had spent time in Mecca for several years and could speak and read Arabic.<sup>48</sup> Nasution's father's position as a government official gave him the opportunity to send his children to Dutch-language schools, which provided a far superior modern education at the time when compared to the native Malay schools. Unfortunately, the Dutch school actively prohibited the learning of Arabic and Islam. This caused considerable controversy and concern in Nasution's family, especially his grandmother, who did not seem to agree. Nevertheless, Nasution spent seven years at the Dutch school, which he found to have very strict discipline and quality academic standards.<sup>49</sup>

The religious education Nasution received began with his own family. As a scholar, his father taught him various kinds of religious knowledge. His mother, as a woman who had lived in Mecca and had religious knowledge, also taught Nasution,

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<sup>47</sup> Mandailing is an ethnic group that inhabits the South Tapanuli area, North Sumatra.

<sup>48</sup> Muhammad Arifin, *Teologi Rasional Perspektif Pemikiran Harun Nasution* (Aceh: LKKI, 2021), p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Richard C Martin, Mark R Woodward, and Dwi S Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam* (British: Oneworld, 1997), p. 160.

making little Nasution's life surrounded by a life of religious education. He explained this in his own words:

—At home I studied the Koran, and studied Arabic writing at school (HIS). Even though it was a public school, Arabic writing lessons were given, because people at that time still used Malay Arabic script. At home I study the Koran from four to five in the afternoon, because at HIS I don't teach that. After the Maghrib prayer, I recited the Koran aloud until Isha' time arrived. I can finish the Koran three times. During the fasting month, pray at the mosque until 12 at night. Every morning I wake up at dawn to pray together!<sup>50</sup>

Nasution was initially interested in the natural sciences. Since childhood, he aspired to become a teacher. In addition to his formal schooling, Nasution also received home-based instruction in Arabic and Malay, and Qur'an recitation from his father. Nasution describes his mother as a strict disciplinarian who required him to do a lot of household chores in addition to secular and religious studies. In general, he described a very disciplined upbringing that emphasized a balance between working and studying general and religious subjects. Nasution describes his academic career and life as an attempt to reconcile the two currents of religiosity; the world of traditional Islamic piety and the world of modern rational and empirical knowledge.

The conditions of Nasution's literalist religious life in his family began to get a comparison when he took formal education at school. Unlike his brother who went to a religious educational institution, Nasution went to a public school. At this educational institution he learned various general knowledge such as natural science and history, and in this institution he also learned strict discipline. After completing his education at Hollansch Inlandsche School (HIS), Nasution began to think about continuing his education. He wanted to continue his education at MULO.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, he attended additional education to continue his education at MULO. However, it turned out that his grandmother told him not to continue at that institution. She wanted Nasution to be sent to religious education. Despite his objections, Nasution finally decided to obey his grandmother, namely the Moderne Islamische Kweekschool (MIK), an educational institution at the MULO level, but which taught more religious sciences.

When Nasution had finished school at MIK, his father asked him to continue his education in Makkah. This was done because there were a number of religious experts

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<sup>50</sup> Panitia Penerbitan Buku dan Seminar 70 tahun Prof. Dr. Harun Nasution, *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam 70 Tahun Harun Nasution* (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> MULO is a junior high school established by the Dutch colonial government.

who understood the nature and basics of religion very well. Unable to refuse his father's wish, Nasution finally went to Makkah. However, when he arrived in Makkah, he found that the surrounding community did not have an educational civilization in accordance with the times. Therefore, he chose to move to Egypt in 1938. He then studied at Al-Azhar University at the Faculty of Ushuluddin. His choice of the Faculty of Ushuluddin was initially based on his low Arabic language skills. According to his seniors, at the Faculty of Ushuluddin many courses were taught in English and French. Nasution mastered these two languages better than Arabic. However, when he had studied at Ushuluddin, he began to feel interested in the Faculty, one of the reasons being that in Ushuluddin the sciences of Philosophy, Theology (*Kalām*) and Sufism were also taught. Apart from Al-Azhar, Nasution also studied at *al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya*, which has a more rational nuance of knowledge like other Institutes for Islamic Studies Western Academia. There Nasution learned religious knowledge and teachers who had more rational Islamic knowledge.<sup>52</sup>

In 1962, Nasution continued his studies at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. He was pleased with the rational approach to Islamic studies that formed the basis of the Institute's curriculum, and compared it to what he saw as the irrationality of Islamic learning in Indonesia, Mecca, and al-Azhar. Nasution was very interested in the history and works of Western orientalists. However, he also strongly denied that he had been influenced by Orientalism. He reported that there is a fundamental difference between the study of Islam based on Islamic tradition and the study rooted in the assumptions of rationalist historiography.

As a result of the inspiration to search for a rational theory of knowledge in the Islamic tradition, Nasution later described his doctoral work relating to Muhammad Abduh's theology. He was concerned that the influence of the Egyptian reformer had not responded well to the development of Islamic modernism in South Asia, the Arab world, Turkey and Indonesia. Although Islamic reform in Indonesia is claimed to have emerged under the influence of Abduh's thought through his writings in *al-'Urwat al-Wuthqā*, *Tafsīr al-Mannār* and *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, his main ideas underlying the reform have not been widely appreciated by Indonesian Muslims. According to Nasution, this main idea relates to his theological concept that encourages young Muslims to maintain a rational and dynamic lifestyle. Nasution then reported on the issues raised by his supervisor regarding his proposed dissertation research. He was asked: "*You have been interested in modernism and renewal in Islam, but now you are going to study kalām?*" He then

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<sup>52</sup> Arifin, *Teologi Rasional Perspektif Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 17.

replied: —*I moved to the study of kalam precisely because of its modernity*||. He went on to explain:

—My aim is to understand Muhammad Abduh as a modern thinker. I became a modernist because of Abduh. Not from an Ash'ariyah position. I did not abandon the position I had held all along: modernism. I certainly want to study modernism, but in the context of modern kalām.||<sup>53</sup>

Nasution is quite consistent with his critical thinking. From the time he sought the ‘satisfaction’ of knowledge at the *pesantren* until his return to Indonesia and his career at IAIN, I did not find any data stating a change in Nasution’s thinking paradigm. Nasution even regretted that IAIN was still in a traditional setting and its teachings were still oriented towards *fiqh* only. It was even forbidden for Muhammad Abduh’s works to be taught at the institute.<sup>54</sup> In response to this, Nasution then took significant action by changing the IAIN (Institut Agama Islam Negeri/State Islamic Institute) curriculum. The aim is to contribute in producing students with critical thinking and an understanding of philosophical thought. According to Nasution, if Indonesian students are not familiar with rational and philosophical thought of Islam, then Muslims will not improve and develop.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Nasution also formed regular weekly and monthly discussion forums for lecturers. He even established the ‘Forum Pengkajian Islam/Islamic Studies Forum’ (FPI) as a medium to solve crucial problems attended by interdisciplinary scholars, either from IAIN’s own academic community or from other institutions.<sup>56</sup>

Nasution’s intention to develop Indonesia may also be understood in the context of the political struggles at the time. In the Old Order (Orde Lama) era, while Nasution was studying abroad, what he often heard about the Indonesian condition was that it was getting left behind in terms of politics, economy, and international activities. Hence, he had the ambition to change Indonesia into a better state after his return from the West. The first step he took was to write several articles on Islamic thought and movements, then he played a role in changing the learning curriculum at IAIN as explained above. Nasution believes that Islam can progress because of its intellectuals, not because of its

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<sup>53</sup> This Nasution’s statement is quoted by Woodward in his work. Unfortunately, I did not find any further information regarding the source of Nasution's words. See: Martin, Woodward, and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam*, (British: Oneworld, 1997), p. 164.

<sup>54</sup> Zaim Uchrowi and Ahmadie Thaha, —Menyeru Pemikiran Rasional Mu‘tazilah,|| in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 39.

<sup>55</sup> Zaim Uchrowi and Ahmadie Thaha, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Ahmad Syadali, —Harun Nasution Dan Perkembangan IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta,|| in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 277.

political parties. It seems that he was disappointed with the political situation of the Old Order, which often caused various problems in society. Therefore, with the changes in the curriculum at IAIN, he expected to produce Indonesian intellectuals who were advanced-minded and could improve Indonesian society. Nasution's arrival in Indonesia in 1969 coincided with the emergence of the New Order under Soeharto. With the insistence of the new regime and the new situation towards economic growth and modernity.<sup>57</sup> Muslims in Indonesia were challenged to show their concern for the development program outlined by the new power holders, which made Nasution even more encouraged in realizing his mission in Indonesia.

A question often posed to Nasution was: *Is Islam compatible with the demands of progress and modernity?*<sup>58</sup> Through his dissertation from McGill entitled *The Place of Reason in Abduh's Theology*, I understand that Nasution, in a sense, has answered these challenging questions. The work he projected was an attempt to combine classical and modern Islamic thought, the aim of which was to explore the extent to which Muhammad Abduh was influenced by the teachings of Mu'tazilah which were then actualized in the context of the modern era. He states that if Abduh, as he assumes, was in fact a Mu'tazilah theologian, then he could continue to influence the development of Islamic thought. From this statement, it is clear that what Nasution projected was an attempt to use Abduh and Mu'tazili's *kalām* as the foundation for the establishment of a modern, rationalist Islamic theology in Indonesia. Nasution described his project as the culmination of his intellectual dilemma to unite the rationalist and Islamic groups from a divided self. He described himself from his youth as a critical rationalist and a Muslim born into a pious family. His life and intellectual development is described as a journey to unite these two parts of himself.

In this case, several researchers have different conclusions in capturing Nasution's thoughts. Sri Sunanta and Makhfira Nuryanti, for example, concluded that the purpose of Nasution's rational theology is to form a philosophical foundation in Islam. They found this philosophical foundation in three ways: Demythologization of Islam's primary sources, dialogue between sacred text and reality, and binary opposition between rational and traditional entities.<sup>59</sup> Fedesrpiel concludes that Nasution is a figure who has the first intellectual spirit in Indonesia. Although the conclusions they express are

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<sup>57</sup> Luigi M Solivetti, -W.W. Rostow and His Contribution to Development Studies: A Note,|| *The Journal of Development Studies* 41, no. 4 (2005), p. 721.

<sup>58</sup> Fauzan Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia: A Critical Survey* (BRILL, 2001), p. 198.

<sup>59</sup> Sri Suyanta and Makhfira Nuryanti, -Basic Philosophy Dalam Teologi Rasional Harun Nasution,|| *KALAM* 7, no. 1 (2019), p. 11.

different, however, if I summarize substantially, then the renewal that Harun Nasution would prefer is a –re-interpretation of Islamic religious belief with proportional functionalization of reason, and that is what Harun Nasution emphasizes in his renewal thinking. Nasution has made this effort in finding the foundation of modernity and democracy in the Islamic tradition. He has managed to influence many people by making the diversity of Islam and the Islamic kalām tradition in Indonesia, and by making it a ‘rational’ historical study.

## 2.2 The Beginning of Modernized Theology in Indonesia

The notions of modernity and tradition used in this study represent two different contexts in which 'intellectual roles' and two different strategies are undertaken in response to them. Talking about the dominance of a pattern in a certain period, then it only dwells on relativity as a tendency, the difference between the two camps is still useful, although only as an ‘ideal type’ for its application to certain periods. In terms of intellectual practice, the difference between the terms modern and traditional means a difference in reflecting on and understanding the nature of the world. In this sense, muslim modernists began to rethink the legacy of Islamic tradition in the mid-nineteenth century aiming to enable Muslims to more adequately respond to the increasingly fast-changing societal requirements. In one of her reviews, Megan B. Abbas characterizes three pillars of modern thought. First, modernists insisted that their religious teachings were rational. Second, they emphasized the importance of social ethics and Islamic values instead of normative legislation. Third, they strongly criticized the practice of *taqlīd* (blind imitation) and advocated *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) to obtain a refined interpretation of religious texts.<sup>60</sup> If drawn to the realm of theology, then the divine element becomes a substantial axis of reflection between Him and the social world order, as well as in understanding the nature and purpose of related works of theological thought.<sup>61</sup> Obviously, this is different from traditional theology which detaches itself from the social context.

Fazlur Rahman further explains that theoretically, modernity as an era is a shift in hegemonic phenomena from various aspects of life such as technology, industry, social, and sciences over a certain period that refers to the development of science that occurred

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<sup>60</sup> Megan B. Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals*, Repr (Cambridge: Polity Pr, 1995), p. 20.

in the West.<sup>62</sup> This is similar to Benavides' view of modernity which he defines as *power over other human beings, practical power over nature in terms of economic production capacity, and intellectual power over nature in terms of predictive capacity*.<sup>63</sup> From here, because it is closely related to *mastery*, modernity is then always identified with colonialism, and it is commonly held that European colonization phenomena always go hand in hand with the process of Islamic reform as a form of response from the Islamic world.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Rahman tends to review it from a phenomenological point of view which basically Rahman's concern about modernity is more directed to the educational aspect where there is a process of secularization of religious and non-religious lessons as a result of modernization.<sup>65</sup> Rahman then concluded that in responding to modernization, Muslim scholars are divided into two: *first*, those who are preventive, in the sense that the acquisition of modern knowledge is limited to the field of practical technology only, because at the level of pure thought Muslims do not need Western intellectual products. In fact, Western intellectual products are to be avoided because they can cause doubts and disturbances in the Muslim minds, in which case the traditional Islamic belief system is considered to have provided satisfactory answers to major worldview questions. *Second*, those who see that Muslims can and should fearlessly acquire Western scientific developments and intellectualism. They also argue that no type of knowledge can be harmful, and in any case the pure science and thought developed by the West was already diligently studied by Muslims in the early Middle Ages from where it was taken over by Europeans.<sup>66</sup>

Based on the above understanding, in this study I relate Islamic modernity to the discourse and renewal project (*tajdīd* or *pembaharuan* in Indonesian language) carried out by Harun Nasution as a representation of Indonesian modernist figures in the field of theology, and use it as a category of analysis and practice simultaneously. With this foundation, I also categorize Nasution as one of the modernist figures in Indonesia. This is because, if I may say so, modernity is a self-reflection of the situation in a certain period, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, he is also one of

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<sup>62</sup> Fazlur Raḥmān, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, 8. impr, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies 15 (Chicago London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 42.

<sup>63</sup> Gustave Benavides, *-Modernity*, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 188.

<sup>64</sup> Muhamad Ali, *Islam and Colonialism: Becoming Modern in Indonesia and Malaya* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Fazlur Raḥmān, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, 8. impr, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies 15 (Chicago London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 47.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

the people insisting rationality and *ijtihad*. Based on this, it seems that Nasution has all the above characteristics mentioned by Abbas. For another point, Benavides said that this self-reflection can be shown by consolidating the sociology of science and the emergence of psychoanalytic sciences.<sup>67</sup> This due to several reasons; First, because Harun Nasution is a figure who succeeded in shifting the discursive paradigm of theology in Indonesia from dogmatic into rationalist.<sup>68</sup> This paradigm shift became a distinctive feature of theological discourse in Indonesia as a result of modernity with Nasution as the starting point. Second, although Nasution's rationalist spirit began with his interest in the ideas of Muhammad Abduh, who was a Middle Easterner, his rationalist tendencies and academic spirit came from the West during his doctoral studies. Even if seen genealogically, Abduh was classified as a regionalist figure, who venerated the reason, due to his direct cultural contact with European rationalism (*al-‘aqlāniyya al-arūbiyya*).<sup>69</sup> Nasution and Abduh's positions at this point have something in common; both are Islamic intellectuals who have direct contact with Western civilization. This phenomenon is exactly in line with Francis Robinson's thesis, which states that since the Muslim reformers—in this context, Harun Nasution—utilized Western knowledge ‘to advance their cause’. He says that Islamic reform and renewal are basically shaped by interaction with the Western academia.<sup>70</sup>

### 2.3 Nasution and His Rationality

In Harun Nasution's theological view, reason occupies a very central position in Islamic belief. In his essay entitled ‘Filsafat Hidup Rasional, Prasyarat bagi Mentalitas Pembangunan/Rational Philosophy of Life, Prerequisite for Development Mentality’ he explains:

-The intellect bestowed upon man by God is able to know the four basic and essential issues in religion. The basic and central issue for religion is God, the creator of the universe and the origin of good and evil. In this philosophy of life,

<sup>67</sup> Benavides, ‘Modernity’, p. 200.

<sup>68</sup> It can be assumed that the teaching style of theological doctrine in Indonesia was initially monotonous and without serious dialogue, unlike after Nasution's arrival from the West. As Ali said, modernization has always been associated with rational ideas in the domains of politics, law, and religious traditions. Therefore, on this basis I claim that Nasution succeeded in shifting the theological paradigm in Indonesia to become more dialectical-rationalist after his arrival from the West. See further description: Ali, *Islam and Colonialism*, p. 5-7.

<sup>69</sup> Muhammad Imarah, *Al-‘A‘māl al-Kāmila Li Muhammad Abduh*, 1st ed., vol. 3 (Cairo: Dar al-Suruq, 1993), p. 24; Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), p. 67 and 147.

<sup>70</sup> Francis Robinson, ‘Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia’, *Cambridge University Press, Modern Asian Studies*, 42, no. 2 (May 2008), p. 261. See as well: Megan B. Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 144.

the human intellect is sufficient to know the existence of God the Creator and Provider and to distinguish between evil and good deeds. After knowing that God is the Creator and Giver of sustenance, the mind can also know the obligation of man to be grateful to Him. Reason can also know that man has an obligation to avoid evil deeds and an obligation to do good deeds. Revelation came down to substantiate this opinion of human reason and to make the norms set by human reason unchallengeable by the disputatious human being.<sup>71</sup>

His statement gives the impression that humans are strongly emphasized and ordered to think rationally in understanding God and the World. He supports his opinions about reason with quotations of Qur'anic verses and Prophetic Hadiths that speak of reason such as Qur'ān *sūra* 47: 24, 7:179, 50:6, and 2:219. Therefore, the position of reason in Nasution's view is an important issue to know the big idea of his rationality. In his various writings, he repeatedly reminds the urgency of reason in regulating the pattern of human life. Nevertheless, he also recognizes the weakness of human reason. The fact that Nasution based his ideas on Qur'anic verses shows that he did not rule out the text of revelation altogether. In his review entitled *„Kaum Mu'tazilah dan Pandangan Rasionalitasnya/The Mu'tazilah and Their View of Rationality‘*, he agrees with the Mu'tazilah view that the truth possessed by humans with their intellect requires reinforcement, justification and confirmation that the truth is in accordance in what God intends through His revelation.<sup>72</sup>

In the West, the discussion of reason is termed rationality where it is the central theme in Nasution's ideas. This issue began to be discussed again by Islamic thinkers after they realized their backwardness from Europeans. This period is then referred to as the era of modernism, an era when European civilization began to dominate the civilizations of other nations. In this case, modernization and its related matters can generally be viewed from various aspects of social phenomena. It can be viewed in terms of colonialism, Islamic reform, and rationality. It seems that this social phenomena have succeeded in shaping modernization where the shift in the paradigm of science becomes the central object.<sup>73</sup> It is quite difficult to determine in detail when exactly modernization

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<sup>71</sup> Saiful Muzani, ed., *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, 2nd ed. (Bandung: Mizan, 1995), p. 142.

<sup>72</sup> He explained this opinion of the Mu'tazilites to correct some of the accusations of Muslims who stated that the Mu'tazilites only used reason in their theological concepts. See: Muzani, p. 140.

