

**BETWEEN THE CLASSICAL MU'TAZILITES AND NEO-MU'TAZILITES: AN  
ANALYSIS OF HARUN NASUTION'S MODERN ISLAMIC THOUGHT IN  
INDONESIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Lately, the classical schools of Islamic theology are generally associated with various modern movements such as Neo-Kharijites and Neo-Mu'tazilites especially in terms of their negative influence. This paper aims at critically analyzing the way in which modern Muslim scholars claim the legacy of the classical Mu'tazilite school. It specifically offers a critical overview of the spirit and contents of both early Islamic movements. It is attempted to draw a more objective picture of the classical Mu'tazilite school, based on their primary sources. The Indonesian Harun Nasution is taken as an example of a Neo-Mu'tazilite scholar. This paper argues that the original Mu'tazilite spirit is not accurately represented by Harun Nasution. The Mu'tazilite was the first theological school who tried to defend and preserve the original teachings of Islam in the face of the many challenges of their time. Today, the Mu'tazilite school is often misrepresented by portraying it as a purely rationalistic school and liberal thought. It is the view of the author that the misrepresentation of the Mu'tazilite school as being a radical school of thought that propagated liberal society solely guided by reason, will bring bad consequence to the understanding and development of Muslim society in general. It can be either giving opportunity to the rise of liberal society with the claim of past root of the history of Muslims as occurred in Nasution's case or rejecting reason from being important source of knowledge acknowledged by Islam.

**Keywords:** Harun Nasution, Indonesia, Mu'tazilite, Neo-Mu'tazilite, rationalism.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The anti-religious spirit that dominates the media and academia today, especially in the form of the New Atheism, has become more and more vocal in accusing organized religions to fail to adjust to the needs of the time. It sends a strong signal to all Muslims to restore the true spirit of Islam and recognize the essential role religion should play in our life. The study of the formation of the early schools of Islamic thought is not only vital to appreciate its historical development, it also encourages today's Muslims to retain their sense of dignity and self-esteem. In short, by recreating the spirit of unity among the history of the Muslims that the original image of Islam can be restored as a successful manifestation of religion as reflecting the Divine Will.

However, the modern take on the development of Islamic thought requires serious revision, and more serious studies are yet to be produced (Frank, 2008; Winter, 2008). In fact, some primary sources relevant to the serious study of the early history of Islamic thought, though not many in number, are highly significant and still in the process of recovery. (Schmidtke, 2016)

In addition, the heresiographical and theological discourses still constitute the main sources for the study of the early schools, which have many weaknesses especially in looking at the positive contributions of the schools (Watt, 2006; Frank, 2008). In respect to the surviving sectarian or polemical tracts, the discussed issues are viewed from a particular standpoint and offer only one possible interpretation. The method used by the theologians is purely dialectical, which has the effect of casting rival schools and sects into a negative light, thus producing a highly imbalanced and distorted view of their ideas. Thus, the established studies on the history of the early schools in Islam have to be subjected to critical analysis. Indeed, tracing the development of different legal and theological views as part of the rich and diverse legacy of Islamic thought should be ceded the scholarly attention it deserves, rather than focusing on producing argument after argument as to why one school is better than the other.

The Mu'tazilite school is considered as the first theological school in Islam which played a major role in the development of early Islamic thought. However, as the other early documented Muslim sects, it suffers from prejudice and prevailing negative perceptions that

distort its original views. Most recent studies on the Mu'tazilites even suggest that they were the first 'free-thinkers' of Islam (Watt, 2007), which is a highly contested opinion. In the context of Islamic studies, 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar saw the need to resurrect early Mu'tazilite thought and publish their long-forgotten works, such as 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Hamadhani's *al-Mughni fi Abwab al-Tawhid wa al-'Adl*, the original manuscript being discovered in Yemen. This trend has continued until today as more manuscripts of the early Islamic schools are being unearthed and published in different parts of the world, as for example in Algeria, the USA and Russia (Schmidtke, 2016). The writings of Dirar ibn 'Amr, Abu Ali al-Jubba'i (d. 303/915), Abu Ali Muhammad ibn Khallad al-Basri, Abu Hashim al-Jubba'i (d. 321/933) and Ibn Mattawayh are among those early works found and restored to posterity.

Presenting a correct picture of classical Mu'tazilite thought is not only important as the Mu'tazilite was a major sect that influenced the development of early Islamic thought but also in their relevance to modern Islamic thought. Some scholars acknowledge the role the Mu'tazilites played in defending Islamic principles in the past, while others claim to be their intellectual successors today. They praise the Mu'tazilite way of valuing the human mind and its capacity of reasoning and argue that it is this aspect of Mu'tazilite thought that should be revived among the Muslims today. They also consider the disappearance of the Mu'tazilite school as a significant loss to Islamic thought in general which needs to be redressed.

Hence, there exists the need to rediscover the original thought of the Mu'tazilite school in a more objective and balanced way with the aim to understand its role in the early development of Islamic thought and to explore the extent of its actual relevance to modern and postmodern society. As for the latter, this paper will examine the views of the Indonesian Muslim Harun Nasution, a self-proclaimed Neo-Mu'tazilite.

## 2.0 OVERVIEW OF CLASSICAL MU'TAZILITE THOUGHT

The Mu'tazilites are generally recognized as the first school of the discipline of *kalam*. The schools that had emerged prior to the Mu'tazilites were the Kharijites and the Murji'ites who addressed the issue of sinning, and the Jabarites and Qadarites who focused on the issue of free will and predestination.

The history of the emergence of the Mu'tazilites is missing from the early accounts and lacks proper documentation. Several opinions exist on the origin of the name 'Mu'tazilah' meaning 'those who withdrew' (Fattah, 1997; Watt, 2006). They believed that any Muslim who committed a grave sin could neither be called a Muslim nor a *kafir* (disbeliever), thus

being suspended in a state between belief and disbelief. Al-Shahrastani (1967) narrated the occasion of Wasil bin 'Ata' disagreeing with Hasan al-Basri on the issue of grave sin and withdrew from Hasan al-Basri's circle as the beginning of the formation of a new and separate circle of scholars and later distinct school (Watt, 2006). Another narration reports that the one who withdrew from the circle was Qatadah bin Da'amah al-Sudusi, a scholar from Basrah. On the other hand, some authors asserted that the name 'Mu'tazilah' was coined by the group itself as its members strictly opposed all types of innovations. Some scholars even go as far as to portray them as a group of Sufis who isolated themselves from political conflict during the time (Fattah, 1997) and added another sect to the already existing sects of the '*Ahl al-'Adl wa Tawhid*, *ahl al-Haq*, the Qadarites, al-Thanawiyyah, al-Jahmiyyah, the Kharijites, al-Wa'idiyah and al-Mu'attilah' (Zuhdi, 1990, p. 10).

The historical background of the Mu'tazilites is summarized in the fact that they emerged in the era of the Muslim conquests of North Africa and Asia Minor, which brought with it numerous adjustment problems in the conquered societies. The Arab Muslims found themselves confronted with various established rival religions and different cultural traditions. The Mu'tazilites understood themselves as the front guards of Islam who defended its truths against the claims of other religions, often in the form of heated polemical debates on theological issues. Understanding this historical situation also means acknowledging the primary concern of the Mu'tazilites at the time. Far from being extreme, their views rather reflected the middle position as compared to the earlier schools. For example, on the status of the grave sinner they took the middle position between the Kharijite and the Murji'ite view, and to some extent they took a similar position in respect to free will and predestination between that of the Jabrites and the Qadarites.

The Mu'tazilite school consists of the major groups or circles located in Basrah and Baghdad. Al-Baghdadi listed a total of 20 different Mu'tazilite sects by regarding every Mu'tazilite leader as the founder of a distinct group, among them being the Wasiliyyah, Hudhailiyyah, Nazzamiyyah, Mu'ammariyah, Ja'rafariyah, Jahiziyah and the Ka'biyah.

### **2.1 Main Doctrines of The Mu'Tazilites**

The Mu'tazilite doctrines were established gradually as their prominent figures decided on issues that were arising in the society at the time. At the later stage of development, the leading Mu'tazilite scholars came to agree on the so-called 'Five Doctrines' (*al-usul al-khamsah*) while retaining different views on the details. The Five Doctrines were the Oneness of God (*tawhid*),

Divine Justice (*'adl Ilahi*), Promise and Threat (*al-wa'd wa al-wa'id*), the Intermediate Position (*al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*) and Enjoining Good and Prohibiting Wrong (Khayyat, 1957; Al-Hamadhani, 1996). The fact that these were the basic Mu'tazilite doctrines was attested to by their own followers and their opponents alike (Fattah, 1976).

A closer look at the Five Doctrines is best achieved by consulting Al-Hamadhani's (1996) work of *Sharh al-Usul al-Khamsah*. The commentary commences with the discussion about the man's responsibility towards God and to himself through reason (*al-nazar*) prior to the concept of oneness (*tawhid*). This is achieved by understanding the relationship between the established rules (law) and that which is inherently good, and God's grace in the creation of the universe (Al-Hamadhani, 1996).

#### *i. Oneness and Unity of God*

The first doctrine commonly upheld by the Mu'tazilites was the Oneness of God. By making it the first doctrine, they established it as the most crucial principle of Islamic teaching and thus worth defending it in the strictest sense. The Mu'tazilites argued that what had corrupted the other religions such as Christianity, Manichaenism and other ancient Persian religions had been that they had compromised on the issue of *tawhid* (Al-Hamadhani, 1996). Taking the issue of the oneness and unity of God to be of utmost importance, they adhered strictly to the idea of God's transcendence and denied the possibility of any similitude between God and His creation. They felt they had to strive hard in order to preserve the concept of God as the absolute being that has no association to other creatures. For this they were known as the '*ahl al-tawhid*' or, rather derogatory, as '*al-Mu'attilah*' (those depriving God of His attributes) by their critics and opponents (Fattah, 1976).