<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, Rahman concluded that there were at least 4 main factors that led to modern development in various Muslim regions: first, due to the domination of European colonialism powers. Second, because of the relationship between the Islam organization and government institutions. Third, the development of Islamic education and the culture that accompanies it. And

occurred in Indonesia. However, the three social phenomena that I have mentioned can basically be a parameter for the so-called ‘renewal’ of Islamic sciences in the modern era, especially in the field of theology.

However, the rationality aspect becomes a very fundamental variable. According to Paul Stoller, rationality has been a major component of Western analytical thinking in terms of science, meaning that scholars are usually expected to provide convincing and consistent rational explanations to a set of beliefs that are considered irrational and inconsistent<sup>74</sup>, and that is what Nasution brought in reformulating his theological creed. But the question then is: what kind of rationality does Nasution intend?

This question will not be completely answered if only viewed from an etymological aspect. For what is desired in the sense of rationality here is an idea emerging in the Western school of intellectual history which generally means ‘acceptance of reason’ and ‘having the power of reason’.<sup>75</sup> The term is used as a label for a system of thought with reference to the 17th and 18th centuries in Western philosophy. Philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz tended to agree that reason alone is sufficient to know what is in the world. This view according to Woodward is exactly the same with Mu‘tazilite view.<sup>76</sup> As a consequence he thought that Mu‘tazilite rationalism was very appropriate for use in the space of modernity.<sup>77</sup>

In relation to rationality, it is important to discuss Stoller’s opinion in this study. He divided the character of rationality into three: Universalist, relativist, and phenomenological. Simply put, universalists seek to evaluate beliefs through a set of logical criteria independent of the local context. For this group, rationality is a matter of coherence and logical consistency of belief statements. Rational beliefs, for example, are those that adhere to the universal rules of coherence and logical consistency.<sup>78</sup> This means that they believe in a single rationality based on universal logical principles that can be applied universally regardless of their socio-cultural context. Viewed in this light, it is clear that universalist rationality is a continuation of the intellectual hegemony of the

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fourth, because of colonial policies by certain colonial countries. See: Raḥmān, *Islam & Modernity*, p. 43-45.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Stoller, ‘Rationality’, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 249.

<sup>75</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and The Scope of Rationality*, 1st ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 116.

<sup>76</sup> This is in contrast to Nasution's opinion, quoting Hudhail Al-'Allāf, he states that the Mu'tazilites, although they put more proportion to reason than revelation, still need revelation to know the details of the matter. See: Saiful Muzani, ed., *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 114.

<sup>77</sup> Richard C Martin, Mark R Woodward, and Dwi S Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam*, p. 11.

<sup>78</sup> Stoller, ‘Rationality’, p. 240.

Western Enlightenment project in which universally applied ‘reason’ is used to construct authoritative knowledge.

In contrast to universalists, relativists tend to concentrate on differences in theological thought and to the exclusion of general relations. They believe there is diversity in rationality that follows their cultural patterns and cultures. In this case, relativists seek to understand the nuances of the local context and are sympathetic in order to avoid analytical errors. They believe that it is best not to make judgments based on relative rationality or irrationality. The latter is the phenomenological approach, this approach creates space for various realities within a particular belief system; it seeks to avoid the logical riddle of endless theological debate; Relativists complain that universalists are insensitive, Eurocentric, or even racist. In contrast, universalists denounce relativists for their scientific naivety and epistemological inaccuracy. At a time when the debate about rationality finally boils down to relativism or universalism, a phenomenological approach exists to ‘reconcile’ these two camps. One’s experience in a culture to another culture according to this group is the key to understanding a new space and new interpretation.<sup>79</sup>

When viewed from these three categorizations of rationality, it seems that the axis of rationality promoted by Harun Nasution is more inclined towards universalist perfectionism where he sees Abduh’s rationalism, and indeed the Mu’tazilites, as an ideal option to revive the spirit of Muslims in their lag behind Westerners without considering the local cultural context that surrounds them. Nasution also argued that Allah not only gave humans the ability to think rationally, but He commanded them to use it in the formulation of moral choices, laws, and the order of social life. This means that the scriptural text is a necessary tool for thinking about what it means to be Muslim in an ever-evolving society. In addition, unlike other modernists, he also realized that the Qur’an was not a complete and ‘perfect’ text that encompassed all the things necessary for the development of modern society, scientific thinking, and technology.<sup>80</sup> What attracted Nasution was that, in promoting his spirit of rationality, he always quoted Qur’anic verses related to reason. He agreed with Muhammad Abduh who stated that Islam is a rational religion, a religion that is run by reason and even a religion based on reason. Faith is not perfect if it is not based on reason. Faith must be based on belief, not opinion, and reason is the source of belief in God. Therefore, according to Aaron, it was

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<sup>79</sup> Stoller.

<sup>80</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*.

only in Islam that religion and reason were for the first time united.<sup>81</sup> In his paper entitled —Muktazilah dan Pandangan Rasionalnya/The Mu'tazilites and Their View of Rationality, he always corrects the opinions of the Mu'tazilites that have been misunderstood by the majority of Muslims. Uniquely, his commentaries on the Mu'tazilites are often accompanied by quotations from the Qur'an related to rationality.<sup>82</sup> This gave the impression that he wishes to defend the opinions of the Mu'tazilites. In his opinion, the people is strongly emphasized and commanded to think rationally in understanding God and the world. He asserted that the Qur'an teaches the fundamental Mu'tazilite doctrine of freedom of will, freedom of action and human responsibility.<sup>83</sup> What the Mu'tazilites did and promoted was considered by Nasution to be in line with the core message of the Qur'an.

To remind the importance of the position of reason for Muslims, Nasution investigated the golden history of Islam in the past. In discussing Islamic history, he divided it into three epoch periods: classical (650-1250 AD), middle (1250-1800 AD), and modern (1800-onwards). He saw that in classical times, a theology developed which he dubbed the theology of *sunnatullah*—or what is commonly referred to as natural laws in the West. This theology developed because at that time, according to Nasution's view, scholars were aware of the importance of a high position of reason in Islamic belief system. This is evidenced by the scientific literacy of the time that led to Greek science and philosophy in Alexandria (Egypt), Antakia (Syria), Jundisyapur (Iraq) and in Bactra (Persia). Philosophy and science encourage scholars to continue to develop the *sunnatullah* theology.<sup>84</sup> Important figures in science such as Abu Bakr al-Rāzi (925 AD), Ibn Sīnā (1037 AD), Ibn Rushd (1198 AD), al-Khayyām (1131 AD), al-Khawārizmi (850 AD), and several other scholars were present during these times in which reason was held in high esteem by Islamic scholars. According to Nasution, there are several factors why Muslims were highly developed during this period. Among them are \_the high position of reason, the freedom of man in deeds and acts, and belief in the natural law (*sunnatullah*) and causality'. All of these factors tend to be more like Mu'tazilite doctrines than other theological doctrines.

<sup>81</sup> Harun Nasution, -The Place of Reason in Abduh's Theology (Doctoral Thesis, Montreal, McGill University, 1968), p. 50.

<sup>82</sup> Muzani, p. 121.

<sup>83</sup> Muzani, 139; compare his argument with: Nasution, -The Place of Reason in Abduh's Theology, p. 45.

<sup>84</sup> What *Sunnatullah* means in the context of Harun Nasution's statement is the law of nature based on causality. This law works because God created it for nature. Nasution affirmed the opinion of 'Abduh who said that everything in nature was created by Allah and has a sunnah in which Allah relates cause and effect. The entire sunnah established by Allah will not change See: Rasyid Ridha, *Tafsir Al-Mannar*, 1st ed., vol. 2 (Cairo: Al-Haia al-'Amma li al-Kitab, 1990), p. 77.

Unfortunately, in the Middle Ages, based on Nasution's argument, rational, philosophical and scientific thinking disappeared from the civilization of the Islamic world and moved to Europe through Western students studying in Andalusia (Spain). At the same time, Ibn Rushd's philosophical thoughts, called Averroism, were growing rapidly in Europe.<sup>85</sup> This philosophy, according to Nasution, in turn led Europe to the modern age with its rapid advances in science and technology. At the same time, the Islamic world actually experienced the throwback period. The *sunnatullah* theology with its rational, philosophical, and scientific thoughts disappeared from the Islamic World and was dominated by fatalism and the prevalence of *taqlīd* attitudes among Muslims. If in the classical era Nasution noted several factors that caused science to develop at that time, then in this medieval era he noted several factors that were opposite to the classical era, such as the low position of reason, human freedom of action, and limitations in thinking due to the strengthening of *taqlīd*.<sup>86</sup> He noted that the productivity of scholars and Muslims in the medieval era was much lower when compared to the classical era. Muslims in the Middle Ages prioritized the afterlife over the world which they considered as something despicable. It is not surprising that the attitude of *tawakkul* (acceptance) and fatalism that emerged as a result of the proliferation of Sufism *ṭarīqahs* also made Muslims in a static state in facing life in the world.

In the 19th century, when Europeans arrived in the Islamic world, Islamic scholars and thinkers were surprised by the rapid development of their science. They now occupied the position of the glory of Muslims in classical times. Hence, many Islamic thinkers emerged with ideas aiming to advance the Islamic world and pursue backwardness from the West. Some of the thinkers mentioned by Nasution are Jamaluddin al-Afghanī (1897 AD), Muhammad Abduh (1905 AD), Zia Gokalp (1924 AD), and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1898 AD). One of the ways that these scholars, including Nasution, see is to revive the theological understanding of classical times that is rational, philosophical, and scientific. As Nasution saw it, this was the case with the Islamic world in the Middle East. Nasution then observed the development of Islam in Indonesia, which according to him only developed in the 13th century AD. In other words, Islam developed in Indonesia when the Islamic world was in the middle ages and underdeveloped. Thus, the developed theology at that time was fatalistic and deterministic, rather than rational and philosophical in nature. The theology taught in Indonesia, Nasution argues, was

<sup>85</sup> Ernest Renan, *Ibn Rushd Wa Rushdiyya*, trans. Adil Zu'aitir, 1st ed. (Cairo: 'Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1957), p. 21; Remi Brague, *The Legend of The Middle Ages: Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 223.

<sup>86</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*.

limited to the al-Ash'ari school of thought. This further implies that Ash'arism was the only acceptable Islamic theological doctrine in Indonesia at the time, giving the impression that Islam was narrow and limited. Accordingly, the majority of Indonesian Muslims prioritized spiritual life over material life in the world. This has led to a lack of productivity among Indonesian Muslims. As a solution to raise the productivity of Indonesian Muslims, Nasution then preached his rational ideas to support increased productivity and catch up with European progress in his era. He then preached his ideas through the Islamic Institute, which at that time numbered 14 throughout Indonesia.<sup>87</sup>

Historically speaking, an understanding of Mu'tazilah theology has been introduced by several Indonesian figures before Nasution. As early as 1939, a prominent modernist thinker and one-time leader of the Masyumi Islamic party, Mohammad Natsir (1993 AD), wrote an article on Mu'tazilism entitled ‘Rasionalisme’ dalam Islam dan Reaksinya/The Mu'tazilah and Ahli Sunnah: ‘Rationalism’ in Islam and its Reaction’. In this work, he states that Ash'arism emerged as a protest against the excessive reliance on a purely rational approach advocated by the Mu'tazilites. They assumed that all the mysteries of the universe could be unraveled through human rational capacities, including the mystery of God.<sup>88</sup> At this point, it can be said that Nasution's progress in terms of rationality is to restore the productivity of Muslims as in the classical era with its Mu'tazilah rational theology<sup>89</sup>, particularly in Indonesia. Nasution's discussion of Mu'tazilism, although quite brief, gives educated Muslims in Indonesia a deeper insight into this area of theological thought. He could be the first Indonesian scholar to present Mu'tazilite theology impartially to Indonesian readers. It is true that before him, other scholars had attempted to introduce Mu'tazilah doctrines. However, these were either cursory (and to some extent impartial) or presented in a lesser academic style. His analysis of the history of Muslim progress leads to the conclusion that Mu'tazilah theology is the one to follow if Muslims are to revive their productivity in term of social life.

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<sup>87</sup> Azyumardi Azra, Dina Afrianty, and Robert Hefner, *-Pesantren and Madrasa: Muslims Schools and National Ideals in Indonesia,* in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert Hefner and M. Qasim Zaman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 71.

<sup>88</sup> Mohammad Natsir, *Kebudayaan Islam Dalam Perspektif Sejarah* (Bandung: Giri Mukti Pasaka, 1988), p. 121.

<sup>89</sup> Howard M. Federspiel, *Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals of the 20th Century*, Southeast Asia Background Series, no. 8 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 70.

## 2.4 Nasution's Attitude Towards Ash'arism

The project Nasution mapped out in his doctoral dissertation at McGill affirmed that the Egyptian reformer Muhammad 'Abduh was actually a supporter of Mu'tazilah.<sup>90</sup> Some of Abduh's theological views that he analyzed through his works such as *Risāla al-Tauḥīd*, *Hāshiya on The Sharḥ al-Dawānī li al-'Aqāid al-'Adudīyya*, and *Tafsīr al-Mannār*<sup>91</sup> were considered to have more in common with Mu'tazilah teachings than Ash'ari or Māturīdī. Nasution then concludes that Abduh became a reformer because he supported Mu'tazilah theology which tended to free human will from God's intervention and put more rational proportion than revelation. He even seems to \_accuse\_ Ash'arī and Māturīdī theology of being restrictive beliefs and therefore, Abduh could not have been a reformer if he followed these two theologies. Nasution further explains:

-In view of his endeavour to introduce reforms into the Muslim community, Abduh could not but follow the Mu'tazilah theology with its belief in the great power of reason and man's independence and its doctrine of man's free will and free act. Only in terms of such a theology could his ideas of reform see realization. The Ash'arī theology with its distrust of the power of reason, its great reliance on revelation and its doctrines of disguised fatalism under the name of *kasb* and man's great dependence upon God could not be an adequate basis of vehicle for his ideas of reforms. Such a theology as the Ash'ariyya profess, moreover, would provide him with little liberty for promoting his reformist movement. In lesser degree, the same is true of the Māturīdī theology which allows man but little power and independence.<sup>92</sup>

From Nasution's statement above, it is clearly stated that the Islamic society that wants to be reconciled with modernity and carry out reform actions like Abduh, then it must follow Mu'tazilah. In fact, in several places, he argues that the Qur'ān teaches the basic Mu'tazilah doctrines of free will, free action, and human responsibility. The basic teaching is that man is a rational creation of God. He explained this view in detail in his first published paper under the title —Filsafat Hidup Rasional, Prasyarat Bagi Mentalitas Pembangunan/Rational Philosophy of Life, a Prerequisite for a Developmental Mentality<sup>93</sup>. In Nasution's case, the most prominent theme is rationality. He argues that rationalism is one of the central themes in the Qur'an. I see Nasution's reading of hermeneutics as similar to that of his teacher Toshihiko Izutsu and the late Fazlur

<sup>90</sup> Harun Nasution, -The Place of Reason in Abduh's Theology, p. 266.

<sup>91</sup> Nasution, p. 8.

<sup>92</sup> Nasution.

<sup>93</sup> Saiful Muzani, ed., *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, 2nd ed. (Bandung: Mizan, 1995), p. 130.

Rahman.<sup>94</sup> His exposure to Islam and Western rationalism seems to have triggered his efforts to find rational Islam and Islamic modernity that he applied in Indonesia, and thus Ash'arī theology became his main target of criticism.

At the level of theological context, Nasution is very critical towards doctrine of Divine compulsion (*jabr*), even the Ash'arism concept of *\_kasb'* (acquisition) as the axis of the independence of human will he considers as *\_disguised fatalism'*. In his view, this doctrine denies human rationality and free will, and leads to a fatalistic way of thinking that makes political, economic and social development unproductive and even impossible. His strong criticism on this issue, without discounting other factors, was a reaction to the concept of the traditional Javanese social order which is generally described as feudalistic and *legowo* (an attitude that accepts things as they are), either to the government or religion.<sup>95</sup> Traditional Javanese social and political thought relies heavily on the doctrine of divine determinism (*titah Jawa*) to justify a rigid and hierarchical social system. The Javanese concept of *nrimo* which means passively accepting one's fate in the hope of heavenly reward, is closely related to this fatalistic-determinist theological doctrine. He sees that the theology of God's absolute will in the view of traditional societies has a huge influence on Indonesian Muslims. Nevertheless, he sees many Indonesian Muslims strongly believe that fate basically lies in the hands of God. Humans are helpless creatures and only surrender to God's *qadhā* and *qadar*. The development of the theology of God's absolute will has been widely embraced by Indonesian Muslims and has made them doubtful and less confident in the existence of *sunnatullah*.<sup>96</sup> Many believe that everything has been directly and absolutely determined by God, so human effort is meaningless. Such an attitude bears little resemblance to the theological doctrine of Ash'arism, which is considered a fatalist theology.<sup>97</sup> Such beliefs

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<sup>94</sup> Implicitly, Rahman once explained that if the ulema tradition, which in this case is the sunni-ash'arī one, is considered as something exclusive and absolute, then it will eliminate creative challenges that might arise. The alienation of Muslims from 'other' schools of thought will hamper Islamic education and ultimately make it irrelevant to the development of Muslim societies. In addition, the alignment with determinist beliefs also grew stronger in the Middle Ages. According to Rahman, the teachings of Sufism, on the basis of a particular interpretation of the theological doctrine of God's divinity, began to advocate a monistic and theistic understanding of determinism in which these doctrines could shape the pattern of Medieval Islamic teaching around the pivot of Determinism alone. This indicates that Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutical reading of history has similarities with Nasution's reading in that they both critically evaluate history through a theological perspective. See: Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 1st ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 113, 185-190.

<sup>95</sup> Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from The Fourteenth to The Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Norwalk: East Bridge Signature Books, 2006), p. 71.

<sup>96</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 121.

<sup>97</sup> Here, I see that the teachings of ash'ari theology are not directly fatalistic. The concept of *kasb* in the doctrine of ash'ari teachings provides space for a servant in making his choice. However,

cannot help increasing the productivity of Muslims. Most modern Indonesian intellectuals and political thinkers are strongly opposed to such elements of traditional thought, as they believe that such doctrines make the intellectual and political dynamism necessary for national and economic development impossible to achieve. This means that Nasution's support for Mu'tazilah can be understood as an attempt to find a counterpoint to such theological doctrines in the Islamic tradition, especially in Indonesia.

In addition to the things mentioned above, Nasution also often criticizes the concept of God's justice in the ashā'irah perspective. In this theological view, Muslims' belief in God's absolute nature leads to the belief that God's justice is God's prerogative that cannot be contested. According to this group, God has the right to perform an act that is contrary to justice that can be understood by humans. Justice is understood as 'putting something in its proper place, i.e. having absolute power over the property owned and using it in accordance with the will and knowledge of the owner'.<sup>98</sup> Humans and the universe –belong to God, so He has the right to exercise His will over humans and everything that exists besides Him. God is considered unjust if He does not have this right, because God is free to determine His attitude and no one limits Him in His will. Based on this belief, the Ash'ariyya consider God to be just even though He breaks the promises and threats that have been made to humans. God is not unjust even though He tortures those who obey Him or gives good rewards to those who disobey Him. He remains just even if His actions go against the standards of justice understood by humans, such as putting everyone (obedient and disobedient) into heaven or into hell. Even if this is done by God, God is still just and innocent according to this theology.<sup>99</sup> This is because He puts things in their proper position, which is the exercise of His absolute power in His kingdom.