Al-Hamadhani (1996, p. 151) opens his discussion of Mu'tazilite doctrine with the "Discussion of Attributes (*al-kalam fi al-sifat*)" relating to the Divine attributes such as Allah being All-Powerful, All-Knowing, the Eternal, the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing and the like. Here, the Mu'tazilites confined God's attributes mostly to attributes of action. Their concept of attributes of God also corresponded to the purpose of denying impossible attributes to God and what is later known as *al-sifat al-salbiyyah*. The Mu'tazilites' standpoint to deny the attributes of essence of knowledge (*'ilm*), power (*qudrah*), hearing (*sam'*) sight (*basar*) was to avoid the idea of a multiple godhead. The Mu'tazilites were keen to avoid any idea linking God to His attributes as distinct entities. According to Fattah (1997, p. 197), the root of the problem lies in understanding the relationship between the essence and the attributes, which must not

alter the fundamentals of the Islamic faith. The *ahl al-sifat* (attributists) including the Ash'arites, on the other hand, acknowledged that the existence of the distinct attributes of God was important in order to prove that Allah was an active God who directed man's life, yet believe that this did not affect His oneness. Important to note at this point is that the Mu'tazilite denial of God's attributes did not totally deprive God of His attributes. It is also the consequence of their strict view on *al-tawhid* that led to their view of the created Qur'an or denial of the eternity of the Qur'an. As such, they were holding on to the principle of *tawhid* also for its immediate and practical effects such as increasing man's loyalty and gratefulness to Allah which was seen differently by other schools.

The Mu'tazilites' primary concern of *tawhid* led them to the idea of a transcendent God and consequently their denial of the physical witnessing God in the Hereafter. The Mu'tazilites denied the possibility of seeing God as it seemingly contradicted the concept of His transcendence based on the Qur'anic verse "Sight does not attain Him" (6: 103). They were also consistent in their belief that good and bad actions had to be rewarded through their doctrine of 'Justice of God' and 'Promise and Threat'. In addition, they affirmed their belief in the severe punishment of sinners.

The Mu'tazilites were known for pioneering the metaphorical interpretation to anthropomorphic words in the Qur'an, using the Qur'anic phrase "nothing like Him" (42: 9) to support their doctrine and vehemently opposed the anthropomorphists (*mushabbihah*) and the corporealists (*mujassimah*). They viewed that the principle of *'bi la kayf'* applied by the *salaf* was insufficient to combat the wrong understanding of attributing body parts to God.

The above discussion proves that the Mu'tazilites held very firm views on *tawhid* and strictly defended the Islamic doctrine of God's Oneness, logically followed by their standpoints on other related principles.

## ii. God's Justice

God's Justice was the second doctrine of the Mu'tazilites, based on the Divine Name of 'The Just' (al-'Adl) as one of His attributes. As Al-Hamadani puts it (1996, p. 302), "Allah knows the badness of bad, and He is free from it, and knows to free from it, and consequently He did not choose for bad in any reason" and supports each of these contentions, he makes use of rational argumentation and human experience. Hence, God is free from evil doing, only good is ascribed to Him. After all, the message of God's perfect justice is very lucidly described in the Qur'an. The Mu'tazilites argued that it that it would be unjust if God was held responsible

for the wrong-doings and sins of humans. Zuhdi (1990) argues that if it was agreed that Allah is the Creator of man's actions, the reprehensible actions would be from Allah and thus, we would not be responsible for committing them. Al-Shahrastani (1967) refers to Wasil ibn 'Ata' who emphasized that Allah was wise and just, therefore, evil and injustice could not be attributed to Him. It could not be right to say that He would want His slaves to do anything different from what which had He commanded, or that He would decree upon them to do anything bad and then punish them for it. Individuals acted on their own initiative to do good or evil, to believe in the truth or falsehood, obey or disobey Allah, and Allah was the One Who gave recompense for his deeds and enabled him to do all that. In summary, the Mu'tazilite principle of God's justice was important as part of the concept of free will and accountability.

*iii. Promise and Threat (al-wa'd wa al-wa'id)*

'Promise and Threat' refers to the Mu'tazilite doctrine according to which God has to punish and award human beings in accordance to their deeds as it would be unjust if He punished men for acts for which they were not responsible. However, humans had to be guided and informed about what were considered good deeds and bad deeds, the actions praised and blamed by Allah. This led them to emphasize the reasoning and objectivity needed to judge the nature of actions.