Here Nasution provides his criticism. He sees that this Ash'ariyya understanding of justice is similar to that of some people who approve of an absolute and dictatorial king. The absolute and dictatorial king has the full right to kill or revive his people. It is then explained that the king is free from laws and regulations, meaning that he does not need to obey and submit to laws and regulations. Because the laws are of his own making.<sup>100</sup> Nasution sees that the concept of God's justice given by the two groups of

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this space did not really liberate his will as found in the doctrine of the Mu'tazilite teachings. For further explanation see: Jalāl Mūsa, *Nash'a al-Ash'ariyya Wa Tatawwuruhā* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnaniyya, 1982), p. 112.

<sup>98</sup> Abul fath al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar el-Marefah, 1993), p. 62.

<sup>99</sup> Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari, *Kitāb Al-Luma'* (Cairo: Mathba'a Misr, 1955), p. 61.

<sup>100</sup> Harun Nasution, *Teologi Islam: Aliran-Aliran Sejarah Analisa Perbandingan*, p. 120.

theologians above has a very significant difference. On the one hand, the Mu'tazilah view God's justice as an obligation that God must honor. Justice does not only mean rewarding those who do good and punishing those who do wrong. God's obligation to do good to humans means that He does not give burdens beyond human ability to carry them, he sends Apostles to humans to strengthen the results of human reasoning. Thus, according to Nasution, God will be just when He takes action on human actions. God's obligations towards humans are not obligations understood in fiqh terms relating to rewards and punishments. Rather, God's obligation stems from His perfect nature; this obligation He places upon Himself by His own will and choice.<sup>101</sup> This obligation is a logical consequence of understanding *sunnatullah*. Here Nasution seems to 'defend' Mu'tazilah theology more than the doctrines of other theological schools.

Another theological doctrine that Nasution criticizes is the issue of predestination and *sunnatullah*. In this context, his view is not much different from Muhammad Abduh. Nasution sees that there are two factors that hinder the productivity of Muslims. First, religion teaches that after the first life in this material world, there is a second life in the afterlife which is spiritual. How this teaching affects productivity and the adherents of the religion in question depends very much on these two ways of life. Nasution sees that if worldly view of life is seen as important, then productivity will increase. Conversely speaking, if the afterlife is prioritized, then productivity will decrease. Second, religion has teachings about human fate and actions. If human fate has been determined by God from the beginning, in the sense that human actions are God's creation, then the productivity of those who adhere to this religious understanding will be very low. But in a society where man is the one who determines his fate and man is the one who creates his actions, productivity will increase.<sup>102</sup> The first factor is related to Sunnatullah, while the second is related to Predestination.

In other works entitled —Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya/Islam Viewed from Various Aspectl dan —Filsafat Agama/Philosophy of Religion, Nasution also reviews many theological and philosophical issues. These two works are fairly representative for understanding the theological construction of Nasution's thought as he made these books compulsory reading material for his students at IAIN.<sup>103</sup> Although in his ideas of renewal he tends to promote Mu'tazilah theological thought, however, in his work, I found some of Nasution's opinions similar to Ash'ari's theological doctrine. On

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<sup>101</sup> Nasution; Ridha, *Tafsir Al-Mannar*, vol. 3, p. 442.

<sup>102</sup> Nasution, *Teologi Islam: Aliran-Aliran Sejarah Analisa Perbandingan*, p. 77.

<sup>103</sup> H. M Rasidji, *Koreksi Terhadap Dr. Harun Nasution Tentang —Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1977), p. 35.

the issue of the Qur'an, Nasution states that the Qur'an is the word of God. In other words, only the Arabic words mentioned in the Holy Book are recognized as revelation. If the words are replaced with other Arabic words, even if they are synonyms, then they are not considered revelation. Moreover, if it has been translated into a foreign language, then it is certain that it is no longer a genuine revelation.<sup>104</sup>

If Nasution's opinion is in any way compared with Ash'ari's concept of theology, then on the one hand there are similarities, but on the other hand there is also little differences. That is why I mentioned above how his opinion is 'similar', not to say 'the same', to Ash'ari's theological doctrine. To put it simply, on the issue of the Qur'an, Ash'ari theology is famous for its *kalām lafẓī* (the created speech of Allah within time and space) and *kalām nafsī* (the eternal speech of Allah) formulations. These two formulations have future implications in validating the status of the Qur'an's revelation. In Ash'arism's understanding, the position of the Qur'an as the *kalām* of Allah is also simply understood in two ways; *kalām nafsī* as *kalām* that is inseparable from the nature of divinity which is difficult to identify and formulate by human reason because everything divinity is essentially *Qadīm* (pre-existing). While *kalām lafẓī* is a *kalām* consisting of letters and sounds that can be identified by the five human senses, hence it is *ḥudūth* (temporality).<sup>105</sup> Based on this concept, the word of God in the form of the Qur'an, which consists of letters and sounds, is categorized as *ḥudūth*. Meanwhile, the word of God in the form of *kalām nafsī* is a word that cannot be understood, described, or interpreted by humans, and the fact that God cannot be explained is included in the characteristics of God as the *qadīm*. This formulation cannot be found in Mu'tazili theological doctrines.

From this simple explanation, it can be understood that the Arabic letters contained in the Qur'an are *makhlūq* (created) without denying the status of revelation and its essence as the word of God. At the present point, it seems that Nasution is not involved in the debate on the *qadīm* and *ḥudūth* status of the Qur'an that occurs between the Ash'arī and Mu'tazilī theology. However, his assertion that 'Only the Arabic words mentioned in the text are recognized as revelation'<sup>106</sup> indicates that he admits the *qadīm* status of the Qur'an even though Ash'arī theology considers that the letters are *ḥādith*.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Harun Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, 5th ed., vol. 2 (Jakarta: UI Press, 2009), p. 87.

<sup>105</sup> Faraz A. Khan, *An Introduction to Islamic Theology: Imam Nur al-Din al-Sabuni's Al-Bidayah Fi Ushul al-Din*, 1st ed. (California: Zaytuna College, 2020), p. 76-79. Lihat juga ulasan sederhana Imam al-Zarkashi dalam: Badr al-Din Al-Zarkashi, *Al-Burhān Fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1990), p. 221.

<sup>106</sup> Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, p. 31.

<sup>107</sup> Abd Al-Jabbār, *Sharh Al-Ushūl al-Khamsa* (Cairo: Maktaba Wahbah, 1996), p. 528.

Here, the similarity lies in their assumption of the revelation of the Qur'an and its substance as the word of God.

Furthermore, in the context of Ash'ari's theological doctrine, other issues of concern to Nasution over this theology are the matter of reason and revelation. Indeed, this matter is a classic one, which has often been debated by previous scholars. However, the moment of modernity triggered thinkers, notably Nasution, to rethink the extent to which reason can play a role in responding to modernity through the standpoint of religion.<sup>108</sup> Nasution is of the view that Muslims today, dominated by Ash'ari adherents, are anxious about reason because it produces opinions that at first glance seem to contradict the text of revelation. This is because Muslims today are largely bound to the literal meaning of the Qur'anic text. Providing metaphorical meanings that rely on reason to the holy book has not been acceptable to the general public.<sup>109</sup> He then considered Ash'ari's theology to be insufficiently proportionate in responding to the modern world because of its traditional doctrine, which did not prioritize reason and tended to be textualist. According to him, the Mu'tazilah were much more respectful of reason because it could lead humans to two basic teachings in religion; the existence of God and the issue of good (*taḥsīn*) and evil (*taqḥīḥ*). This is different from the Ash'ariyya opinion, which asserts that reason does not have much power if it is not accompanied by revelation. The authority of reason, according to Nasution, for the Ash'ari theological view is only limited to reasoning to rationalize the truth of revelation.<sup>110</sup> In short, the Mu'tazilah use human reason more, while Ash'ari prioritizes revelation in order to rationalize the truth of revelation. Furthermore, Nasution said:

-The Ash'ariyah, on the other hand, hold that reason is not so powerful. Among the four issues above<sup>111</sup>, reason can reach only the existence of God. The question of obligation towards God, the question of good and evil and the obligation to do good and the obligation to avoid evil cannot be known by human reason. It is known to human beings only through revelation sent by God through the Prophets and Messengers.<sup>112</sup>

In another place, Nasution also said:

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<sup>108</sup> Rasoul Nazami, -The Qur'an, Reason, and Revelation: Islamic Revelation and Its Relationship with Reason and Philosophy, *University of Chicago*, Interpretation, 43, no. 3 (2017), p. 405.

<sup>109</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 60.

<sup>110</sup> Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, p. 38.

<sup>111</sup> The four things in question are: the existence of God, the issue of good and evil, the obligation of human beings towards God, and the obligation to do the right thing.

<sup>112</sup> Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, p. 39.

—Ash'ariyya theology does not recognize the existence of the immutable laws of nature created by God or *sunnatullah*. There is no natural law of fire burning. What burns is not fire, but God's absolute will. If God's absolute will does not want to burn, then the fire will not burn. In the concept of traditional theology, all of nature, including humans, moves and circulates according to God's absolute will and not according to certain rules. So in contrast to the concept of rational theology where nature is predictable, according to traditional theology there is no predictability in nature.<sup>113</sup>

Nasution in his work considers that Ash'ari theology does not give the slightest space to natural law because it maintains God's absolute power and its closeness to fatalism.<sup>114</sup> The concept of evolution and the concept of natural law are considered by Nasution as something that contradicts the doctrine of God's absolute will and power found in Ash'ari theology. With its productivity-inhibiting tendencies, Ash'ari theology was believed to be an absolute teaching that could not be challenged by medieval muslim. Rational thinking became closed, views became narrow, and Muslim attitudes became static due to its absolute dogmas.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, the alignment of this theology with the teachings of Sufism has made *majlis tarīqa* (sufi gatherings) in Indonesia prolific, influencing many Muslims' viewpoints about the day afterlife that should be prioritized. As a result, most Indonesian Muslims prioritize spiritual life over materialistic worldly life.<sup>116</sup> Nasution even stated that the renewal of thought in Indonesia would not develop as well as in Egypt, Turkey and India because of its Ash'arite traditionalist beliefs.<sup>117</sup>

In such a situation, culture can no longer develop, the orientation of the hereafter further eliminates the scientific culture that once dominated Muslim society in classical times. As a result of some of his views on this theology, Nasution then concluded that this teaching was not suitable for educated people who received education from the West. Western education has taught them to be critical and adhere to the principle of causality, while this theology does not give any room for this.<sup>118</sup> He even claimed that this view of

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<sup>113</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 374.

<sup>114</sup> Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*.

<sup>115</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 98.

<sup>116</sup> Muzani, p. 120.

<sup>117</sup> Muzani, p. 155.

<sup>118</sup> Nasution's assumption demonstrates that he has not followed the debate regarding the concept of causality in Ash'ari theology. Hamid Fahmi Zarkasyi in his work mentions several scholars who contributed to the academic debate on this matter in the context of Al-Ghazali, including Karen Harding, Ilai Alon and L.E. Goodman. The conclusion I can draw from the debate is that Ash'ari's concept of causality is not as simple as Nasution suggests. Thus, I disagree with Nasution's assumption that Ash'ari's theology leaves no room whatsoever for the law of causality. See in

theology was against modernization.<sup>119</sup> He also considers Ash‘arī theology to be textualist in reading religious texts. They only capture the explicit meanings, not the implied ones. This makes them unproductive in developing their religious tenets.<sup>120</sup> In fact, Nasution states that this traditional Ash‘arī theology needs to be quickly abandoned and replaced with rational, philosophical, and scientific thoughts,<sup>121</sup> all of which indicate the teachings of Mu‘tazilah theology. Again, at for least in this case, Nasution compares Ash‘arī and Mu‘tazilah theology where he often favors Mu‘tazilah views in responding to the problems of modernity.

Nasution’s strong critique of Ash‘arī theology seems to be due to certain tendencies that make it seem to be anti-ash‘arism. The fact that Nasution over-simplifies the Ash‘arism view makes his strong criticism not really address the intended target. This is different when compared to Mustafa Akyol’s critique, which is more steeped on historical facts and does not simplify the doctrines of Ash‘arism. From here, I see two possibilities that led Nasution to have this attitude towards Ash‘arism. First, because of his ambition to rationalize Islamic discourses in Indonesia inspired by Muhammad Abduh. Second, because of his disappointment with the learning system in Islamic institutions in Indonesia, which he considered too monotonous and dogmatic. Nasution’s critique was primarily a reaction to the ongoing challenges. He tried to catch up with the West by responding to the thoughts of Jamaluddin al-Afghāni and Muhammad Abduh in order to rise up to deal with the modern world. In other words, Nasution’s thinking is Western-style thinking that develops but is motivated by Islam.

Be that as it may, the reflection of rationality promoted by Nasution is based on the spirit of the Qur’an. He is the only Indonesian who deeply criticized Ash‘ari’s theology, although his criticism still has many gaps to be debated in academic terms. Here, the valuable moral note arising from his criticism is how the creed of Muslims can motivate the Muslims’ progress in responding to the current situation. Muslims’ faith should not always prioritize the day afterlife, but should also play a role in social change and provide a positive impact on life in this world. Although the Mu‘tazilah theology he offered did not get a favorable response from Indonesian society, but he succeeded in creating a dialog-based Islamic teaching system as well as in applying the foundations of Islamic rationality to the Indonesian public without having to radically change their beliefs.

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detail: Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, *Kausalitas: Hukum Alam Atau Tuhan? Membaca Pikiran Religio-Saintifik Al-Ghazali*, 1st ed. (Ponorogo: UNIDA Press, 2018) p. 225-228.

<sup>119</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 157.

<sup>120</sup> Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, p. 39.

<sup>121</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 178.

## 2.5 Concluding Remarks

In closing, I will enumerate some of Nasution's views that are in line with Ash'ari's theological teachings even though he does not explicitly state them. The first is his opinion about Sufis and the path that can lead a person to the degree of servanthood, such as what Sufis commonly refer to as *maqāmāt* (each stage a Sufi's soul must attain in its search for God) for example. Nasution elaborates on this several times without any criticism, although he does criticize aspects of Sufism in general for its tendency towards fatalism.<sup>122</sup> Here, only Ash'arite theology is in accordance with Sufism, whereas this understanding cannot be found in the doctrines of the Mu'tazilah. Second, Nasution's assumption of the existence of natural law and causality. Indeed, Nasution considers that Ash'ari's traditional theology does not give such space for this natural law. However, as I have explained in footnote number 115 above, this theology has the concept of natural law and causality albeit within certain limits.

Up to this point, no one has seriously responded to Nasution's critique of Ash'arism, either in terms of substantive or methodological criticism. Instead, the response he often gives is due to his position as a promoter of Mu'tazilism. One of the figures who often responds to Nasution's thoughts is Mohammad Rasyidi. He wrote a book specifically to respond to his thoughts in general. Nevertheless, on the basis of his criticism, he succeeded in triggering the nuances of academic debate in Indonesia, especially IAIN Jakarta and the surrounding area (Ciputat)<sup>123</sup>, although some people consider his thoughts to be somewhat elitist, not appropriate to be applied towards ordinary people as Mansour Fakih argued in a review.<sup>124</sup>

From the explanation above, it seems clear that the reason Nasution put aside Ash'ari theology in the context of modernism due to some reasons: its theological doctrines tend to emphasize the predetermined destiny of humans (fatalism), placing the position of the world lower than the afterlife, overly textualist, and denies the existence of natural law. All of which are the main factors that hinder the productivity of Muslims in their lagging behind the West.

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<sup>122</sup> Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*.

<sup>123</sup> For a detailed review of Nasution's role in shaping the academic environment at IAIN, see: Imam Arifin, *Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam Di Indonesia: Studi Kasus Harun Nasution*, 1st ed. (Sukabumi: Haura Publishing, 2021), p. 109-128.

<sup>124</sup> Mansour Fakih, "Mencari Teologi Untuk Kaum Tertindas," in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 155.

## Chapter III

### Nurcholish Madjid: An Overview of Theological System

As a comparative study, this chapter will discuss some aspects mentioned in the previous chapter such as biography, educational background, and aspects of rationality but from Nurcholish Madjid's perspective. These aspects are Nurcholish's 'instruments' in formulating his argument regarding his defense of Muslim traditions through historical approaches. Nurcholish, as one of the people who lived in the midst of the hegemony of modernity and the vibrancy of orientalism thought, has an unbiased point of view regarding the doctrine of Ash'arism. Unlike Nasution and his teacher, Fazlur Rahman, Nurcholish was keen to defend Ash'arism from the negative accusations leveled against it. This chapter will explore the historical facts demonstrating the similarity of Nurcholish's theological views with the doctrine of Ash'arism. The similarities lie in his viewpoints regarding rationality, predestination, and the issue of Islamic mysticism (Sufism).

#### 3.1 Nurcholish Madjid; Brief Biography, Life and His Intellectual Agenda

Nurcholish Madjid, or more familiarly called 'Cak Nur', is a renowned Indonesian intellectual. His thoughts have succeeded in providing new academic nuances in Indonesia, especially for intellectuals. Unlike Harun Nasution, Madjid's thoughts are more complex and richer in perspectives. This is also the case with his writings. He was born on 17 March 1939 AD in Jombang, East Java and came from a boarding school affiliated with the traditional NU (*Nahdlat al-Ulamā*) organization. Nurcholish attended primary school and *Madrasa Ibtidā'iyya* (Islamic primary school) in Mojoanyar and Bareng, Jombang. After that, he continued his junior high school education at a traditional pesantren, Dārul Ulūm, Rejoso, Jombang. However, due to his family's tendency towards the Masyumi party, which was known to be modern at that time, Nurcholish was assumed uncomfortable to stay in a traditional pesantren and then decided to move to a modernist one, namely KMI (*Kulliyatul Mu'allimīn al-Islāmiyya*), Darussalam Gontor, located in Ponorogo.<sup>125</sup> It was in this modern pesantren that Nurcholish studied the basic Islamic sciences and other sciences. He further explained:

-Gontor is indeed a modern boarding school, even very modern for that time.

What makes it so are its activities, system, orientation, and methodology of

<sup>125</sup> Budhy Munawar-Rachman, *Ensiklopedi Nurcholish Madjid* (Jakarta: Democracy Project, 2011), p. iiv.

education, and teaching. Its modernity is also evident in the materials it teaches. In the matter of language, in this pesantren English, Arabic, including Dutch were taught before it was finally banned. The students are required to speak daily in Arabic or English.<sup>126</sup>

After completing the basic Islamic sciences from the pesantren, Nurcholish then continued his academic career at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, at the Faculty of Adab. He completed his undergraduate studies in 1968. Nurcholish then continued his education abroad, at the University of Chicago in March 1978 and received a scholarship from the Ford Foundation. Because of his interest in philosophical matters, he then studied political science and philosophy at the university in the field of Islamic Philosophy until he got his Ph.D. in 1984 with his research on Ibn Taymiyya's thought.<sup>127</sup> During his studies, Nurcholish gained access to classical medieval Islamic libraries with the direct guidance of the famous Pakistani thinker, Fazlur Rahman. As a result, Fazlur Rahman's thoughts have more or less influenced Nurcholish's way of thinking.<sup>128</sup>

Nurcholish's intellectual career was not achieved only through academic benches, he was also active in several organizational institutions such as HMI (Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam/Islamic Student Association), PEMIAT (Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Asia Tenggara/Southeast Asian Islamic Student Association) dan IIFSO (International Islamic Federation of Students Organizations).<sup>129</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that Nurcholish's thinking is quite complex because of his involvement in various academic organizations and his association with political parties. At that time, precisely in 1968, Nurcholish wrote an article entitled -Modernisasi adalah Rasionalisasi, Bukan Westernisasi/Modernization is Rationalization, Not Westernization.<sup>130</sup> This was his first article to be discussed by HMI activists across Indonesia. Among his other writings that were also discussed during these years were —Sekali Lagi tentang Sekularisasi/Once Again on Secularization and -Keharusan Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat/The Necessity of Renewal of Islamic Thought and the Problem of

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<sup>126</sup> Ihsan Ali Fauzi (ed.) -Demi Islam, Demi Indonesia. Nurcholish Madjid's unpublished autobiographical manuscript. See in: Munawar-Rachman, p. Ivi.