*iv. Intermediate Position (Manzilah bayna al-Manzilatayn)*

This doctrine stipulated that grave sinners would be expelled from the circle of the believers but would nevertheless not be counted among the disbelievers. Those who were in this state in between would receive permanent punishment but lighter than that of disbelievers. The two other prevalent views at the time were that of the Kharijites who maintained that grave sinners were the same as disbelievers and would be punished in Hell for eternity, while the Murji'ites opined that their judgment would be postponed (Watt, 2006). Hasan al-Basri's view that grave sinners were equivalent to the hypocrites (*munafigun*) was rejected by the Mu'tazilites.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Mu'tazilites were using reason, but they were doing that the earliest attempt of articulating the teachings of Islam to support revelation. The concept of *al-tawhid* is undoubtedly one of the most important teaching of Islamic faith. God's Justice is also a clear message of the Qur'an. It is also observed that they were strengthening the commitment of being Muslims and therefore seriously tackled the problem of uncommitted

Muslims who indulged in grave sins and doing bad in life which must be corrected at institutional level.

The point that the Mu'tazilite views are being not agreeable to later schools, especially the mainstream of Islam, is mainly on their point of departure of making human-centric and ethical-centred explanation of Islam and resulted lack of focus on the concept of God. This is indeed more accurate representation of the teachings rather than to consider their views as "rational theology".

v. *Al-Amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil)

The *Mu'tazilites*' serious commitment to Islam was demonstrated in their doctrine of 'Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil' (*al-'amr bi al-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an il-munkar*). It stipulated that every person had the responsibility to ensure that society's welfare was safeguarded and protected. In their opinion humans should use their reasoning to differentiate between good and evil and be actively involved in the affairs of society.

### 3.0 HARUN NASUTION'S EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND ROLE IN INDONESIA

A considerable number of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernists in Indonesia propagated liberal thought, among them Nurcholish Madjid, Djohan Affendi, Ahmad Wahib and Ulil Absar Abdalla (Assyaukanie, 2002). They championed freedom of thought in a general sense without openly identifying with the Mu'tazite school. Nasution (1919-1997), on the other hand, openly declared his allegiance to the school and made it his personal agenda as part of his theological and social reform attempt. He openly acknowledged that he wished to propagate Mu'tazilite ideas which he found suitable in order to reform modern Muslim society (Nasution, 2002). In his view, the Mu'tazilites had embraced the idea of human empowerment and active involvement in society rather than human weakness and passivity.

Nasution had been exposed to modern ideas since his childhood. He had his early education from a modern primary school and a modern Islamic school for his secondary level of education. However, his father sent him to receive a thoroughly traditional Islamic schooling at the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. After one and a half rather miserable years, Nasution went to Egypt which was then becoming a hotbed for Muslim reformist ideas (Nasution, 1989). However, studying at the Azhar University was not to his satisfaction either and he decided to enroll at the American University instead where he completed his



undergraduate studies. After gaining a few years of work experience, Nasution went on to pursue his post-graduate studies at the McGill University in Montreal, Canada (Ishak, 2009).

Nasution was an influential figure in Indonesia. He was actively involved in the reinterpretation of Islam in his society. This change in the 1970s had a great impact and long-enduring effect on Islam in Indonesia, up to the present day. Barton (1995, pp. 30-31) describes this Indonesian reform movement as follows:

There have arisen in Indonesia in the past twenty-five years a new Islamic intellectual movement that, whilst having clearly arisen out of the well-established tradition of Islamic modernism in Indonesia, is sufficiently different in its conception and application of ideas that it represents a distinctly new approach, an intellectual movement of thought that deserves to be studied in its own right.

Nasution can be considered as one of the key figures in the reform of education in Indonesia. He was directly involved in the development of the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (State Institute for Islamic Studies or IAIN), which is a group of Islamic education colleges and universities with campuses in the major cities. He began his career at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Ciputat upon completing his PhD at McGill and was appointed rector (1973-1984).

In his new role Nasution proposed changing the IAIN syllabus since he found it to be main cause for the narrow-mindedness and stagnation of the Muslim mind as it deprived Islam of its inherent dynamism and capability to reform society. He exposed his students to different views on diverse issues including mysticism and philosophy by introducing a new text book called *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya (Islam as Seen from Various Aspects)*. Nasution was iconic to the development of liberal Islam as an active movement in Indonesia (Muzani, 1994). Many individuals leading various Islamic movements promoting liberal ideas had been his students such as Nurcholish Madjid and Ulil Abshar Abdalla.

### ***3.1 Nasution's Understanding of the Mu'tazilites and Development in Islam***

Nasution entertained the ambition to change the mindset of the Muslims in Indonesia. He believed that the change and reform could be achieved by emulating the original ideas of the classical schools of Islamic thought and solve modern day problems. In his view, the legacy of the classical Muslim scholars were essential as they formed the foundation on which new ideas

could be based. He insisted on returning to the authentic intellectual traditions of Islam that were relevant to modern community. He viewed the Mu'tazilite school as striking a conciliatory tone between various early schools which made it capable of offering solutions to contemporary theological conflicts in Indonesia and support a modernist approach to Islam. (Nasution, 2002)

Nasution's strong identification with Mu'tazilite doctrine emerged already in his student years when referring to Mu'tazilite and modern reformist ideas as those developed by Muhammad 'Abduh as the basis for developing strictly rational solutions to contentious issues in Islamic philosophy and theology in his PhD thesis. His hypothesis was that Muhammad 'Abduh had only been able to develop Muslim reformist ideas by allowing himself to be guided by Mu'tazilite theology (Nasution, 1989), which proves that he understood the Mu'tazilite spirit and thought at being at the core of the successes of the Muslims in the past. He later concluded that Muhammad 'Abduh was not only influenced by Mu'tazilism, but was even more rationalistic and liberal than the Mu'tazilites themselves had originally been (Nasution, 1989). He justified his argument through analyzing Muhammad 'Abduh's *Risalah al-Tawhid* and *Hashiyah 'ala Sharh al-Dawwani li-l-'Aqa'id al-Adudiyah*. Although the Mu'tazilites were not explicit about their view that reason was capable of creating social laws that could compel people to obey them, 'Abduh did believe in its capability to achieve this (Nasution, 1987). For Nasution, rational theology of Islam as developed by the Mu'tazilites, Muhammad 'Abduh and other Muslim modernists constituted more than merely an intellectual or academic exercise. He regarded Mu'tazilite thought as capable of providing the theological basis for Islamic reform or modernism to which he was committed. In fact, Nasution himself would introduce the idea of a 'rational theology' later on. He openly agreed that Muhammad 'Abduh's rational theory of knowledge was apt and pertinent to all Muslims today. In his view, it was Allah's *Sunnah* to bequeath to humankind the aptitude for rational thought and choice, which was a pre-requisite for free will and negated the doctrine of divine compulsion as advocated by the Jabarites (Ishak, 2009).

Nasution extensively discussed the Mu'tazilites in his article "Kaum Mu'tazilah dan Pandangan Rasionalnya" (The Mu'tazilah and Their Rational Views) and his monograph entitled *Teologi Islam* (Islamic Theology). He considered its emergence as an appropriate solution to resolve the issues that challenge the Muslim world today. The title already suggests that he favored the Mu'tazilite schools for their emphasis on reasoning. According to their understanding, the main obligations in life were discernible through sound reasoning such as

the recognition of the existence of God, the duty of praising and acknowledging one's debt, enjoining good and abstaining from evil. Similarly, the ability to reason is also necessary to reflect upon the revealed message of the Qur'an and heed its advice and follow its guidance. Man had to acknowledge the power but also the limits of human reason in respect to this world and the Hereafter (Nasution, 1986). He introduced his 'rational theology' as the key to development, progress and reform. His central idea of reform commences with absorbing and emulating the sciences developed in the classical period of Muslim civilization, with its early beginnings during the lifetime of the Prophet (PBUH) until the fall of the Abbasid caliphate. Nasution insisted that only rational theology could stimulate intellectual growth, courage and boldness, as exemplified by the early generations of Muslims who were able to greatly enhance their lives and witnessed unprecedented levels of development. The early generations of Muslims had also been open to other cultures and appreciative of other civilizations. In the context of modern Indonesia, the spirit of rationalization helped enhance the Muslim responsiveness towards the modern sciences and Western culture and civilization (Muzani, 1994). His approach to rationalism was so radical that it even made him unpopular with the Muhammadiyah and Persatuan Islam movements, which already had a positive attitude towards Western education and opposed other conservative Muslim groups such as the followers of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (Noer, 1989).

Nasution gave greatest importance to the human reasoning faculty when it came to interpreting Islam. He argued that only 14% of the Qur'an contained absolute principles, whereas the remaining verses comprised of explanations and examples of the practices that could be neglected in different societal contexts. Furthermore, even absolute evidence might be overruled by logic. He maintained that the Prophetic traditions had an even narrower application than the Qur'an since their authenticity could be questioned, with a few exceptions. He also argued that although the Quran was the revelation of Allah, it did not contain precise and minute instructions on social interactions, for example, which had to be followed to the dot. In sum, the total number of verses were actually too few to address all the problems of the Muslims and thus left it to human reason to fill the gap. Even such basic elements like the two parts of the *shahadah* which were necessary for everyone wishing to embrace Islam were not directly stated in the Quran (Nasution, 1986). Thus, it was up to the Muslims to decide certain matters of Islamic practice, according to the dictates of their own time and place. In other words, the interpretation (and practical application) of Islam may be different from one place to another and from one time to another. According to Yusuf (1989), a student of Nasution, the

absolute themes in Islam can be classified into four major parts: First, to believe in the existence of God; second, to believe that the Quran is a revelation; third, to profess that Muhammad is the Prophet and the Messenger of God, and fourth, to believe in the Day of Judgement and the Hereafter. The existence of Angels, however, is subject to disagreement.