<sup>127</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Ibn Taimiyah Tentang Kalam Dan Falsafah*, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>128</sup> Anas Urbaningrum, *Islamo-Demokrasi Pemikiran Nurcholish Madjid* (Jakarta: Republika, 2004), p. 40.

<sup>129</sup> Victor Immanuel Tanja, *Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam*, trans. Hersri (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1982), p. 12.

<sup>130</sup> The article is included in the work: H. M Rasidji, *Koreksi Terhadap Drs. Nurcholish Madjid Tentang Sekularisasi* (Bandung: Bulan Bintang, 1972), p. 32; Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam: Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan* (Bandung: Mizan, 1988), p. 145.

Integration of the Ummah.<sup>131</sup> Nurcholish was once dubbed the ‘Young Natsir’<sup>132</sup> by the senior generation of Masyumi. Unfortunately, they were later disappointed by Nurcholish’s writings which they considered liberal such as his article entitled —Menyegarkan Pemahaman Keagamaan di Kalangan Umat Islam Indonesia/Refreshing Religious Understanding among Indonesian Muslims which he delivered at Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) in October 1972 AD.<sup>133</sup> These articles were written before his departure to Chicago and also caused a stirring pro-contra among academics and activists.<sup>134</sup> They even considered it a misguided understanding.

Nurcholish’s formulation of ‘modernization as rationalization’ in 1968 was an encouragement for Muslims to respond to modernization as a sense of responsibility for this era and a form of appreciation for knowledge. Furthermore, Nurcholish interpreted modernization as:

-Thinking and working according to fitrah or sunnatullah. Human understanding of the laws of nature gave birth to science, so modern means scientific. And science is obtained by man through his mind (his ratio), so modern means scientific, which also means rational. The purpose of a rational attitude is to obtain the maximum usability to utilize this nature for human happiness.<sup>135</sup>

Nurcholish’s effort through his call for rationalization was one of the main progresses in the history of his intellectual career. He wanted to pursue modernity for the Indonesian nation through the renewal of thoughts that he offered such as liberalization and secularization through free and rational thinking.<sup>136</sup> Nurcholish saw that Indonesian Muslims in his day had experienced a dullness in thinking and developing Islamic teachings. Therefore, he wrote an article entitled —Keharusan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat/The Necessity of Renewal of Islamic Thought and the Problem of Integration of the Ummah as an effort to awaken Muslims over the dullness. In 1992 in the same place, Nurcholish again voiced his ideas entitled —Menyegarkan

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<sup>131</sup> Budhy Munawar-Rachman, ed., *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 239.

<sup>132</sup> Mohammad Natsir was a well-known intellectual and leader of an Islamic political party called Masyumi at the time.

<sup>133</sup> Idris Thaha, *Demokrasi Religius: Pemikiran Politik Nurcholish Madjid Dan M. Amien Rais* (Jakarta: Teraju, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>134</sup> M. Wahyuni Nafis, *Cak Nur Sang Guru Bangsa*, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Kompas Media Nusantara, 2014), p. xx.

<sup>135</sup> ‘Modernisasi ialah Rasionalisasi Bukan Westernisasi’ dalam: Madjid, *Islam: Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan*, p. 153.

<sup>136</sup> It should be noted that what Nurcholish rejects is liberalism and secularism, not liberalization and secularization. See detailed explanation at: ‘Masalah Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam’ dalam: Munawar-Rachman, *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, p. 297.

Faham Keagamaan di Kalangan Umat Islam di Indonesia/Refreshing Religious Understanding among Muslims in Indonesia. Nurcholish's exclamations show that he is someone committed to his ideas.<sup>137</sup> Accordingly, as mapped by Ann Kull, Nurcholish's thoughts 'succeeded' in triggering the attention of Indonesian intellectuals, both those who agree with him, or those who are against.<sup>138</sup>

Like other 'modernist' or 'liberal' thinkers, Nurcholish was also aware of the profound social changes that impacted every aspect of life, affecting the entire Islamic world, including Indonesia. These changes, which began in the early nineteenth century, have overall had a significant impact on Indonesian Muslims.<sup>139</sup> On this basis, Nurcholish's writings came as a response to this intellectual crisis for the sake of the ideas of thought reform that he offered to Indonesian Muslims.

Generally speaking, Nurcholish's renewal writings cannot be separated from the following three contexts: Islamicity, Indonesianness, and modernity. Budhy Munawar-Rachman, in his study of Nurcholish's works, sees that Nurcholish's works are generally divided into two categories: the first is about Islam and Indonesianness which ranged from 1965-1978 AD. And the second is about Islam and modernity which ranges from 1984-2005 AD.<sup>140</sup> In addition, Ann Kull in her work on Nurcholish Madjid provides a neat and structured overview of Nurcholish's thought. Unlike Budhy who examines Nurcholish's works only from the aspect of thought and few socio-political aspects, Ann Kull's work gives more attention to Nurcholish's sufism and political context in Indonesia. According to her, Nurcholish's ideas and thoughts generally revolve around issues of pluralism, tolerance, inclusivism, democracy, ethics, rationalization, modernization, secularization, and contextualization of Islamic values.<sup>141</sup> The complexity of Nurcholish's thought indicates that he is a figure concerned with various social aspects in Indonesia. Kull sees that Nurcholish's thoughts on Sufism began when he was a student at IAIN. Thus, at that time, Nurcholish's thinking not only rested on political issues such as pluralism and democracy, but also he considered sufistic experiences to be an important part of the process of modernity in coinciding with scientific and technological developments.<sup>142</sup> Nurcholish's ideas about secularization, pluralism, and liberalization

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<sup>137</sup> Munawar-Rachman, *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, p. 277.

<sup>138</sup> Ann Kull, *Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and His Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia* (Sweden: Lund University, 2005), p. 257.

<sup>139</sup> Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 46.

<sup>140</sup> Munawar-Rachman, p. xxxi.

<sup>141</sup> Kull, *Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and His Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia*, p. 140.

<sup>142</sup> Kull, p. 153.

had already promoted through one of his articles when he served as president of HMI for the second time in 1970. The article generally reveals the fact that Muslims in the 1970s experienced a stagnation in their thinking and lost what Nurcholish called the ‘psychological striking force’ in their struggle. On this basis, Nurcholish then proposed an agenda of ‘liberalization of Islamic doctrines’.<sup>143</sup>

Nurcholish's intellectual thoughts remained consistent and ongoing even though he was no longer the president of HMI. In 1971-1974, Nurcholish led a very provocative Islamic magazine called ‘*Mimbar Jakarta*’. Through this magazine, he spread his reformist ideas to the Indonesian people widely. Furthermore, in 1986-1990s (after his return from the University of Chicago), he was still consistent with his ideas. His thoughts on Indonesianness, Islamicness, and modernity were then developed and discussed in several foundations that he founded such as Paramadina, ICMI, and PMKI.<sup>144</sup> In the history of his thought, I do not find any historical data stating that Nurcholish's thoughts have undergone significant changes, especially in religious matters. It is certainly not an easy endeavor to map Nurcholish's thoughts in such a comprehensive manner, in addition to the diversity of his thoughts, it will also take this research out of its intended topic of discussion.

After reading some of Nurcholish's early writings, my humble opinion sees that the first step he took to achieve modern Islam in Indonesia was to reinterpret the meaning of rationality as he explained in his statement above. He considers that rationality is the most important asset to overcome Muslims' stagnation. In his article entitled ‘Islam Yes; Islamic Party No!’, Nurcholish sees the stagnation of thinking and creativity that has been stifled by various forms of dullness, one of which is sectarian understandings and political parties. The Islamic party that was contesting with the communist party at that time was considered by Nurcholish to have made Muslims in a dullness. He considers that Islamic parties have not succeeded in building a positive and sympathetic image, even on the contrary.<sup>145</sup> Islamic organizations and parties tend to be sectarianist. Nevertheless, Nurcholish saw the need for a new Islamic renewal group who would be able to have liberal thinking. Through his ideas of liberalization and secularization, Nurcholish offers the idea of progress, an open attitude, and fresh thoughts that can foster a ‘psychological striking force’.<sup>146</sup> Nurcholish then affirmed the opinion of Andre Beufre

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<sup>143</sup> M. Wahyuni Nafis, *Cak Nur Sang Guru Bangsa*, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Kompas Media Nusantara, 2014), p. 79.

<sup>144</sup> Nafis, p. 102.

<sup>145</sup> Thaha, *Demokrasi Religius: Pemikiran Politik Nurcholish Madjid Dan M. Amien Rais*, p. 43; Munawar-Rachman, *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, p. 273.

<sup>146</sup> Madjid, *Islam: Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan*, p. 204.

who said —*our traditional lines of thought must go overboard, for it is now far more important to be able to look ahead than to have a large scale of force whose effectiveness is problematica*ll. From this expression, he concludes that renewal must begin with two actions: breaking away from traditional values and seeking future-oriented values.<sup>147</sup> Excessive nostalgia and longing for the past will hinder the liberalization process.

Liberalization and secularization are two major themes in Nurcholish's ideas. From the brief description above, the liberalization diction is used by Nurcholish not to contradict the position of revelation in Islam, but as a respond against traditional practices that can lead to dullness. He, through his idea, only wanted to 'break' the Islamic tradition in Indonesia, which according to him could not produce productivity in terms of science. The culmination of his liberalization idea was secularization. Nurcholish interpreted secularization as an attempt to globalize values that should be worldly (*dunyawī*) because many Muslims tend to make them otherworldly (*ukhrawī*). Thus, secularization is always a must for every religious community, especially Islam, if it really wants to improve the social conditions that surround it. In his analysis of Islamic history, Nurcholish sees that Muslims are no longer able to distinguish which Islamic values are transcendental and which are temporal. This hierarchy of values is often reversed, even Muslims consider all things to be of *ukhrāwī* value, without exception. So that this specifically has an impact on the way of religion of Muslims in Indonesia who are always concerned with *ukhrāwī* divinity and therefore they are in a dullness.

Furthermore, Nurcholish explained, the intended secularization is to further strengthen man's worldly duties as -khalīfah (caliph) Allah on earthll.<sup>148</sup> This function provides space for human freedom to determine and choose their own ways and actions in order to better life on earth. So that with this function, Muslims do not lose their enthusiasm for *ijtihād* and can act rationally. He emphasized that *ijtihād* for renewal must be a continuous process of original thought based on an assessment of current social phenomena. *Ijtihād* is a process of continuously evaluating the rightness and wrongness of current social phenomena. It is a job that requires the ability to think as much as possible, especially for educated people. Nurcholish's ideas are indeed addressed especially to Islamic organizations such as HMI, PII, GPI, and so on. As a consequence, in my opinion, his idea of reform is often controversial among the mass public at large due to their inability to understand it in a comprehensive and philosophical sense. Nurcholish's ideas give the impression that he is indeed someone who feels he has an

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<sup>147</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam Agama Peradaban: Membangun Makna Dan Relevansi Doktrin Islam Dalam Peradaban* (Jakarta: PARAMADINA, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>148</sup> Madjid, *Islam: Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan*, p. 182.

intellectual responsibility in Indonesia. This can be seen from the way he responds to the political situation in the New Order to Reformation transition era and his concern for Islamic intellectual history.

In addition to Nurcholish's ideas mentioned above, I see a big idea that is the ultimate goal of all Nurcholish's thoughts, namely pluralism and the creation of a civil society. Although, as with his other thoughts, this idea also often reaps fierce controversy. Be that as it may, Nurcholish's enthusiasm in promoting the idea of pluralism stems from his love for the basic foundation of the Indonesian state, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity In Diversity), and his understanding of several Qur'anic verses that speak of plurality such as Q. 10:19, 49:13, and 5:47.<sup>149</sup> Nurcholish's writings related to this idea are reflected in one of his books entitled *-Islam Doktrin dan Peradaban/ Islam Doctrine and Civilization*. He articulates plurality as a diversity that has been outlined by God (*taqdīr*). Accordingly, plurality for Nurcholish is part of *sunnatullah* which inevitably must be accepted. Nurcholish's other thoughts such as inclusivism, relativism, and interfaith tolerance are like a bridge that will lead to this understanding of pluralism..<sup>150</sup>

Unlike Nurcholish's idea of secularization and leberalization, in this case he does not distinguish between pluralism and plurality as he distinguishes secularization and secularism. In fact, he interprets the result of plurality as pluralism.<sup>151</sup> Simply put, pluralism is interpreted by Nurcholish as an attitude that not only recognizes and accepts the reality of a plural society, but must also be accompanied by a sincere attitude in accepting the reality of plurality which is God's grace for mankind. He strengthens his opinion by quoting Qur'an 30:22 which means: —*And among the signs of His greatness is the creation of the heavens and the earth, the difference in your language and the color of your skin. Indeed, in such things there are signs for those who know*. With this sincere acceptance, Muslims will be able to enrich cultural growth through dynamic interaction and exchange of diverse cultures.<sup>152</sup> If Muslims only accept pluralism without an attitude of sincerity, it will be difficult to achieve. The teaching of pluralism signifies the basic understanding that all religions are given the freedom to live with the risks that will be borne by the followers of each religion.<sup>153</sup> This means that the pluralism referred to by

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<sup>149</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban* (Jakarta: PARAMADINA, 1999), p.66.

<sup>150</sup> Nur Khalik Ridwan, *Pluralisme Borjuis: Kritik Atas Nalar Pluralisme Cak Nur* (Yogyakarta: Galang Press, 2002), p. 80 .

<sup>151</sup> Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban*, p. 116.

<sup>152</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *-Etika Beragama: Dari Perbedaan Menuju Persamaan*, in *Kehampaan Spiritual Masyarakat Modern: Respon Dan Transformasi Nilai-Nilai Islam Menuju Masyarakat Madani*, ed. Nurcholish Madjid, M. Amin Akkas, and Hasan M. Noer, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Mediacita, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>153</sup> Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban*, p. 181.

Nurcholish is an important path towards Indonesia's transition to becoming a democratic and civil country.

Fauzan Saleh in his writing sees that, in general, the intellectual significance of Madjid's thought lies in his efforts to reformulate fundamental Islamic postulates such as God, man and the world, as well as how to respond to them in a new socio-political context.<sup>154</sup> Meanwhile, Kamal Hassan assessed Nurcholish in terms of his movement. According to him, Nurcholish falls into the category of an accommodationist figure because he is willing to accommodate his ideas with the secular tendencies of the New Order regime. Despite the controversy, Nurcholish's reform ideas reflect a 'polite' and less ambitious elaboration of a conception of Islam that is in tune with contemporary efforts towards socio-political modernization by adjusting Indonesian culture. It contains a veiled nomenclature designed to convey the meaning of religious concepts in a rational manner. Certainly, by rationality he means.

Overall, Nurcholish's approach is characterized by his approach based on notions of inclusiveness, tolerance (mutual respect among diverse religious beliefs) and religious pluralism. He is an eloquent and subtle articulator of Islamic doctrines in the face of the challenges of modernization, at least in the Indonesian context. Since his early career as a student activist in various organizations, he has shown his talent as a writer who is critical but also concerned with the issue of how Islam can address the problems of modernization, nationalism, secularism, and social justice.<sup>155</sup> Indeed, there are many conclusions drawn by researchers who study Nurcholish's thought, depending on how they examine it. The scholars I mentioned above are only some of the people in favor of Nurcholish's thoughts. Obviously, the conclusions of commentators on Nurcholish's thought will differ from the views of those who oppose his ideas. However, after describing the conclusions of several researchers, I suggest that there is nothing wiser in making an decision other than to observe the author's intentions through his or works.

### **3.2 Nurcholish's View on Rationality and Modernization**

As I mentioned before, one of the first articles Nurcholish wrote was about rationality and modernity. In his article, Nurcholish tried to reaffirm that rationality is not always related to westernization. This assertion was deemed necessary because, for Nurcholish, many people assumed that being rational meant being westernized in this era.

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<sup>154</sup> Fauzan Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in 20th Century Indonesia: A Critical Survey* (BRILL, 2001), p. 242.

<sup>155</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Dialog Keterbukaan: Artikulasi Nilai Islam Dalam Wacana Sosial Politik Kontemporer* (Jakarta: PARAMADINA, 1998), p. 221.

It is true that, etymologically, the concept of rationality originally emerged in the West. But—as explained in the previous section—in his article, Nurcholish tried to re-articulate the meaning of rationality from a different perspective. Budhy Munawar-Rachman, for example, in his review of Nurcholish's rationality, denies any connection between Nurcholish's rationality and classical rationality as brought by Mu'tazilah. He goes on to explain that Nurcholish's rationality is essentially related to the 'application of science' which according to him is a necessity. Accordingly, he considers this process as an effort to find truths in order to reach the Absolute One, which is God.<sup>156</sup> This is reflected in Nurcholish's own words:

-We are fully of the opinion that modernization is rationalization supported by moral dimensions, based on the principle of faith in God Almighty. However, we will also totally reject the notion that modernization is westernization, because we reject westernism. And the westernism we are referring to is an entire understanding that forms a total way of life, in which the most prominent factor is secularism, with all its ramifications.<sup>157</sup>

Nurcholish's rejection of the link between rationality and westernization does not seem unwarranted. As he himself explained in his writing entitled 'Modernisasi adalah Rasionalisasi bukan Westernisasi/Modernization is Rationalization Not Westernization', that his rejection was due to certain efforts that tried to divert the meaning of modernization into westernization. Here, Nurcholish seems like 'anti-Western'. What needs to be considered in this sense is his anticipatory attitude which cannot be separated from the political context at that time. He was in a terrible relationship with the ruling Indonesian communist party because, according to Nurcholish, they were perceived as a government that distorted the aspirations of the people. They, who at the time called themselves the 'intellectuals', were in control of Indonesian politics. They were intellectuals who were westernized in terms of ideas, attitudes and beliefs.<sup>158</sup> By borrowing a term from Gerald S. Maryanov<sup>159</sup>, Nurcholish dubbed them 'westernized intellectuals' who were patriotic. The dictatorial attitude of the communist party at the time made Nurcholish's view of the West negative and antipathetic so that he separated it

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<sup>156</sup> Munawar-Rachman, *Ensiklopedi Nurcholish Madjid*, p. IX.

<sup>157</sup> 'Modernisasi ialah Rasionalisasi Bukan Westernisasi' dalam: Madjid, *Islam: Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan*, p. 158.

<sup>158</sup> Madjid.

<sup>159</sup> Gerald S. Maryanov, 'Politics in Indonesia: An Interpretation', *Kuala Lumpur University, Papers on Southeast Asian*, no. 07 (1966), p. 32.

from the rationalizing aspects he used to advance Indonesian society. Nurcholish also noted that the connotations of westernization often give rise to impressions related to obscene films, rock songs, and clothes that exposes one's body parts. All these things are considered by Nurcholish as symptoms of Western degeneracy that must be rejected. The rejection can also be assumed to be Nurcholish's response to the Old Order regime which was 'exposed' to colonialist views and therefore tended to rely on Western perspectives in various spheres of social life.<sup>160</sup> At the same time, in the 1970s, Indonesia experienced tremendous economic development under Soeharto's New Order government. Jakarta, where Nurcholish worked, began to become a metropolitan city, social middle classes began to emerge, and skyscrapers began to be built.<sup>161</sup> At that time, the Indonesian government was able to fulfill its promise to improve the welfare of the Indonesian people in the fields of agriculture, education, and health, especially when compared to the record years of the Soekarno presidency.