Nasution placed *ijtihad* as the third source after the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions, while ignoring the consensus of the community (*qiyas*) and the learned opinions of the Companions, which significantly enhanced the role of reasoning. He encouraged debate and critical thinking, which had resulted in the emergence of various schools of thought in theology and jurisprudence in the past (Nasution, 1988). Debate and disagreement among the scholars was of course permissible in Islam, and not only permissible but highly appreciated as it constituted the source of dynamism in Islam. Nasution limited the extent to which modern Muslims should emulate the West. In his view, rationality did not necessarily mean becoming westernized, but that it was important for the Muslims to create their own rational tradition to address life in the modern world (Muzani, 1994).

#### **4.0 ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NASUTION'S VIEWS AND MU'TAZILITE VIEWS**

The Mu'tazilite school was purely a school of thought made up of individuals who held on to their definite views. Although these individual scholars differed in their views on some matters, they agreed on certain fundamental issues. The *Usul al-Khamsah* summarized their main doctrines which reflected their shared understanding of Islam and was used to defend it from deviating views. The Mu'tazilites defended their established doctrines against others in their major works, and their polemic tracts and those of their opponents provide ample evidence that they were serious in defending their views.

The Mu'tazilites were a group of theologians who strived for a sound understanding of their faith. They understood their role as responding to the external and internal threats they perceived. Their primary aim of defending Islam is also evident in their rejection of deviant views on issues that were not accepted as sound by the Muslim community at large and therefore not accepted into the mainstream of Islamic thought. The Mu'tazilite spirit was also in line with the aims of the *mutakallimun* who strove for the twin objectives of '*ilm al-kalam*', namely to uphold the correct and pure understanding of faith and refute those new ideas that were regarded as harmful innovations. Khaldun (1969), for example, defined '*ilm al-kalam*' as a science that involves arguments with rational evidences in defense of the articles of faith and

refutation against heresies. Shafi'i (1991) also highlighted that the objective of strengthening the core of the Islamic fundamentals through various arguments differentiates *kalam* from Islamic jurisprudence, the latter in order to find solutions to problems arising in society, whereas the former was to examine the context that led to the emergence of innovations and deviated teachings. Frank (2008, p. 3) noted:

So, *kalam* did not make proper sense and was declared and considered by many to be mere “dialectic”: a simply disputation exercise in defense of one or another doctrinal orthodoxy, not a serious theoretical reflection on basic questions of metaphysics and theology. The assumption that the *mutakallimun* were not only intellectually, but also religiously, a rather plebeian lot, was simply not questioned.

The reason for the emergence of the Mu'tazilites is found in the rapid expansion of territory that exposed the Muslims to various other spiritual and intellectual communities and traditions. Watt (2007, p. 86) explains,

The Mu'tazila had come under the influence of Greek philosophy, but the idea of most nineteenth-century Orientalists that their dislike for anthropomorphism sprang from a desire to Hellenize and rationalize Islamic theology is unsound. It is now realized that they devoted much time and energy to apologetic for Islam against Manichaenism and various Indian religions and that they were not primarily hellenizers and rationalists but primarily Muslim who found in the armoury of Hellenistic thought useful weapons against their opponents.

On the heat of the ongoing dogmatic discourse in *kalam*, Van Ess (1975) argued that it reflected the situation at the time when Muslim scholars felt it necessary to think in the form of ‘defense’ and ‘attack’ in order to respond to the increasingly diverse and contested religious landscape in their society. In fact, the discussed issues related to faith were also related to philosophical principles such as those of free will and predestination (human agency) and the foundations of political and social institutions. The turbulent political situation at the time and sometimes involving bloodshed happenings, may explain the level of urgency they felt. Fattah (1976) concludes that the Mu'tazilites made invaluable contributions to Islamic thought as the first

school that established critical and objective ways of thinking which later became the foundation of *'ilm al-kalam*.

Frank (2008) observes that the early discourse of *kalam* constituted an original and valuable contribution to Islamic thought that deserves due credit and appreciation. He explains,

The dominant schools, the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites, seemed clearly to indicate that underlying and supporting the theses and arguments that were reported there must have been genuinely formal theoretical systems whose basic concepts, principles and structures were not clearly set forth in the manuals because of the elementary and disconnected way elements of the various theses and arguments were presented (p. 6).