Nurcholish dealt with a complex political situation. The reason was that in 1998 the transition of the political paradigm from the New Order era to the Reformation occurred, and Nurcholish was one of the people who fought in the transition.<sup>162</sup> Although there were some significant developments in the context of economy and education, however, at the end of the New Order, Nurcholish was faced with a situation of inter-group violence that appeared in various forms, such as inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict, which had increased since the 1990s. One of the factors for this violence was the emergence of the terms indigenous and non-indigenous in Indonesian society. So it is not surprising that in those years, the thoughts expressed by Nurcholish were about the issue of plurality and justice where Indonesia was experiencing a crisis in the modern era.<sup>163</sup>

Back to the issue of modernization, Nurcholish said that it is synonymous with rationalization. It leads to a process of changing the paradigm of thinking and working procedures from irrational to rational way. Something can be said to be modern if it has a rational, scientific nature, and is in accordance with the prevailing laws of nature.<sup>164</sup> Nurcholish considers natural law as a representation of *sunnatullah*. So that, when someone manages to understand natural laws that give birth to new science, then that person has reached the stage of rationality because he has thought scientifically, and that

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<sup>160</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 325.

<sup>161</sup> Ricklefs, p. 344.

<sup>162</sup> M. Wahyuni Nafis, *Cak Nur Sang Guru Bangsa*, p. 62.

<sup>163</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, p. 381.

<sup>164</sup> Here, I find a similar point between the thoughts of Nurcholish Madjid and Harun Nasution in terms of modernity; both recognize the existence of natural law, which in Nasution's thinking is referred to as *sunnatullah*. See: Madjid, *Islam: Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan*.

is modernity according to Nurcholish. To be modern is an absolute necessity, but modernity is very much bound by space and time, thus it is relative. This rational style of thinking, according to Nurcholish, must be applied in various aspects of life because of its concrete-material nature, such as agriculture, transportation, and production processes in factories; and also non-material ones such as social, economic and political improvements. Science, in addition to providing pragmatic benefits, can also lead humans to a deep awareness of this universe about the existence of God.

Nurcholish views that rational thinking does not mean liberal thought, rather it is a thought supported by a moral dimension and based on the principle of faith in God Almighty. He emphasized that the use of reason in revealing the laws of nature scientifically is to achieve divine truth that can lead a person to the Absolute One, namely Allah Swt. The aspect of rationality in Nurcholish's framework became a prominent feature for the beginning of a new chapter in the context of Indonesian Islam.

However, in addition to his insistence on being rational, Nurcholish also distinguishes between rationality and rationalism. In criticizing rationalism, again, he also criticized the communists as adherents of this view. Rationalism according to Nurcholish is a view that recognizes the absoluteness of the ratio. A rationalist is someone who uses his mind with the belief that his mind is able to find everything, including the Absolute Truth. Nurcholish is opposed to this kind of opinion. He still believes that Islam only justifies rationality, not rationalism. Meaning that reason can only discover human truths, hence truth is relative. Absolute truth is accessible to humans only through the power of something higher than reason, namely the revelation brought by the Prophets of God.<sup>165</sup> As a reinforcement of his opinion, Nurcholish then quoted a verse of the Qur'an which means: —*You (humans) have not been given knowledge (through ratios) but only a little!* (Q 17:85). To simplify, he considers that rationalism tends to place reason far higher than revelation, while rationality is the opposite.

In his reading of Islamic history, Nurcholish always links pluralism with modernity. He affirmed the argument of Robert Bellah who praised the Islamic caliphate as an era that *transcended* modernity because of its system of pluralism and democracy. According to Bellah, Islam is too modern for the locality and time in which it was first revealed. Islam's failure to uphold equality and justice during the caliphate is proof that it is indeed *modern* with its concept of plurality. This period is a historical fact that represents the democratic and inclusive nature of Islam for thirty years. Unfortunately,

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<sup>165</sup> Madjid.

the Umayyad dynasty, with its authoritarian temperament, revived the Arab tribal system and ‘marginalized’ the plurality that had been implemented previously.<sup>166</sup>

Based on Bellah’s opinion, Nurcholish further responds that if Islam, implicitly, in the primordial era was equivalent to modernism, then the current modern conditions should provide fuller opportunities and it could reconcile social conditions to become better. The modern situation should equip Muslims to understand their religion more contextually by taking lessons from its history. Besides Bellah, some other figures that Nurcholish often refers to regarding this context are Bernard Lewis and Ernest Gellner.<sup>167</sup> In their quotes, they acknowledge that the Islamic tradition in the past was successfully ‘modernized’ with its democratic character and high appreciation of the pluralism values without reducing its authenticity as a religion of revelation. Consequently, based on historical facts and their opinions, Nurcholish then concludes that Muslims are now required to modify forms of modernity from the West so as not to become westernized, just as in the past when they adopted the ideas of Hellenism without having to undergo Hellenization.<sup>168</sup>

From the complexity of Nurcholish’s thought progress, Wahyuni Nafis notes that his intellectual progress lies in his efforts to integrate four main ideas: integration of Islam and humanity, integration of Islam and modernity, integration of Islam and politics, and integration of Islam and Indonesianness.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, organizations such as HMI, ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim se-Indonesia/Association of Muslim Scholars in Indonesia), and PMKI (Perkumpulan Membangun Kembali Indonesia/Association for Rebuilding Indonesia) have also become a forum for Nurcholish’s brilliant ideas, but the forum where Nurcholish’s ideas continue to be discussed and developed is only confined to the Paramadina Foundation. Even Nurcholish also wrote his basic views which he specialized in making a Paramadina guidebook.

It was with this latter foundation that Nurcholish then built the authority of his thought as an attempt to respond to modernity.<sup>170</sup> The foundation was built on the principle of brotherhood and humanity. Nurcholish often conducts academic discussions in an open manner with his team at this institution. The topics discussed are also not only

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<sup>166</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (USA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 23.

<sup>167</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, ‘Mencari Akar-Akar Islam Bagi Pluralisme: Pengalaman Indonesia,’ in *Jalan Baru Islam: Memetakan Paradigma Mutakhir Islam Indonesia*, ed. Mark R Woodward, trans. Ihsan Ali-Fauzi (Bandung: Mizan, 1998), p. 103-107.

<sup>168</sup> Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban*, p. 15-25.

<sup>169</sup> Nafis, *Cak Nur Sang Guru Bangsa*, p. xxviii.

<sup>170</sup> Padli Ahmad, *Setelah Pluralisme, Apa Lagi? Mambaca Cak Nur Setelah 15 Tahun Kepergiannya*, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Mengeja Books, 2021), p. 10.

normative, but are also associated with the history of Islamic civilization related to the context of the discussion. Knowledge of the civilizational aspect will have an impact on expanding the horizons of knowledge and can liberate oneself from the normativism and dogmatism of Islamic teachings.<sup>171</sup> His awareness of this historical approach was discovered from his discussion experiences at the Foundation.

Nurcholish's ideas of renewal were more vigorously discussed when he began to bring the foundation alive. Paramadina was inaugurated on October 31, 1986 by Nurcholish and his colleagues who were predicted to be agents of social change in Indonesia. Regarding the vision of the Paramadina Foundation, Nurcholish further noted: —*Thus Paramadina, aspires as its goal the establishment of civil society which is a polity that is just, open, and democratic within Indonesian religious, cultural, social, and political contexts. To promote pluralism, tolerance, and mutual understanding among religious, cultural, social, and political groups of Indonesia is therefore among the most urgent programs of the foundation.*<sup>172</sup> The vision and mission that Nurcholish expects from this institution are clearly visible in his description above. He wants to make this institution a platform for better social change, certainly in terms of science.

The Paramadina Foundation, as Nurcholish explains, adheres to three basic foundations: independence, openness and culture. Independence means that the Foundation is not affiliated with any social or political organization, either within or outside the country. Openness means that this institution is a forum for scholars and anyone interested in meeting, interacting, and dialoguing in order to explore various sciences and civilizations in an honest, scientific, transparent, and democratic manner. Lastly, cultural means that this institution is expected to produce productive and constructive work as a solution to various humanitarian problems such as social, economic, political, cultural, and educational matters.<sup>173</sup> These foundations, as Nafis explains, are derived from the formulation of the objectives of the establishment of the Paramadina Foundation, which if summarized, the formulation contains three points. First, to increase the development and awareness of an open-minded Islamic religious life. Second, to develop understanding and religious thought and performances that are historical (contextual) so that they are meaningful for solving new humanitarian problems with responsibility. Third, developing an atmosphere of religious life that is transparent,

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<sup>171</sup> Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban*, p. 71.

<sup>172</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Buku Panduan Program Pusat Studi Islam Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina* (Jakarta: Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina, n.d.), p. 6.

<sup>173</sup> Nafis, *Cak Nur Sang Guru Bangsa*, p. 107.

dynamic, reasoned, and responsible. Fourth, developing a system of religious education that has high results and effectiveness.<sup>174</sup>

The Foundation's strategy has proven to be successful in giving the urban elite an intellectual influence on Islam, and they have even immersed themselves in it. Nurcholish's efforts have been fruitful in turning urban *abangan* businessmen and students into professionals and leading to a deeper knowledge of Islam and a more progressive view of the role of religion in society. Paramadina, as Gerg Barton describes its intellectual strategies and approaches, is considered to function as a fashionable madrasa of the late 20th century.<sup>175</sup>

Talking about Nurcholish's intellectual progress, Federspiel sees that Nurcholish's formative works have made an extraordinary contribution to the growth of Muslim intellectualism in the Southeast Asian region. In addition to his reputation in classical Islamic heritage, Nurcholish's works are also enriched with Western literature sources. His progress succeeded in demonstrating Islam as a modern religion capable of providing guidance and enabling Indonesia to take a leading role in the international community.<sup>176</sup> As Hefner explains, Nurcholish's reform did not absolutize rationality and aspects of modernity. Although the starting point departs from this, Nurcholish's thinking is quite adaptive in modernizing his homeland, Indonesia. Hefner sees that in addition to the historical approach, Nurcholish's thinking is also characterized by a cultural approach. The main role of Islam in the context of the nation is as a source of ethical and cultural guidelines.<sup>177</sup> This principle underlies Nurcholish's perception of Islam in the Indonesian context.

The rationalization that Nurcholish pursues is unconventional, and it is in contrast to the rationalization offered by Harun Nasution—as explained in the previous section. Although his thoughts often reap controversy among intellectuals, it must be recognized that Nurcholish's ideas are more sympathetic to Indonesian culture in grounding Islamic teachings. This is what, in my humble opinion, makes Nurcholish different from other intellectuals in Indonesia. Nurcholish's thoughts on the contextualization of Islam and Indonesian culture have given a new impetus to the development of Islam in Indonesia. The strength of Islamic culture highlighted by Nurcholish is expected to present a more

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<sup>174</sup> Nafis.

<sup>175</sup> Greg Barton, "Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid as Intellectual Ulama: The Meeting of Islamic Traditionalism and Modernism in Neo-Modernist Thought," *Studia Islamika* 4, no. 1 (1997), p. 50.

<sup>176</sup> Howard M. Federspiel, "Muslim Intellectuals in Southeast Asia," *Studia Islamika* 6, no. 1 (1999), p. 60.

<sup>177</sup> Robert W. Hefner, "Islam, State, and Civil Society: ICMI and the Struggle for the Indonesian Middle Class," *Indonesia* 56 (October 1993): 1, p. 5.

religiously substantive image of Islam. Thus, Islam will be able to play an important role in the midst of the onslaught of modernity.<sup>178</sup> Accordingly, it is quite reasonable if the cultural Islamic approach offered by Nurcholish succeeds in positioning himself not only as a modernist, but also an Indonesianist.

Nurcholish contends that the use of a cultural approach will be able to engender rational religiosity. In the same vein, Nurcholish emphasized the need to re-understand the Indonesian ‘environment’ in order to apply the correct Islamic doctrine which must be based on cultural considerations and certain social conditions with its three main elements: development, growth, and plurality.<sup>179</sup> Nurcholish considers that these points are included as one of the *ijtihad* efforts and will lead to a rationality tradition that is cultured and Indonesian-oriented. In other words, as Liddle says, Islam will still play its role as a universal religion, but its practices must remain culturally oriented.<sup>180</sup>

### **3.3 Nurcholish’s Attitude Towards Ash’arism**

The complexity of Nurcholish’s thinking in his renewal project makes some of his arguments not only focus on theological aspects, but also social, political and economic. Muslims, according to Nurcholish, are required to apply the teachings of Islam properly and possess a good understanding of the local culture in which they apply the Islamic teachings in order to create a modern and polity-stable life in Indonesia. As a form of his concern as a citizen, Nurcholish argues that Muslims should involve themselves in the modernization process by upholding the values of pluralism in society for the sake of creating the benefit of the people. Obviously through modern scientific and empirical approaches.

Seeing Nurcholish’s thinking is in such a complex manner, it requires an in-depth reading in order to capture the implicit impressions of his opinions related to theological aspects, particularly Ash’arism. This certainly differs from Harun Nasution’s thinking, which only highlights one aspect in his thesis related to the factors causing the backwardness of Muslims. I will start this discussion from Nurcholish’s perspective on his reading of the history of Muslims which then leads to a discussion of their backwardness, or their reduced productivity in responding to the challenges of modernity. All ideas of Islamic renewal thought from Muslim thinkers cannot be separated from this

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<sup>178</sup> Bahtiar Effendy, *Islam Dan Negara: Transformasi Gagasan Dan Praktik Politik Islam Di Indonesia*, trans. Ihsan Ali-Fauzi and Rudy Harisyah Alam (Jakarta: Democracy Project, 2011), p. 47.

<sup>179</sup> Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban*, p. Ixix.

<sup>180</sup> R. William Liddle, *Leadership and Culture in Indonesia Politics* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 73.

factor, although their approaches and conclusions ultimately differ. The Prophet's description that the faithful are those who are better today than they were yesterday, and those who are better tomorrow than they are today, has prompted Nurcholish to realize his concern for the future of Muslims in Indonesia.<sup>181</sup>

Similarly to Nasution, Nurcholish also sees one of the reasons why Islam in Indonesia has not developed in its intellectual phase due to the fact that its arrival coincided with the decline of international Islamic power in the Middle East. For Nurcholish, the fact that the Majapahit Kingdom in Java was established exactly half a century after the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 AD strengthens this argument. The destruction of Baghdad, which at the time was the center of Islamic civilization, was a great tragedy that became the starting point for the rapid decline of Islamic civilization.<sup>182</sup> It was not long after that, Islam began to develop in Indonesia. Unsurprisingly, the Islamic teachings that developed in Indonesia were more dogmatic rather than philosophical.

On the other hand, Nurcholish's reading of Muslim history emphasizes tolerance values such as inclusivism, pluralism, and democracy rather than theological aspects. By quoting Ibn Taimiyya's and Max Dimont's praise, Nurcholish also affirmed that the pluralism, democracy, and inclusiveness that sustained for 5 centuries in Spain had succeeded in carrying them out to prosperity, and thus they had 'transcended' modernity. Nurcholish considers that freedom is the keyword of modernity and is the bulwark of its legitimacy. As such, based on his arguments, there is no explicit indication that Nurcholish has discredited or favored a particular theology, most notably Ash'ari, in terms of the progress and backwardness of Islamic civilization.

Budhy Munawar-Rachman in his work entitled *-Membaca Nurcholish Madjid/Reading Nurcholish Madjid* quotes Nurcholish's words delivered in his speech at the KAA (Klub Kajian Agama/Religious Studies Club) in 1997:

-The classical Muslims (salaf) seemed to think 'normally' when it came to human values, because they did not confront the problem. Although imperfect, but Islamic societies, until the advent of modern times, were the best at practicing the principles of justice and human equality. But when the modern era arrived, with the beginning of various conflicts in the West, in the name of religion and others (culminating in World War II), and at the same time the rampant evil of international imperialism, Muslims were almost all under the

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<sup>181</sup> Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban*, p. 173.

<sup>182</sup> Madjid, p. 47.

occupiers' feet. So the perspective of universal humanity, as taught by the Prophet, was pushed to the back, down to the subconscious buried by the ever-urgent pile of the necessity to fight and repel the invaders. Now it has come, or almost come, the time for Muslims to take the initiative again in an effort to develop and strengthen human values, in line with the necessity of their own religious teachings!.<sup>183</sup>

Nurcholish in his statement highlighted the crisis of humanity as a major problem due to the impact of Western modernity. He did not 'accuse' any theological concept for the crisis of humanity. What he emphasizes is only how this crisis can be overcome with the principles of inclusiveness that Muslims have applied in their heyday without having to get caught up in fierce theological debates. The victory of Islam in the past was characterized by the universalism and cosmopolitanism of Islam without having to threaten other groups. This historical lesson, according to Nurcholish, is important to be reexamined so that Muslims do not lose their relevance to the latest humanitarian developments.<sup>184</sup>

In some of his writings, Nurcholish repeatedly emphasizes that humans, if they rely on their intellect solely, will not be able to know the truth. Although he often quotes Ibn Taimiyya<sup>185</sup>, his attitude is compatible with the doctrine of Ash'arī theology, which considers revelation to be essential in articulating Islamic belief system. Indeed, particularly in this case, I do not find any explicit acknowledgement of his tendency towards a certain theology. But on closer inspection, the fundamental tenets of Ash'arī theology and its doctrines are also presented in some of his works without any intended criticism. For instance, in his review of the problem of ta'wīl, Nurcholish explained the concept of ta'wīl of the Sufis (*ahl al-Bāṭin*) and the Sunnī view as a form of Muslim

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<sup>183</sup> Budhy Munawar-Rachman, *Membaca Nurcholish Madjid: Islam Dan Pluralisme* (Jakarta: Democracy Project, 2011), p. 174.

<sup>184</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, '-Cita-Cita Politik Islam Era Reformasi,' in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar-Rachman, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 3860.

<sup>185</sup> Given that, in terms of theology, Ibn Taimiyya has many differences with Ash'ariyya theology. His debate with Ash'ari theology is far more fierce than other theological teachings, especially on the issue of God and Ta'wīl. However, although Nurcholish seems to be favorable to Ibn Taimiyya's opinions, he never clashes them with Ash'ari's theological views. See for example the review of Abdul Fadil al-Qūsī, a well-known theologian from Al-Azhar, on the differences between the concepts of Ibn Taimiyya and Ash'ari in the matter of takwīl at: Abd el-Fadhil Al-Qushi, *Mauqif Al-Salaf Min al-Mutashābihat Bain al-Mutsbitīn Wa al-Muawwilīn*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Basair, 2004), p. 8-20.

creativity and the wealth of Islamic intellectual treasures without considering it a civilizational decline in the modern era.<sup>186</sup>

Another theological issue discussed by Nurcholish is the issue of predestination, which he elaborated in his article entitled -Pintu-pintu Menuju Tuhan/The Doors to God. In this writing, Nurcholish alludes to the assumptions of some people regarding fatalism caused by their belief in predestination. Interestingly, Nurcholish does not discriminate against any theology, notably Ash'ariyya. He only explained and straightened out the understandings that have been assumed as fatalism, causing productivity to stagnate. On the other hand, Nurcholish also does not absolutize human will. Humans, according to Nurcholish, still operate in accordance with the provisions set by God because it must be recognized that there are things which are entirely beyond our ability to reject or fight them. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that humans can work on it through other possibilities of His will.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, he explains:

-The definition of 'accepting predestination' that is common in society is not entirely wrong. But 'accepting predestination' is correct only if it is applied to something that has already happened, that has already passed, so it is 'closed book'. And obviously, it would be wrong to apply it to something that is yet to happen or to be done. We must speak of the obligation to make an effort, to choose the best possibility, precisely on the basis of our understanding of God's decree laws governing our lives, which the Holy Book defines as *taqdīr* or *Sunnatullah*.<sup>188</sup>

From his overview, it appears to me that Nurcholish wants to mediate between the opinion that absolutizes freedom of will and the opinion that tends to self-surrender. He avoids theological debate on this issue. However, his view, although not exactly the same, is closer to the concept of *kasb* found in Ash'arī theology which encourages humans to make efforts prior to surrendering to fate. Indeed, there are some views of Ash'arī scholars with fatalist tendencies, such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī for example.<sup>189</sup> Yet, there

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<sup>186</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Kontekstualisasi Doktrin Islam Dalam Sejarah, in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar-Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 1428-1434.

<sup>187</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Pintu-Pintu Menuju Tuhan, in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar-Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 1725.

<sup>188</sup> Madjid, p. 1728.

<sup>189</sup> I came to this conclusion through an interview with Yunus Masruhin, the author of *al-Jānib al-Insānī fī al-Khithāb al-Kalāmī 'Ind al-Ashā'ira*, on 12 December, 2023. According to him, one of the most rational Islamic theologians of the ash'ariyya sect was Al-Razi. Unfortunately, he is also one of the most fatalistic on the issue of predestination among them. After I checked directly to

are also some scholars from their group who reinterpret human will to conclude that human will has an influence on social reality changes, in this case Al-Ghazali and Al-Juwaini are among those who argued so.<sup>190</sup>

In the context of Sufism, Nurcholish affirms that there are some modernist thinkers who consider Al-Ghazālī to be the cause of the decline of Islamic civilization because of his attack on philosophy in his work entitled *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*. The symptoms of the decline of Islam that began to appear in the 12th century AD were then followed by the European Renaissance. Nurcholish affirmed this phenomenon of decline. However, instead of agreeing with the above opinion, Nurcholish actually rectifies the view stating that Al-Ghazali is the cause of the decline. Nurcholish even recognized the development of logic in the hands of Al-Ghazali as a form of creativity of the scholars at that time. He argues that it was the attitude of fanaticism and intolerance caused Muslims to be in regression.<sup>191</sup> Indirectly, the seal indicates outwardly that Nurcholish actually appreciates Al-Ghazali as a representation of Ash‘ari scholars, and not considering him as the cause of the decline of Muslims, either in the past or in the present time.

The other interesting aspect to discuss is Ann Kull’s assessment of Nurcholish Madjid’s Sufism. Kull sees that Nurcholish has experienced a spiritual transition after he delivered his speech at TIM in 1992<sup>192</sup> which Kull interpreted as ‘an inclusive and moderate truth, which keeps human nature in this worldly existence’. Nurcholish’s strong engagement with aspects of Islamic mysticism and spirituality led Ann Kull to characterize him as a Sufi first and foremost in the modern Indonesian context. This is understandable, because in some of his writings Nurcholish seems to show his ‘familiarity’ with the literature of Islamic Sufism and its perennialist practitioners such as Al-Hallāj, Suhrawardi, Ibn ‘Arabi, Martin Lings, Rene Guenon, and Fritjof Schoun.<sup>193</sup> Even Budy Munawar-Rachman assumed that Nurcholish’s Sufism thoughts were then used as the foundation of the Paramadina school and its idea of pluralism.<sup>194</sup> The following statement by Nurcholis about Sufism may prove what Kull assumed:

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Al-Razi's work, the situation is indeed so. Al-Razi considers that human will, or *kasb*, is just a metaphorical term. It is only God who drives the real action. See: Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi, *Nihāyat Al-Uqul Fi Dirasat al-Ushul*, 1st ed., vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Dzakhir, 2015), p. 74.

<sup>190</sup> Hasan al-Shafi‘i, *Lamahat Fi Al-Fikr al-Kalami* (Cairo: Mirats al-Nubuwwa, 2010), p. 48.

<sup>191</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, ‘Kaki Langit Peradaban Islam,’ in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar-Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 2663-2670.

<sup>192</sup> Kull, *Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and His Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia*, p. 277.

<sup>193</sup> Madjid, p. 78.

<sup>194</sup> Munawar-Rachman, *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, p. Ixxxvii.

—Living with such ‘resignation’ and submission can indeed give the impression of passivity and escapism. However, as an impetus for moral living, the Sufis’ mystical experience is actually a revelation. That is why the teachings of Sufism are also referred to as moral teachings. And the morals they want to realize are those that are ‘imitations’ of God’s morals, in accordance with the words of the Prophet which they hold in confidence ‘Be all of you with the morals of God’.<sup>195</sup>

Nurcholish, in a different writing, mentions several reasons why tasawuf, or what he calls the esoteric understanding of Islam, is unavoidable. First, because of the rapidly growing access to its literature which is no longer possible to prevent. Secondly, the higher level of intelligence of members of society according to unconventional religious notions. Thirdly, due to advances in information technology, humanity’s global interactions are increasingly unavoidable.<sup>196</sup> He regarded Sufism as a doctrine representing the most intellectual aspect of Islam because of its role in maintaining the existence of Islam during times of political and military decline when compared to the fiqh which tends to be more practical and theology which tends to be defensive. Sufism paved the way for many compromises between the Islamic beliefs and elements of local culture, for instance the parallels between the concept of Sufism and some Javanese mystical teachings, like *tarekat*, *makrifat*, and *hakikat*. The flexibility of the teachings of Sufism led Nurcholish to appreciate the Sufism doctrines. In fact, Nurcholish does not even hesitate to say that *tarekat (tarīqa)* is one of the forms of *ijtihād* to bring oneself closer to God.<sup>197</sup>

According to Ann Kull, amidst the continuing onslaught of Western rationalism, Nurcholish’s tendency towards Sufism is a significant contribution of Islamic thought to Indonesian society.<sup>198</sup> Nurcholish not only addresses Ibn Arabi’s *tasawwuf falsafī* and al-Ghazali’s *tasawwuf sunnī*, but he also elaborates on the relationship between the principles of *tarīqa* and *sharī’a* and its role in understanding Sufism as a form of worldly activism. In other words, he is careful to categorize Sufism in accordance with Ibn Taimiyya’s directive of harshly criticizing the radical doctrines of Sufism while also being

<sup>195</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, ‘Tradisi Islam,’ in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 4776.

<sup>196</sup> Madjid, ‘Kontekstualisasi Doktrin Islam Dalam Sejarah,’ p. 1465.

<sup>197</sup> Madjid, ‘Islam Agama Peradaban: Membangun Makna Dan Relevansi Doktrin Islam Dalam Peradaban,’ p. 2354.

<sup>198</sup> Kull, *Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and His Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia*, p. 260.

completely receptive to what he calls ‘positive Sufism’, or what Hamka and Fazlur Rahman often refer to as neo-Sufism.<sup>199</sup>

### 3.4 Concluding Remarks

From the explanation above, it is possible to conclude that some of Nurcholish Madjid's opinions have more in common with the doctrines of Ash'arism than other theological schools, notwithstanding that he doesn't state it in explicit terms. The reason for this is clear from his views on rationality, predestination, and Sufism with its various types where the only Islamic theological doctrine that is in line with these concepts is Ash'arism. It was only reasonable, therefore, that in the end, he was in the number of those who expressed his defense of this theology. Nurcholish Madjid's neo-sufism provides a new spiritual perspective for urban communities. Sufism is not merely interpreted as the performance of religious rituals, but more than that; how to improve oneself in order to be better in various aspects of social life.<sup>200</sup> On the issue of Islamic thought, Nurcholish contributed many ideas for his 'fresh' interpretation of Islamic values. He has bestowed several Islamic studies institutions that continue to be useful, such as the Paramadina Foundation which has developed into a university, ICMI, and NCMS (Nurcholish Madjid Society). The aforementioned institutions are actively engaged in open discussions on Islamic studies. Those responsible for continuing the discussions are Nurcholish's students, the individuals who preserve his thoughts. As for theological issues, Nurcholish's defense of Ash'arism leaves a suggestion that in responding to modernity—or the backwardness of Muslims—theological issues are not the only solution in addressing modernity. Nurcholish tries to go beyond these theological issues by focusing more on the basic norms of Islamic values and ethics such as plurality, justice, and inclusiveness.

At the end of this section, I would like to point out another instance where Nurcholish, yet again, ‘seems’ to be defending Ash'ari's theological understanding. In an article he dedicated to the anniversary of Nasution's death, he said:

-Harun was keen to state that one of the reasons for the decline of Islam was the dominance of Ass'arism which was extremely Jabbari. In fact, al-Ash'ari himself

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<sup>199</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, ‘Tradisi Islam,’ in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 2924.

<sup>200</sup> Budhy Munawar-Rachman, *Membaca Nurcholish Madjid: Islam Dan Pluralisme* (Jakarta: Democracy Project, 2011), p. 100.

did not intend to make Muslims Jabbarī. He actually wanted to mediate between Qodari and Jabbari with the kasb theory.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Abduhisme Pak Harun, in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 106.

## Chapter IV

### A Comparative Analysis of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid Theology

In this chapter, I will compare Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid's thoughts from a theological perspective in a more specific way. If the previous discussion has described their differences regarding their instruments of thought such as rationality, the meaning of modernization, and their historical approach, then in this section I will focus only on theological issues with a more systematic manner. In addition, in this chapter I will also analyze several factors causing both figures to have different opinions in regard to their theological matters, notably those related to the Ash'arism belief.

#### 4.1 The Similarities and Differences of Their Theological Point of View

The modern era has become a new stage in the struggle for scientific knowledge. This era not only provides a renewal movement in Islamic sciences, but also reconstructs religious authority; from doctrinal to rational, and from Middle East-oriented to Western-oriented.<sup>202</sup> The two intellectuals studied in the previous sections, Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid, are only a few of the Muslim intellectuals whose ideas have been discussed in various academic circles in the modern era. In Indonesia, they have also become icons for a new paradigm shift in Islamic discourse that has often generated controversy. Nonetheless, as Kersten says, some of their ideas are still relevant at the beginning of the 21st century, and are even continuing to be developed by "devotees" of their thought.<sup>203</sup>

Based on the information and data that I have described in chapters 2 and 3, it seems that the two well-known Indonesian scholars have different attitudes towards Ash'arī theology in the context of its relevance to the order of modern reality. The different perspectives they use in analyzing the phenomena of modernity make their assessments of this theology tend to be different, even contrary. Indeed, in the context of modernity, many researchers have studied the two figures with various perspectives. Some have looked at it from a political and spiritual perspective such as Ann Kull and

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<sup>202</sup> Megan B. Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 17.

<sup>203</sup> Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought In The Muslim World Trends, Themes, And Issues*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), p. 71.

Idris Thaha.<sup>204</sup> Some have studied them from the point of view of intellectualism such as Carool Kersten and Howard M. Federspiel.<sup>205</sup> There are also those who see it from a theological point of view such as Lukman Thahir and Muhaemin Latif.<sup>206</sup> The difference between this research is that it focuses only on their attitude towards Ash‘ariyya theology, which is often considered a ‘scapegoat’, as Harun Nasution claimed<sup>207</sup>, for the backwardness of Muslims in the modern era. Although, according to Montgomery Watt’s argument, the element of fatalism in Muslim beliefs already existed in pre-Islamic Arab beliefs<sup>208</sup>, Ash‘arī theology remains the culprit for some modernist thinkers’ fatalistic beliefs.<sup>209</sup>

The similarity between both intellectuals lies in their goal or mission, which is to reclaim the backwardness of Muslims from the West through ideas of renewal. In addition, historical investigation is also a sense of similarity between them, both of which evaluate the current condition of Muslims through a historical approach. In fact, in the context of Nasution, some of his students at IAIN had complained that Nasution’s books were full of historical interpretations.<sup>210</sup> Yet, the perspectives they use are different;

<sup>204</sup> Thaha, *Demokrasi Religius: Pemikiran Politik Nurcholish Madjid Dan M. Amien Rais*, p. 22.

<sup>205</sup> In this context, Kersten and Federspiel draw a distinction between intellectuals and scholars. Intellectuals, according to them, are people who are qualified in a certain field of knowledge and are accompanied by the ambition to reposition Islam in accordance with the challenges of the times that surround it. Meanwhile, scholars are those who are only qualified in a particular field without such ambition. Thus, based on the above definition, every intellectual is a scholar but not every scholar is an intellectual. See the detailed review on: Howard M. Federspiel, *Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals of the 20th Century*, Southeast Asia Background Series, no. 8 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 21; Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitan and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and The Study of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p.14.

<sup>206</sup> Here, what I mean by 'theological point of view' is the new theological point of view, or in Arabic often referred to as '*ilm kalām al-jadīd*'. Thahir and Latif tend to assume that Nasution's and Nurcholish's construction of theology is a newly independent theology, detached from its classical epistemological tradition. See: Lukman Thahir, '-The New Theology: Constructing Critical Islamic Theology Based on Hegel’s Dialectic Theory,' *HUNAFa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 17, no. 1 (June 18, 2020): 88–107; Muhaemin Latif, *Ragam Paham Dalam Teologi Modern* (Yogyakarta: Quantum, 2022).

<sup>207</sup> Actually, not only Nasution who hold this view from among modernist thinkers, but also other modernist thinkers have this point of view.

<sup>208</sup> Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), p. 90.

<sup>209</sup> Mustafa Akyol, in his critique of the dominance of Ash'ari theology and its fatalism, mentions several scholars who also problematize this theology from the perspective of modernity. For example, he mentions Fazlur Rahman and Ahmad al-Raysuni who suggested the Ash'arites to self-criticize what they believed all through the years. Here, the solution offered by Akyol is slightly different from Nasution. Akyol only suggests that the ash'ari theology should autocriticize its traditional doctrines, while Nasution suggests that this theology be completely replaced with the theology of Mu'tazilah. See more at: Mustafa Akyol, *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance* (New York: St. Martin’s Essentials, 2021), p. 34-37.

<sup>210</sup> I obtained this review from Steenbrink's article. Unfortunately, I did not find any further review of the type of book the student was referring to. Given that, in my opinion, Nasution's historical

Nasution only emphasizes the theological aspects, while Nurcholish focuses on the social aspects and Islamic values in general. Nasution's focus on the theological aspect only was considered by Deliar Noer to have narrowed his perspective and his mission in Indonesia.<sup>211</sup> As such, Nasution's thoughts were confined to the academic sphere and did not reach social movements such as politics and Islamic organizations. Nevertheless, many international scholars, including Deliar Noer himself, appreciate Nasution's role in 'shaking up' the theological discourse in Indonesia. The third similarity between them is their description of Islamic discourse, which tends to be more dialectical and philosophical. Although their approaches are different, however, they both try to present Islamic belief system with a more scientific concept when compared to previous religious discourses in Indonesia.<sup>212</sup> In other words, they systematically and discursively situate Islamic issues in a way that successfully reflects the development of Islamic discourse in Indonesia. Presumably, these are the only three things I can find related to the points of similarity between the two prominent Indonesian intellectuals.

Furthermore, I will compare the differences between these two scholars. The first difference lies in their perspective in looking at the historical context of Muslims. Nasution reviews the history of Islamic philosophy, including its philosophers, and the Mu'tazilah only to trace their rationality in creating a civilization which was highly developed at the time.<sup>213</sup> This gives the impression that, from Nasution's perspective, it was the theological dimension that shaped their rationality. Theology 'stimulates' them to think in rational manner. Interestingly, in a meeting organized by LP3ES (Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan, dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial/Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education, and Information) which aims to explain the theoretical and applicable features of theology and sociology respectively in 1983, Harun Nasution only said that Islamic theology is a discussion of God and man's relationship with Him. There was no further exploration from Nasution regarding the role of theology as an applicable

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presentation in his existing books is not as complicated as Nurcholish Madjid's writings when it is compared. See: Karel A. Steenbrink, -Dari Kairo Hingga Kanada Dan Kampung Utan: Perkembangan Pemikiran Teologis Prof. Dr. Harun Nasution, in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 159.

<sup>211</sup> Deliar Noer, -Harun Nasution Dalam Perkembangan Pemikiran Islam Di Indonesia, in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 85.

<sup>212</sup> Fachry and Taftazani, -Harun Nasution Dan Tradisi Pemikiran Islam Indonesia, in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 121.

<sup>213</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Khazanah Intelektual Islam, in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 72.

science in the process of social change, which was the main topic of the discussion.<sup>214</sup> However, in this sense, Harun Nasution's perspective in evaluating history for the modern development of Muslims is only confined to theological boundaries.

In contrast to Nasution, Nurcholish's point of view in observing Islamic history pays more attention to the attitude of the Muslim people at that time. He took off the theological elements and debates in it. I presume that at this point, Nurcholish deliberately releases the theological element since he wants to minimize the never-ending debates of the past. It fits with one of his visions, which is to unite the voices of Muslims in matters of development through his ideas of Indonesianness and modernity.<sup>215</sup> In addition, when compared to Nasution, Nurcholish quotes far more from Western historians and sociologists such as Diamont, Marshall Hodgson, Robert Bellah, and Peter Berger in developing his arguments.<sup>216</sup> So it is reasonable that the perspective Nurcholish considers is enriched by a wider range of viewpoints than that of his senior.

Another point of difference between Nasution and Nurcholish in their reading of history is Nurcholish's sympathetic attitude towards Muslims. A vivid example in this context is his attitude in reading the history of Ash'ari theology and particularly imam Al-Ghazali, in which theology is often considered the object of criticism by orientalist and several other modernist thinkers, notably Nasution. Instead of following their path in criticizing, Nurcholish actually felt 'compassion' for the marginalization of this theology in the modern world. In his article entitled '-Kelebihan dan Kekurangan Pemahaman Asy'ari Sebagai Doktrin Akidah Islam/The Strengths and Weaknesses of Ash'ari's Understanding as a Doctrine of Islamic Creed', Nurcholish does acknowledge the weaknesses in this doctrine, specifically in answering the challenges of modernity.<sup>217</sup> Nevertheless, he also recognizes the unique systematic advantages in this theological methodology which differentiate it from other theological schools. Thus, according to Nurcholish, this is also the main reason for the nearly universal acceptance of this school of belief and its survival even today. Certainly, this kind of recognition cannot be found in Nasution's works which is overly Mu'tazilah-oriented. He gives no space for Ash'ari

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<sup>214</sup> This implicitly indicates a contradiction between Nasution's analysis of history and his concept of theology. He pays attention to the theological aspect in analyzing history as he considers that theology plays an important role in shaping social change and civilization. However, at the meeting, Nasution did not explain much about applicable theology. See: Steenbrink, '-Dari Kairo Hingga Kanada Dan Kampung Utan: Perkembangan Pemikiran Teologis Prof. Dr. Harun Nasution', p. 163.

<sup>215</sup> Madjid, *Islam: Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan*.

<sup>216</sup> Khairudin Aljunied, '-The Islamic Reformist Mosaic in Muslim Southeast Asia', in *Overcoming Orientalism: Essays in Honor of John L. Esposito*, ed. Tamara Sonn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 112.