He further points out,

The earlier *kalam* was more than a *vanitas et cura superfluo*, that is, if it represents a really serious and meaningful attempt of the human mind to understand the ultimate structure of being, it constitutes a 'new thing', an epochal moment in the history of human thought, and is deserving of our most serious consideration (p. 7)

The Mu'tazilites have been generally giving priority to reason over revelation. However, today, it is evident that the issue is not as straightforward as it seems, especially in the analysis of the discourses presented in *kalam*. This issue of reason and revelation has been attempted to be solved from the Muslim as well as the Christian and the Jewish perspectives. Arberry considers the issue of reason versus revelation an old issue that has been debated for millenia, yet has remained acute in its relevance and provides material for a fascinating discourse. It can be argued that labeling the Mu'tazilites as the 'rationalists of Islam' and excluding them from the mainstream of Islamic thought does not provide a satisfactory solution and has in fact been already replaced with more constructive ones. The issue of reason versus revelation is indeed much more complicated than generally presumed and deserves to be scrutinized in a more exhaustive manner. According to Netton (2013), the Mu'tazila in their various ways debated the nature of Allah's attributes, provided a fivefold structure for what they perceived to be a

theologically logical universe and vaunted a rationalism which was, nonetheless, powerfully textually based and rooted in the Quran.

In the specific context of modern Islamic thought in Indonesia, Nasution's priority was the flexible application of reason to faith. He defended the opinion that this would liberate the Muslims mind. For this reason, he introduced his 'rational theology' to enable a more progressive understanding of Islam. In his view, this was the solution for Muslims in Indonesia who were searching for a new Muslim identity that could reconcile seemingly opposite Islamic and Western values. He argued that the understanding of Islam could be adapted to modern views, which was necessary so that today's Muslims could build a successful modern society without betraying their faith. Instead of supporting any specific doctrines, Nasution preferred an inclusive approach by remaining flexible and tolerating a multiplicity of different views. It is based on this understanding that he was able to relate it to the spirit of the Mu'tazilite school.

Nasution followed the spirit of the Mu'tazilites in a rather loose and general sense by focusing on the aspect of rationality that is reflected across all classical schools of thought rather than subscribing to specific doctrines and propagating them. His definite agreement with the Mu'tazilite doctrine of *tawhid* reflected the agreement of all Muslims on Allah's Oneness, which he interpreted it as "an attempt to present the teaching of the unity of God in the purest form possible" and "to reject all forms of thought that approach polytheism (*shirk*)" (Nasution, 1996). He also discusses this issue in his article "Kaum *Mu'tazilah* dan Pandangan Rasionalnya" although rather briefly. (Nasution, 1996) similar to his discussion on the Divine attributes and the createdness of the Qur'an.

According to Nasution, the most impressive aspect of Mu'tazilite doctrine was the idea of God's justice. In his view, the Mu'tazilite conception of free will reflects the purpose of the human existence as we are expected to fulfill our commitments in life and realize our respective roles and responsibilities (Nasution, 1986). He believed that the Mu'tazilite view suited modern society as compared to the Ash'arite emphasis on the absolute will and power of God which does not foster feelings of individual responsibility and agency.

However, Nasution's take on the status of sinful Muslims differs from the Mu'tazilite view as his view is more lenient than that of the Mu'tazilites. In his view a Muslim who did not pray five times a day was still considered a Muslim, albeit a sinful one. In his opinion, a Muslim who performed his obligatory prayers but still engaged in sinful practices was also a sinner. He saw the *Sirat* as a very wide path along which all Muslims could enter Paradise and rejected the famous tradition that it was thinner than a single strand of hair (Nasution, 1986).

Here he contradicted the Mu'tazilite requirement that every Muslim had to be highly committed to abiding by the rules laid down in Islamic law. The doctrine of *al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn* explicates that the sinful Muslim is expelled from the circle of Muslims and will be placed permanently in Hell, yet punished less severely than the disbelievers.

Nasution (1987) also made clear his preference for philosophical principles such as al-Kindi, al-Razi and Ibn Sina over theological dogmas. He agreed with the Muslim philosophers on the theory of emanation which was rejected by the Mu'tazilites including al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (1996). Here he argued that the concept of emanation helped refute the concept of multiple godheads and served as a viable solution to the issue of God entertaining a direct connection with all parts of His creation. It also provided a relevant answer to the way the world was created. He refuted the criticism that this theory suggested a certain level of Divine passivity by arguing that God was active through His thinking ("*kun fa yakun*") which represented His absolute power. Nasution preferred the philosophical idea that God had created the world from eternity as it was to His honour. The theological conviction, however, that God had created the world from nothing gives the impression of passivity of God before the existence of the world.