<sup>217</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban* (Jakarta: PARAMADINA, 1999), 316.

theology in the context of the modern world system precisely because it is often considered fatalistic, irrational, and pre-deterministic. In fact, he rejects this theology in its entirety if Muslims in Indonesia want to revival from their ‘degradation’.<sup>218</sup> Although on a theological level both scholars discuss the age-old debate about reason and revelation, Nurcholish’s respect for the Islamic intellectual treasure inspires him not to discredit a particular theology. In short, Nurcholish’s research into Islamic intellectual history strengthens his expertise in classical Islamic scholarship, especially theology and philosophy. Abbas says that Nurcholish in the context of his historical reading, he uses a fusionist lens in reading history<sup>219</sup>, Kersten even considers his historical reading to have gone beyond Gadamerian hermeneutic fusion due to his standing within the historical interpretive tradition that views hermeneutics as ‘the discipline of historical interpretation seeking what is practicable and meaningful’.<sup>220</sup>

The next striking difference between these two scholars is the contextualization of Islamic theological doctrine in the Indonesian context. I would like to agree with Fachry Ali and Taftazani’s criticism that Nasution’s theological thinking is ‘overly reductive’ when placed in the Indonesian context. That is because Nasution’s style of thought is not reflective due to the fact that his thoughts do not address the socio-cultural issues of Islamic society in Indonesia.<sup>221</sup> Furthermore, Mansour Fakhri, one of Nasution’s prominent students, considers the theological solutions offered by his teacher in overcoming the social crisis in Indonesia to be elitist and beyond the ‘out reach’ of the Indonesian people.<sup>222</sup> This stands in contrast to Nurcholish’s theological perspective, which is more contextual and adaptive to the social conditions of Indonesian society. In one of his reviews, Nurcholish once said there was an intellectual gap between the Islamic world and Indonesia. The arrival of Islam in Indonesia brought by traders and Sufis<sup>223</sup> has made the style of Islam in Indonesia lack the intellectual dimension.

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<sup>218</sup> Harun Nasution, ‘The Place of Reason in Abduh’s Theology’ (Doctoral Thesis, Montreal, McGill University, 1968), p. 319.

<sup>219</sup> Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia*, p. 141.

<sup>220</sup> Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitan and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and The Study of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 84.

<sup>221</sup> Ali and Taftazani, ‘Harun Nasution Dan Tradisi Pemikiran Islam Indonesia’, p. 122.

<sup>222</sup> Mansour Fakhri, ‘Mencari Teologi Untuk Kaum Tertindas’, in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 167.

<sup>223</sup> Michael Francis Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton [N.J.]; Oxford [England]: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 62; Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern –Ulamā’ in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 1. publ, Southeast Asia Publications Series (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 2004), p. 31.

Moreover, the arrival of Islam in Indonesia coincided with the Islamic Middle Ages when the Islamic world was experiencing an intellectual crisis due to the collapse of Spain. So, from these historical facts, it is reasonable, as Nurcholish assumed, if the accepted theological school is Ash'arism which is in line with the teachings of Sufism and able to adapt to the Hindu-Buddhist religious traditions for a long time adopted by the Indonesian people.<sup>224</sup> Nurcholish further explained that a large number of Hindus converted to Islam through Sufi doctrines primarily because of their similarities in the doctrines of *adivata* (nonduality) and *wahdat al-wujūd*.<sup>225</sup> Likewise with Ricklefs, he argued that pre-Islamic Javanese social and traditional thought relied heavily on the doctrine of determinism (*titah jawa*) to justify a rigid and hierarchical social system. The Javanese concept of *nrimo* (acceptance), which means passively accepting one's fate in the hope of heavenly reward, is closely related to the fatalistic-deterministic theological beliefs of Ash'arī.<sup>226</sup>

Considering the history of Islam's arrival and its religious traditions, instead of replacing Ash'ari's theological beliefs in Indonesia, Nurcholish took the initiative to develop them in a way that remained relevant to modern Indonesia.<sup>227</sup> He once said:

-But, perhaps more importantly, such a perspective can be used as a starting point for looking at the problems of Muslims in Indonesia today with regard to the contribution they can make to the dynamic growth of Indonesian values with the materials available in their own religious teachings.<sup>228</sup>

The extensive knowledge of Nurcholish related to Indonesian history also influenced the character of Nurcholish's renewal in the field of theology fairly realistic. His insight into the history of pre-Islamic Indonesia makes Nurcholish's ideas wiser in responding to the crisis of modernity in Indonesia. However, this is different from Nasution, who only briefly reviews the history of Indonesian culture in the construct of his historical approach.<sup>229</sup> In another article, Nurcholish also firmly said:

-Every nation has an ethos or psychological atmosphere that becomes the main characteristic of that nation. This is also the case with the Indonesian nation. The

<sup>224</sup> Anthony H Johns, —Aspects of Sufi Thought in India and Indonesia in the First Half of the 17th Century, | *JMBRAS* 28, no. 1 (1955), p. 18.

<sup>225</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Islam Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan, | in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 122.

<sup>226</sup> Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from The Fourteenth to The Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Norwalk: East Bridge Signature Books, 2006), p. 73.

<sup>227</sup> Madjid, *Islam Doktrin Dan Peradaban*, p. 303.

<sup>228</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Islam Kemodernan Dan Keindonesiaan, | in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 137.

<sup>229</sup> See Nasution's review of this in: Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 119.

ethos is then expressed in various forms of manifestation, such as identity, personality, and ideology. Especially in this modern era, the manifestation of this ethos in the form of a systematic formal formulation results in an ideology.<sup>230</sup>

The statement ‘every nation has an ethos or psychological atmosphere that becomes the main characteristic of that nation’ clearly demonstrates his argument in reconstructing the understanding of theology in Indonesia, Nurcholish truly considers the Islamic culture of Indonesia properly. He uses a persuasive approach in his ijtihādi efforts by providing space for Ash‘ari theology in modern Indonesia context.

The other difference between these two scholars lies in the issue of rationality, which has implications for their views on Ash‘ari's theology. Although both of them use rationality as an instrument to make ijtihādī efforts, I see that the style of rationality they offer has a fundamental difference in concept. Nasution’s rationality is more influenced by Mu‘tazilah views, which he considers the most ideal for the modern era. He was eager to apply this kind of rationality to whatever culture he found without taking into account the nature of that culture. His assertion with regard to revelation being revealed to strengthen human reason and making the norms established by human reason inviolable is very similar to the views of Mu‘tazilism as opposed to Ash‘arism.<sup>231</sup> Likewise, Nasution recognizes the weakness of human reason, but the position of reason in his view is an important matter in regulating human lifestyle. For Nasution, the truth owned by humans through their intellect requires reinforcement, justification and confirmation that it corresponds to what God intends through His revelation. This means an independent reason can find the absolute truth. It is merely that it needs revelation as its legality.<sup>232</sup> Such a view is also commonly accepted by modern philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz who prefer to agree with the view that reason itself would be able to know what is going on in the world.<sup>233</sup> According to Woodward, this view is exactly the same with the Mu‘tazilah position. Thus, Nasution considers this point of view as an ideal belief to deal with the cacophony of modernism where rationality tends to be prioritized in various aspects of life.

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<sup>230</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, ‘Tradisi Islam,’ in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 2813.

<sup>231</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 142; Richard C Martin, Mark R Woodward, and Dwi S Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam* (British: Oneworld, 1997), p. 177.

<sup>232</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 140.

<sup>233</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 553-576.

If this is discussed in Paul Stoller's theory of rationality, as I have described in chapter 2, it seems that the pivot of rationality carried by Harun Nasution is closer to universalist perfectionism where he sees Abduh's rationalism as a representation of the Mu'tazilah school. For Nasution, this kind of rationality is the ideal solution to revive the fervor of Muslims over the dullness of their reasoning without entirely considering the local cultural context in Indonesia. Abduh's rational theology greatly influenced Nasution's orientation as a reformer and his neo-Mu'tazilah view of the supremacy of reason. That is, Nasution believes in a single rationality, namely Mu'tazilah rationality, which is based on universal logical principles that can be applied universally regardless of the socio-cultural context.<sup>234</sup>

With his view of rationality, he aspired to redevelop the discursive and critical theology of Mu'tazilah and strongly believe in the need for Muslims to free themselves from the rigid and fatalistic theology of Ash'ariyya and Jabariyya. Indeed, his strong efforts to restore rational theology in Indonesia are substantially recognized in the context of Islamic modernism as a great supporter of reason and a pioneer of the reforms initiated by Abduh in Cairo.<sup>235</sup> According to Nasution, the theology developed by Mu'tazilah and Abduh, is not just an intellectual exercise or academic endeavor, but has become the theological foundation of Islamic modernism.<sup>236</sup> So that, his perfectionist-universalist rationalist view led to his view of Ash'arī theology becoming unfavorable. This theology was not given any space within the context of the modern world, regardless of how beneficial it might be to the society around it.

It seems that Nasution's rationality view mentioned above is different from Nurcholish Madjid's rationality which is more 'adaptive' and 'sympathetic'. If Nurcholish's view is referred to Stoller's types of rationality, then in my opinion Nurcholish's rationality is classified as relativist one. In this case, relativists try to understand the nuances of the local context and sympathize to avoid analytical errors. They believe that it is better not to make judgments based on relative rationality or irrationality. It implies that Nurcholish is convinced towards the diversity of rationality based on the existing patterns and culture of a particular society. As with Nasution, this type of rationality is in line with Nurcholish's historical approach, which has a sympathetic nature and has a tendency to appreciate the cultural background of a

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<sup>234</sup> Paul Stoller, 'Rationality,' in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 241.

<sup>235</sup> Ahmad Nabil Amir and Tasnim Abdul Rahman, 'The Influence of Muhammad Abduh in Indonesia,' *International Journal Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* 23, no. 1 (June 24, 2021): 27–59, p. 52.

<sup>236</sup> Mohd Shuhaimi Haji Ishak, *Islamic Rationalism: A Critical Evaluation of Harun Nasution Thought* (Malaysia: IIUM Press, 2009), p. 41.

particular society rather than radically revising it. Nurcholish believes such rationality is not liberal reasoning, rather it is a way of thinking supported by a sense of morality and grounded in the principle of faith in God Almighty.<sup>237</sup>

Thus, Nurcholish's caution in articulating rationality with its distinctive character requires him to distinguish the rationality referred to from Western rationalism (the absolute use of reason). Rationalism is considered by Nurcholish to be a view on recognizing the absoluteness of the ratio. A rationalist uses his mind with the conviction and belief that his mind is capable of discovering all matters in the world, even including the Absolute Truth. Nurcholish challenged such an opinion. He contends that Islam only justifies rationality, not rationalism. Meaning that reason can only reveal human truths by their relative nature. Absolute truth can only be accessible to humans through the power of a supreme being, namely the revelation brought by the Prophets of God.<sup>238</sup> If it is carefully considered, Nurcholish's opinion of rationality is different from Nasution's view, who believes revelation's function is only to legitimize everything that has been determined by reason to be good or evil. Nasution with his idea of rationality tends to consider revelation as a complement, whereas Nurcholis emphasizes the superiority of revelation. Implicitly, Nurcholish's opinion is more closely related to the view of Ash'arism in which reason is not regarded as an autonomous superiority. This, in my opinion, is one of the factors—in addition to several other factors that I will mention in the next discussion—that is why Nurcholish does not easily overtake Ash'arism in his analysis of the context of the modern world, particularly in Indonesia.

#### **4.2 Why did They Differ? Textual Based-Analysis on How They Read Ash'arism**

After discussing some of the differences and similarities between the theological views of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid in the previous section, in this part I will try to attempt several factors that make their perspectives stand apart in viewing Ash'ari theology in modern Indonesia. Indeed, from the previous description, I have already mentioned the issues of rationality and history that have led them to this differing perspective. However, these matters are not the main reason, but only the 'vehicle' they employ to develop their renewal project which implicates their perspectives on Ash'arism's doctrine.

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<sup>237</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Islam Kemedernan dan Keindonesiaan, in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 133.

<sup>238</sup> Madjid, p. 157.

Upon reviewing the works of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid, both of them have broad insights related to the understanding of Ash'arism. This is reflected in their writings on the history of classical Islamic sects and their leaders, as well as the theories of *sunni-falsafi* Sufism.<sup>239</sup> However, how deeply and how far they understand Ash'arī theology will not affect their attitude towards it. Generally speaking, these two figures both recognize the weaknesses in the concept of Ash'arī theology epistemology, but the solutions they offer to cover the weaknesses of this theology tend to be different. This fact shows that what influences their perception of Ash'arism is not the depth of their understanding of this theology, but the dialectical process of their perception of theology with the crisis of social reality they face. In addition, the methodological instruments they adopted from the West also influenced their perception of Ash'arism.

They both perceived Ash'arism from the lens of modernism. Nasution considers that Ash'arism's beliefs are an obstacle to the reformist offer he proposes, Rational Islam. This is different from Nurcholish who tends to make Ash'arism only a bridge to advance Islam and Indonesia in a modern context. From this it can be seen that the respective goals of these two figures are not for the revival of Ash'arī theology itself, but for the realization of Islamic values that they consider appropriate to be applied in the modern world order. In solving the problems of modernity, Nurcholish differs from some fundamentalist Muslims who either oppose modernity or accept it gratuitously without considering existing cultural traditions. He seeks solutions within Islam to solve the problems of modernity based on the long tradition of Islamic intellectuality itself. Therefore, in criticizing Nasution, it was natural for Nurcholish to say *-By promoting Mu'tazilah ideas, Pak Harun has created an unnecessary controversy in Indonesian society*.<sup>240</sup>

I concluded that there are two factors affecting their perception of Ash'arism. However, before reviewing them in great detail, I will initially map them out in outline. These two factors are: the impact of the idea of Islamic reform in the Islamic world on Nasution and Nurcholish's theological outlooks and their Islamic studies educational background in Western universities. Here is the following explanation:

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<sup>239</sup> Nasution's review can be found in: Nasution, *Teologi Islam: Aliran-Aliran Sejarah Analisa Perbandingan*. As for Nurcholish's review, it can be seen in some of his writings edited by Budy Munawar-Rachman on: Munawar-Rachman, *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*.

<sup>240</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, —Abduhisme Pak Harunl, p. 104.

## A. The Impact of Islamic Reform on The Theological Thought of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid

The Islamic reformation that occurred in several Islamic countries such as Egypt, India, and Turkey—as Nasution admitted<sup>241</sup>—also ‘stimulated’ certain Indonesian Progressive thinkers in articulating Islamic values, notably theology. The influence of the Islamic reform that occurred in the Middle East also had an impact on several thinkers in Southeast Asia, notably Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid.<sup>242</sup> Needless to say, the influence of this reformation idea has ‘shocked’ various Indonesian aspects of Islamic thought, from theology, Islamic law, politics, and other humanities sciences. In order not to take the discussion out of the scope of this study, I will limit the discussion to the theological aspect instead.

The idea of reform in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, indeed began during the Rifā‘ah al-Tahtawī era which was engaged in the realm of education.<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, as a continuation of the al-Tahtawī movement, Jamal al-Dīn al-Afghani took part in continuing his role in expanding it to various social aspects. He also moved into the social, political, and solidarity realms of fellow Muslims. In fact, al-Afghani often visited abroad for the purposes of his country’s political bureaucracy.<sup>244</sup> The role of al-Afghani was then continued by Muhamad Abduh, a well known reformer from Al-Azhar and at the same time his own student, who played a role in promoting the moral concept of linear community development through his rationalist ideas. Abduh played a role in continuing his predecessor in reforming religious education and religious judicature in Egypt without neglecting the inherited political role initiated by his teacher.<sup>245</sup>

The brief review of the role of several Egyptian reformers above is only to trace the genealogy of Harun Nasution’s thoughts, which were to some extent influenced by Muhammad Abduh’s. Despite Muhammad Abduh

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<sup>241</sup> Muzani, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan Dan Pemikiran Harun Nasution*, p. 148.

<sup>242</sup> Aljunied, ‘The Islamic Reformist Mosaic in Muslim Southeast Asia’, p. 115.

<sup>243</sup> John W. Livingstone, ‘Western Science and Educational Reform in The Thought of Shaykh Rifā‘a al-Tahtawi’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 4 (1996), p. 5.

<sup>244</sup> Usamah Sayyed Al-Azhari, *Jamhara A‘lām al-Azhar al-Sharīf*, vol. 2 (Alexandria: Maktaba Iskandariyya, 2019), p. 27.

<sup>245</sup> Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and The Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), p. 177. See also for a more comprehensive overview in: John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 9-23.

himself refusing to be claimed as a Mu'tazilah, Nasution's investigation concluded, as explained in chapter 2, that Abduh's theological works were more influenced by Mu'tazilah views than other theological schools.<sup>246</sup> Muhammad Abduh with all his ideas of renewal has become a 'role model' for Nasution to reformulate the reasoning of Indonesian Muslims in a theological sense. Ironically, Abduh, who is 'revered' by Nasution, is apparently not too obsessed with grounding his renewal project with Mu'tazilism. In contrast, Nasution's attitude, according to which I read, tends to 'sanctify' Mu'tazilah theology and consider it as the only solution in the context of Islamic development to build a new stage for Muslim contestation in Indonesia. Presumably this can be understood due to Nasution's interest in the ideas of rationality and his influence on the writings of orientalist who revived Mu'tazilah thought as he himself admitted.<sup>247</sup>

However, in addition to his fascination with Abduh's method of thinking for the modern context, the achievements of Abduh in his various reform movements have been notable for Nasution.<sup>248</sup> Nasution's educational background, having studied at Al-Azhar, brought him much closer to accessing the rational-Mu'tazilah ideas of Muhammad Abduh as a prominent reformer in the Islamic world. Abduh succeeded in inspiring Nasution in his structured and progressive intellectual agenda in Indonesia, especially in the field of Islamic theology. Thus, he succeeded in creating an academic environment and future generations in Indonesia to be more critical in theological issues and Islamic thought.

In the same vein, the impact of Modernity's hegemony also seems to affect Nurcholish Madjid as a prominent Indonesian thinker. His reputation as one of the students of the renowned Pakistani Islamic thinker, Fazlur Rahman, is also a sign of his credibility in addressing issues of modernity from an Islamic perspective. Differently from Nasution, Nurcholish began his intellectual 'onslaught' in Indonesia through the idea of Secularization which he wrote in his article entitled —Keharusan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat/The Necessity of Renewal of Islamic Thought and

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<sup>246</sup> Nasution, 'The Place of Reason in Abduh's Theology', p. 219.

<sup>247</sup> Zaim Uchrowi and Ahmadie Thaha, 'Menyeru Pemikiran Rasional Mu'tazilah', in *Refleksi Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam: 70 Tahun Harun Nasution*, ed. Tim Penyusun (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 1989), p. 34.

<sup>248</sup> Uchrowi and Thaha, p. 37.

the Problem of Integration of the Ummah.<sup>249</sup> Nurcholish conveyed and discussed this idea of secularization in a student organization forum known as HMI. It was in this organization that Nurcholish began his intellectual career. Apparently, it is not easy to determine what and who really influenced Nurcholish's thinking in the realm of theology as he essentially was by no means someone who only focused on that particular field. However, Carol Kersten notes that Nurcholish's intellectual maturity began to develop when he served as president of the HMI through which he was able to travel to America and the Middle East. On his visit, Kersten noted how the literature he collected during his overseas trip had introduced Nurcholish to the ideas of Christian sociologists and theologians such as Robert Bellah and Harvey Cox.<sup>250</sup> He used Nurcholish's exposure to the sociologists' thoughts on secularization to challenge the thesis of the unification of religion and state that was being discussed by activists of the Islamic organization, Masyumi. This shows the primary starting point of Nurcholish's reform breakthrough was his understanding of the socio-cultural conditions rooted in Indonesia's social challenges, which Kersten termed *opus alienum*<sup>251</sup>, rather than any theological issues.

As for his visit to the Middle East, Nurcholish began to read and collect books related to the ideas of the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi's 'left Islam'. Accordingly, Halverson considers that Nurcholish has also been influenced by Hassan Hanafi's thought.<sup>252</sup> Unfortunately, I did not find any data that could be used as concrete evidence of the influence of Hanafi's thought on Nurcholish. In the very least, Nurcholish once praised some of his juniors who were able to study in the Middle East because they had direct access to Arabic literature in a modern style. In an article, he once said: —*Let's look at Hasan Hanafi. He writes in Arabic, but his Arabic is modern. Fushah, classical, but modern in expression!*<sup>253</sup>

<sup>249</sup> M. Wahyuni Nafis, *Cak Nur Sang Guru Bangsa*, 1st ed. (Jakarta: Kompas Media Nusantara, 2014), p. 79.

<sup>250</sup> Kersten, *Cosmopolitan and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and The Study of Islam*, p. 54.

<sup>251</sup> Kersten, p. 62.

<sup>252</sup> Jeffry R. Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 148.

<sup>253</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, 'Dialog Keterbukaan: Artikulasi Nilai Islam Dalam Wacana Sosial Politik Kontemporer,' in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 3451.

As for the ideas of Islamic Reformation that occurred in the Middle East, Nurcholish appreciates the role of Muhammad Abduh and his teacher, Al-Afghani, as an influential reformer in the modern era. Nurcholish even recognized Abduh's theological work entitled *Risālat al-Tauhīd* as the first work of Islamic theology with a modern view.<sup>254</sup> Although Nurcholish's insight is sufficiently broad regarding these figures, I did not find any evidence of the influence of their thoughts on Nurcholish in its entirety. In fact, Nurcholish also reviewed several scholars who criticized Abduh's modernist ideas such as Maryam Jameelah and Hamid Algar.<sup>255</sup> It is due to Nurcholish's insight that is not only limited to reading Abduh's thoughts, but also the criticisms expressed to him, I would like to assume that this is why Nurcholish became less obsessed with the solutions offered by Middle Eastern reformers, especially Abduh with his rationality. Even though Nurcholish did affirm some of Abduh's opinions on the issue of Muslims' dullness, *ijtihād* and the ungenerousness of studying philosophical texts, the depth and breadth of Nurcholish's thought on the Islamic classical treasures have made him appreciate traditional Islamic values without having to \_alienate\_ them with the overtures of Islamic reformists.

Nurcholish's prototype of his response to modernity and Islamic reform movements reflects what Kersten terms the Postmodernist school of thought, which maintains and develops the tradition of the inevitability of social change as a modernity's impact in the history of humankind.<sup>256</sup>

## **B. Western-Based Universities' Influence on Their Attitudes**

Western ideologies seem to have a significant influence on the Islamic world, especially Indonesia. The military regimes that modernized Egypt, Turkey and Indonesia called for Western-style development. They strengthened the urban middle class and encouraged social programs such as increased access to education through economic policies that developed within their systems.<sup>257</sup> Modernization theory at the time rested on a Western liberal foundation that encouraged scholars to evaluate other cultures. Many

<sup>254</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, "Warisan Intelektual Islam," in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 62.

<sup>255</sup> See detailed review on: Madjid, p. 79.

<sup>256</sup> Kersten, *Cosmopolitan and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and The Study of Islam*, p. 57.

<sup>257</sup> Megan B. Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia*, p. 15.

social scientists working in the Middle East later concluded that Islam was an obstacle that hindered such modernization.<sup>258</sup> As a result, social scientists began to talk openly about Qur'ānic hermeneutics and several other topics related to Islamic religious reform. In this way, progressive Muslim intellectuals became interested in Western academic disciplines and engaged Western academic theories with Islamic reform.

In Indonesia, the New Order era led by Soeharto implemented these modernization ideas with Nurcholish and Nasution as one of the important actors who contributed to its realization. This had an impact on Nasution's and Nurcholish's agendas, which centered on the development of Indonesian society in terms of economy and education. Their agendas are the same, but it is the differences in their ways and methods that then produce different solutions.

Their education with the West provides a commendable intellectual contribution to Indonesian society. Unfortunately, when they address sensitive issues, which in this context is Ash'arism theology, their opinions tend to be contradictory. Genealogically speaking, Nasution comes from a Dutch-based modern education background at the time and doesn't have a background in traditional pesantren education. In several biographical writings, Nasution was described as an individual with strong criticism of religious dogmas.<sup>259</sup> He had a track record of having studied at a well-known traditional Islamic institution, Al-Azhar University. At the same time, he also actively participated in lectures and discussions held by the American University in Cairo. From several Islamic educational institutions through which he has passed, he often gives a 'negative' impression over the learning in such institutions. According to him, Islamic institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, religious studies in Mecca, and even Al-Azhar do not provide space for him to disagree with his teachers.<sup>260</sup> In other words, the learning system was considered somewhat dogmatic for such a critical person like Nasution.

Nasution was only satisfied with the learning system at the American University in Cairo and McGill University in the West. These two

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<sup>258</sup> Megan B. Abbas, p. 16.

<sup>259</sup> Uchrowi and Thaha, *-Menyeru Pemikiran Rasional Mu'tazilah*, p. 33; Muhammad Arifin, *Teologi Rasional Perspektif Pemikiran Harun Nasution* (Aceh: LKKI, 2021), p. 28.

<sup>260</sup> Uchrowi and Thaha, *-Menyeru Pemikiran Rasional Mu'tazilah*, p. 22.

universities succeeded in giving Nasution academic satisfaction by giving him the opportunity to think critically and express different opinions from his teachers. At McGill, Nasution met the famous Japanese thinker Toshihiko Izutsu, who also became one of his influential lecturers. Izutsu inspired Nasution to be critical and reflective of the hegemony of European modernity. He subsequently used this modernity as a framework for his doctoral thesis in which he examined the thoughts of Muhammad Abduh.

If one takes a more in-depth view of Nasution's attitude towards his educational history, it shows that Nasution has been critical of religious doctrines since his childhood. Even in his own biographical or autobiographical writings, it can be clearly observed. Hence, it is reasonable that Nasution had a tendency to favor the rational way of thinking of Islamic reformers such as Muhammad Abduh and Sir Ahmad Khan. In addition, he started to appreciate the works of orientalist and read many of their books outside of lectures, as he himself explains in his autobiography.<sup>261</sup>

In my humble opinion, this seems a bit ironic. Ash'arism as a theological discipline, which has been the fundamental pillar of Al-Azhar for centuries, is becoming the object of Nasution's criticism, whom is a student of the institution. It seems that Nasution's intellectual 'thirst' is much more influential on his attitude than the institution where he studied. As a result, when he found a certain belief in theology which he considered to be in line with his rationality, he pursued it and then applied it to the academic landscape in Indonesia.

The irony is not only found in Nasution's attitude. Nurcholish Madjid's attitude, which ultimately defends Ash'arism, also serves to compound this irony. Even though Nurcholish had visited several Islamic countries in the Middle East, he was never officially affiliated with a traditional institution like Al-Azhar.<sup>262</sup> As with Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid's educational trajectory began at the Gontor Islamic boarding school, a modern-based educational institution. His family background affiliated with the traditional NU organization did not prevent Nurcholish from engaging with more progressive and modern ideas. It was in this modern pesantren that

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<sup>261</sup> Uchrowi and Thaha, p. 30.

<sup>262</sup> Ahmad Gaus, *Nurcholish Madjid: Sebuah Biografi* (Jakarta: Satupena, 2024), p. 9.

Nurcholish began to learn the basics of Islamic science albeit not as deeply as it was commonly studied in traditional pesantren.

He then continued his education at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. On this campus Nurcholish began his career as an activist by engaging in various student organizations. During his time as a student at IAIN, there is no definite track record concerning the extent to which Nurcholish investigated the classical treasures of Islam, particularly in the field of theology. I can only identify his thoughts on Islamic renewal through secularization from several biographical sources. Even then, there is no definite clarity about the figures who influenced Nurcholish on his secularization ideas.

The historical record of Nurcholish's pedigree is about his educational career in Chicago. His education succeeded in introducing Nurcholish to other figures that he previously did not know, such as Marshall Hodgson for a very famous Islamic historian through his work entitled *The Venture of Islam*. Nurcholish's awareness of this historiographical work made him begin to deepen the classical sources of Islam that were often referenced by the Islamic reformist movement.<sup>263</sup> Hodgson's notion that the East is not subject to 'millennial lethargy' and 'in other parts of the world there is an equally active past' influenced Nurcholish's awareness of the importance of cultural traditions in re-energizing the role of religion.<sup>264</sup> Furthermore, according to Kersten, Nurcholish's doctoral thesis on the positive impact of Ibn Taimiyya in his purificative view of Islam was inspired by this Islamic historian.<sup>265</sup>

From the above simple background review, it seems that Hodgson is very instrumental as one of the starting points of Nurcholish's thinking in looking at Islamic history. He affirms Thomas Kuhn's characterization of scientific progress as 'problem solving'. Thus, Nurcholish is carried away in a functionalist interpretation style that causes him not to claim certain 'ultimate truths' and allows the reciprocal relationship between 'the improvement of the world today' and 'the hegemony of Islamic world reform' to remain intact on the basis of the Qur'an. Nurcholish's assertion which states: —*The ever-increasing demands of the times can only be met by the ever-increasing*

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<sup>263</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 116.

<sup>264</sup> Albert Hourani, —Review of *The Venture of Islam*, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (1978), p. 59.

<sup>265</sup> Kersten, *Cosmopolitan and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and The Study of Islam*, p. 73.

*demands of the times: "The ever-increasing demands of the times can only be met if there is Islamic intellectual development in two branches: Islamic intellectualism that draws inspiration from the rich and flexible classical treasures of Islam, and efforts to develop the ability to provide quick answers to the demands of an ever-increasing age"*<sup>266</sup> was in line with Daniel Brown's argument stating -we should envision tradition as a beam of light packed with the prism of modernity, and not see modernity as a source of light that can darken our tradition.<sup>267</sup>

The historical approach in Nurcholish's thought construction is one of his main keys to reformulating Islamic ideas. However, this approach may be understood through the fusion of Gadamerian or Dilthey hermeneutics from his traditional horizon. For that reason, this method of reading history, which is closely related to the discourse of tradition, also influences the findings of Nurcholish's thinking, which is not 'scapegoating' Ash'ari's theology as a faith that has been acculturated into Indonesian culture. In fact, on several occasions, he even encouraged the redevelopment of this theology.

Based on the explanation above, whether Harun Nasution or Nurcholish Madjid, they both have the same educational background in pesantren, albeit with certain differences, yet I argue that their education in the West has much more influence on their point of view than their education in Indonesia. Given what Megan B. Abbas explains in her review, she noted that in the latter half of the twentieth century Western universities have become important places in the production of Islamic knowledge and religious authority, in particular for Indonesia whose many prominent thinkers have come from these universities.<sup>268</sup> Moreover, these universities have succeeded in providing opportunities for Muslim scholars to engage further in dialogue-based and scholarly cross-discursive disciplines of Islamic studies. In both Harun Nasution's and Nurcholish Madjid's case, they are trained with the most advanced research methods like history and hermeneutics, which they use to reinvestigate the Islamic period across centuries in order to find a

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<sup>266</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, -Islam Agama Kemanusiaan: Membangun Tradisi Dan Visi Baru Islam Indonesia, in *Karya Lengkap Nurcholish Madjid*, ed. Budhy Munawar Rachman (Jakarta: Nurcholish Madjid Society, 2019), p. 2040.

<sup>267</sup> Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 51.

<sup>268</sup> Megan B. Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 2.

solution to any problems that occur around Muslims. By employing these methods, they are able to open up new possibilities for reestablishing Islamic belief systems in a modern context.

### 4.3 Concluding Remarks

To sum up, it seems clear that the two Western academic institutions, Chicago and McGill, have become a new wellspring of Islamic scholarship. Muslim scholars such as Nasution and Madjid, despite the pros and cons of their thinking, have successfully integrated Islamic and Western intellectual traditions through these Universities. Although these two institutions are not the only factors that have impacted Nasution and Nurcholish's thinking, but they have succeeded in creating a different nuance of Islamic thought which is represented in these two Indonesian scholars, especially in the field of Islamic theology. In this regard, Nurcholish is more deserving of what Abbas calls the 'fusionists' while Nasution represents the modernists one.<sup>269</sup> Both of them equally insist in asserting Islam as a rational religion. They also emphasized that the Qur'an commanded humans to use their intellectual capacity with total confidence. However, the only difference lies in their role in reviewing and integrating the respective 'two traditions' which led them to draw different conclusions on Ash'arism.

Nurcholish's endeavor to integrate his empathetic aptitude and 'foreign' intellectual worldview when understanding Western ideas and methodologies sets him apart from Nasution. Nurcholish managed to integrate each tradition, Indonesian Islam and Western traditions, in a systematic framework. This attempt, according to MacIntyre, is challenging enough as it requires a high empathetic aptitude and wide discursive horizons,<sup>270</sup> both of which Nurcholish has succeeded in demonstrating through his works. He successfully employed a rigorous form of academic inquiry to apply both the universal and flexible values of Islam to adhere simultaneously to the Indonesian and modern contexts. Although these two institutions are not the only factors that have impacted Nasution and Nurcholish's thinking, but they have succeeded in creating a different nuance of Islamic thought which is represented in both Indonesian scholars, especially in the field of Islamic theology.

They developed rational methodological approaches, albeit in different capacities, that balanced objectivity and subjective religious beliefs. They also use critical

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<sup>269</sup> Megan B. Abbas, *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2021), p. 4.

<sup>270</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 166.

analysis in deciphering Islamic history, aiming not only to reconstruct the past but also to rethink the future of Islam according to their evaluation and methodology of Islamic history. By conceiving themselves as academics and Muslim believers simultaneously, these two figures succeeded in demonstrating how the two traditions of knowledge can be integrated, yet come to different conclusions in the end. Given the fact that Harun Nasution's and Nurcholish Madjid's perceptions contradict each other even though they have similar backgrounds, this research assumes other factors influence their thoughts. After investigating this matter, it turns out that the problem lies not only in the internal tenets of Ash'arism itself, but also in other external matters, that is, how and from what perspective they see the backwardness of Muslims today. It certainly seems that Nasution's overly simplistic understanding of Ash'arism has also influenced his perception. Ultimately, they assessed Ash'arism not only through the Indonesian people who tended to believe in fatalism as a representation of the Muslim backwardness, but they also evaluated it through the perspective of the Islamic studies development in the West—McGill and Chicago—as a supportive instrument for their perceptions of Ash'arism. In addition, both figures also discuss Islam and modernity in the Indonesian context. Yet despite all this, both thinkers have their own independent ingredients in what makes their thinking, to borrow Carool Kersten's term, difficult to categorize their ideas into 'neat boxes'.

## Chapter V

### 5.1 Conclusion

The discord between Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid regarding their perceptions of Ash'ari theology is a subject which in my opinion is somewhat marginalized, specifically in the context of Indonesian academia. Since this theology is a component of religious belief, it is important to revisit how they articulate this belief within the modern Indonesia. As a study of the discourse of Islamic theology in Indonesia, particularly Ash'arism, this research has investigated the comparative thoughts of Harun Nasution and Nurcholish Madjid on their own perceptions of Ash'arism, which are not only different, but also contradictory. In its entirety, what they did was an attempt to find the factors of Muslims' backwardness in terms of scientific knowledge. Indeed, it is a positive *ijtihād*. However, the interest of this study goes on how they, with their thinking instruments, reformulated the Islamic belief system.

Harun Nasution with his critical personality was always dissatisfied with the learning system in several Islamic educational institutions, both in Indonesia and in the Middle East, as it was purely dogmatic. He often complained that he was not given the opportunity to be critical. When he continued his education at McGill, he only expressed his satisfaction in studying Islam. Apart from the fact that the university gave Nasution the opportunity to think critically, he also met some world-renowned thinkers such as Toshihiko Izustu and Charles Adam. He also expressed his interest in the works of orientalist.

At that university, Nasution took Muhammad Abduh's rational thought as his research object. Abduh's rationality later influenced Nasution's ideas. He claimed that Abduh's reformist role in the Islamic world was due to the *Mu'tazilah* doctrine he revived. Admittedly, if Abduh had not chosen the *Mu'tazilah* way of thinking, Nasution argues that he was unable to become a modern Islamic reformist. The *Mu'tazilah* rationality employed by Abduh then influenced Nasution's theological perspective. Even in his investigations of Islamic history, he only focused on this aspect of rationality, which he considered to be a leading factor in the progress of Islamic civilization in classical times. He then reviewed *Mu'tazilah* thoughts and considered it an ideal way of thinking for the modern world because of its doctrine that emphasizes the superiority of human reason.

When he saw the Indonesian context where the majority of the Muslim community adhered to Ash'arism, he then adjusted his extremely criticism on the basis of

this theology. He considered the non-productive condition of Muslims in Indonesia due to the fatalistic doctrine within Ash'arism. As a result, Indonesian Muslims are overly concerned with the hereafter rather than the material world which causes them to be unproductive. However, I did not find such strong criticisms of Ash'arism when I read Nurcholish Madjid's thoughts. As a santri (Islamic student) educated at Western Academia, Nurcholish's perspective on Ash'arism contrasts with Nasution's perception. Although both figures have the same mission to modernize Indonesia from a religious point of view, the fact that they contradict each other in their theological contexts and instruments of thought makes Nurcholish hold another title that Nasution does not.

In their own framework, the difference begins with how they reinterpret rationality, a long-standing theological debate. The aspect of rationality as one of the important instruments in the epistemology of their thought also influences their perspective on Ash'arism. If this is categorized according to Paul Stoller's classification of rationality, then Nasution is a universalist while Nurcholish is a relativist. In addition, their perspectives in investigating history also have different tendencies. Nasution tries to read Islamic history through a critical lens and divides it into three periods. His intention is to investigate the rationality aspect of each period. On the other hand, Nurcholish sees Islamic history as an intellectual treasure. His influence on Hogshon's approach to reading Islamic history is clearly reflected in his writings. In contrast to Nasution, alongside Nurcholish's extensive knowledge of Islamic history, the history of Indonesia with its religious heritage was also seriously studied by him. Thus, the cultural elements that have been intertwined with the Ash'arism and Sufism beliefs constructing the social system of society in Indonesia are also taken into consideration in his renewal project. Hence, instead of strongly criticizing the belief system of Ash'arism, Nurcholish argues that this theology should continue to persist and should be developed in accordance with the needs of the times. Regrettably, Nurcholish does not further elaborate the steps on how to develop this theology in the context of modernity and Indonesianness.

## **5.2 Recommendation**

The differences between Nasution's and Nurcholish's perspectives in this regard are not only due to a single factor, but the instruments of their way of thinking also influence their arguments on Ash'arism. From this difference, it can be concluded that, implicitly, each of them intends to make Islamic theology played its role in responding to modernity based on the way they believe; Nasution with his rational-Mu'tazilah theology, while Nurcholish with his integration of ideas related to Islam, Indonesia, and Modernity.

The difference in their conclusions indirectly indicates the vulnerability of Islamic theology, especially Ash‘arism, in responding to modernity. Accordingly, it can be used as an academic consideration for further research in reformulating the ‘marriage’ of Islamic theology and cultural concepts that are more influential in responding to social problems.

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