In general Nasution accepted the established views as long as they did not contradict the undisputable teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions. In his discussion pertaining to the creation of the world, he accepted all commonly held views as long as they did not contradict the word and message of the Qur'an (Nasution, 1987). He explained that since the details of creation were not discussed in the Qur'an, Muslims were free to make certain assumptions. He believed this theory did not contradict God's creation of the world since there was no verse that affirmed that the world had a beginning (Nasution, 1996). In this he supported the Sufis and the Mu'tazilites equally in their approach of proving the oneness of God by negating existence and attributes respectively (Nasution, 1987).

His liberal approach to understanding the role of religion in society merited him several attacks, especially in the form of H. M. Rashidi's critique *Koreksi Terhadap Dr. Harun Nasution* (1987) in response to his *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya*. Noer (1989) describes the relationship of Nasution's views and Western thought as follows: "Harun's finding of Western thought is like the finding of new way to God since it is in line with the Islamic teaching." He was accused of being influenced by Christian orientalists, of denying the Prophetic traditions, and of being someone who did not care about prayers (Yusuf, 1989).



Based on Nasution's writings, it can be concluded that he adopted a comprehensive, assimilationist approach to western and Islamic thought. However, his critics accused him of uncritically accepting Western ideas as argued by H. M. Rashidi, and of undermining and belittling all Muslim's today who have inherited mainstream Islamic thought as their legitimate legacy and follow the majority in the practice of their faith (Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah).

Nasution's case supports the view that Muslim modernists attempted to adopt certain Mu'tazilite views in their desire to propagate a rational and liberal interpretation of Islam, while excluding other key elements. Richard, Woodward, and Atmaja (1977, p. 56) comment:

The modernist Muslims have applied the spirit of rationalism, formerly ascribed to Mu'tazilite theologians, to broader social and political issues affecting Islamic societies today. It is in this broad sense, which is not focused narrowly on specific doctrines, that the classical Mu'tazilite teachers and their works have become references in the writings of many of the modernists and post-modernists Muslim intellectuals.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The Mu'tazilites were among those Muslim scholars who responded to the challenges arising in the early years of the Muslim empire. Their intellectual response was mostly in terms of developing sound theological concepts and approaches. It is indeed very important to understand and appreciate the value and contributions of this controversial school in terms of their attempts to protect Islam from external influences. The Mu'tazilite approach was critical in defending the Islamic faith from foreign elements in the form of Hellenistic thought in eastern Christianity and certain naturalistic trends in Greek philosophy, in addition to the dualistic ideas inherent in the ancient Persian religions. First and foremost on their agenda was to uphold the belief in *tawhid* (oneness of God). The Mu'tazilites focused their intellectual efforts on preserving the original teachings of Islam from other cultural and spiritual influences that would have otherwise corrupted it such as incursions into the concept of the transcendence of God. Even though the Mu'tazilites did cause some enmity and controversy among Muslim circles, they did not intend to reduce the original spirit of Islam to its purely rationalist system of collected dogmas or question the fundamentals of Islam.

The Mu'tazilites remained uncompromising on the status of Muslims and their commitment to practicing their religion by focusing on the principles of Divine justice and

promoting the welfare of society. The most important aspect seems to be their adamant refusal to submit to any external influence and preserve its original teachings.

In contrast, today's Neo-Mu'tazilites use the eminent status of this school of Islamic thought to promote Western ideas of rationalism and liberalism. Their approach to the practice of Islam as a religion is rather flexible and they adopt a much more lenient standpoint towards non-Muslims.

This misapplication and misrepresentation Islamic thought and its various schools deserves our criticism and ought to be rejected for two reasons: First, the misrepresentation of our Islamic legacy constitutes a serious and condemnable issue since it relates to our own early history. Depicting these historical events and developments in an inaccurate manner, whether intentionally or unintentionally, may negatively affect the way we modern Muslims appreciate the contributions of our own predecessors.

The serious study of history constitutes the best starting point to learn how to appropriately deal with disagreements, disputes and controversies, especially when it comes to such sensitive issues as religion. It is therefore crucial that the early controversies and debates in Islamic thought are approached and presented in an objective and balanced manner, whereby all aspects are taken into due consideration, including the contextual background of certain discourses and views.

The second reason is that the historical misrepresentation of our past is likely to empower by giving credence to corruptive movements which claim to be 'Islamic' even though their actual agendas are far from reform-minded in spirit and purpose, such as extremist, liberalist and rationalist ideologies that are foreign to Islam. Associating a particular movement with the schools of classical Islamic thought without critically examining their claims may thus strengthen their alleged legitimacy instead of weakening it.

Indeed, a clear answer to this issue can contribute to our increased understanding of our past, our present and our future. By way of misinterpreting and misappropriating the Mu'tazilites as representing pure rational thought of Islam which led to the exclusion of its other teachings, would come to the rejection of reasoning and philosophical inquiry altogether. This would be a very regrettable and also worrisome development. Quite to the contrary, reasoning and philosophical inquiry constitute indispensable intellectual tools which we need in order to in develop a sound epistemological framework based on Divine revelation.

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