



Reconstruction of Rationality in Islamic Philosophy and Theology: Harun Nasution's Thought and Its Relevance to Contemporary Islamic Studies in Indonesia



Avisena Perdana Putra Muama¹, Abdelrahman Moawad Ali Tahawi²

Universitas Islam Negeri Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon, Indonesia,¹ Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah
International Islamic University, Malaysia²

¹avisenaputra01@gmail.com, ²abdelrahman@unishams.edu.my

Abstract

This study aims to analyze Harun Nasution's rational approach to Islamic philosophy and theology, as well as its relevance to contemporary Islamic studies in Indonesia. This rational approach is considered crucial for overcoming the exclusivism and dogmatism prevalent among Indonesian Muslims. The methodology employed is a qualitative-analytical approach utilizing library research, which facilitates an in-depth examination of Harun Nasution's thought through various literary sources. The results indicate that, first, Harun Nasution perceives philosophy in Islam as a means to counter the stagnation of religious thought. His rational approach to philosophical studies is grounded in critical, free, and logical thinking. Philosophy serves as a tool to deeply explore Islamic teachings, both absolute and relative, enabling Muslims to break free from dogmatism and exclusivism in religion. Second, in the realm of theology, Harun critiques orthodox Islamic theological thought, particularly regarding the roles of reason and human free will, which are often constrained by dogmatism and literalism in the interpretation of the Qur'an. He proposes a new approach known as rational theology, which emphasizes the significance of reason and human freedom in comprehending religious teachings. The implications of this study underscore the importance of adopting a rational approach in Islamic studies in Indonesia. This approach enables Muslims to optimally enhance creativity and productivity across various aspects of life while simultaneously mitigating dogmatic and exclusive attitudes.

Keywords: Rationality; Harun Nasution; Islamic Philosophy and Theology; Islamic Studies

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pendekatan rasional Harun Nasution dalam filsafat dan teologi Islam serta relevansinya bagi studi Islam kontemporer di Indonesia. Pendekatan rasional ini dipandang penting untuk mengatasi sikap eksklusivitas dan dogmatisme yang berkembang di kalangan umat Muslim Indonesia. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif-analitis dengan jenis penelitian kepustakaan, yang memungkinkan kajian mendalam terhadap pemikiran Harun Nasution melalui sumber-sumber literatur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa, Pertama, Harun Nasution memandang filsafat dalam Islam harus berperan melawan stagnasi pemikiran keagamaan. Pendekatan rasional yang digunakannya dalam kajian filsafat didasarkan pada berpikir kritis, bebas, dan logis. Filsafat berfungsi sebagai alat untuk menyelidiki secara mendalam ajaran Islam yang bersifat mutlak maupun relatif, sehingga umat Islam tidak lagi terbelenggu oleh dogmatisme dan eksklusivitas dalam beragama. Kedua, dalam bidang teologi, Harun mengkritik pemikiran ortodoksi teologi Islam klasik, khususnya terkait kedudukan akal dan kehendak bebas manusia yang dibatasi oleh sikap dogmatisme dan literalisme dalam memahami Al-Qur'an. Harun menawarkan pendekatan baru yang disebut teologi rasional, yang menekankan pentingnya akal dan kebebasan manusia dalam memahami ajaran agama. Implikasi dari kajian ini adalah pentingnya penerapan pendekatan rasional dalam studi Islam di Indonesia agar umat Muslim dapat mengembangkan kreativitas dan produktivitas secara optimal di berbagai bidang kehidupan, sekaligus mengurangi sikap dogmatis dan eksklusif.

Kata Kunci: Rasionalitas; Harun Nasution; Filsafat dan Teologi Islam; Studi Islam

Article History: Received: 28-03-2025 | Revised: 13-05-2025, 06-06-2025 | Accepted: 19-06-2025



INTRODUCTION

The dialectical-dichotomous approach employed in the study of Islam in Indonesia has recently fostered a religious climate characterized by dogmatism and exclusivity. Moreover, intellectual stagnation or stagnant thinking is largely attributable to this dogmatic and dichotomous understanding of Islam. The emergence of exclusive claims to Islam has consequently influenced modes of thought and belief systems that are both absolutist and desacralized. Rather than reflecting an inclusive and rahmatan lil ālamīn (mercy to the worlds) representation of Islam, the universal truth of Islam is constricted to an exclusive and singular claim. This phenomenon is rooted in the tendency of Indonesian Muslim society to adopt a monolithic perspective of Islam. A deeper analysis reveals that the proliferation of conflicts, divisions, and polarization among Muslims can be partly explained by the insufficient emphasis on rational and critical approaches in the study of Islam.¹

According to Amin Abdullah, the dynamics of Islamic studies in Indonesia remain predominantly centered on the issue of *Nāṣ* (text), which he terms *Haḍāratu al-Nāṣ* (the civilization of text or an Islamic religious mindset grounded in *nāṣ* culture or *bayānī* texts) as the primary reference. In contrast, other dimensions such as *Haḍāratu al-Ilm* (the civilization of knowledge, characterized by a religious mindset supported by evidence-based reasoning, empirical data, and scientific inquiry) and *Haḍāratu al-Falsafah* (the civilization of philosophy, representing a religious mindset informed by ethical, transformative, philosophical, or critical thought) have received comparatively less attention from Muslim scholars in Indonesia. By relying on *Nāṣ* (text) as containing definitive evidence and verses, various interpretations have emerged that are often regarded as equally sacred as the text itself. However, Amin argues that the text and its interpretation are fundamentally distinct; while the text is sacred, its interpretation is not and remains open to correction, critique, and renewal. Similarly, he distinguishes between religion and religious knowledge, noting that religious knowledge comprises human-compiled understandings (by Muslims) within their historical contexts. Consequently, religious knowledge is not equivalent to religion itself, is not sacred, and is therefore subject to change and renewal (*Qābilun Li an-Niqāsy Wa al-Tagyīr*).²

Islamic religious thought remained stagnant from the 12th to the 19th century. The closure of the door of *ijtihād*, as described by Fazlur Rahman, led to a process of orthodoxy within the science of *Kalām*, the sciences of *Fiqh*, and other fundamental Islamic disciplines (*Ulūm al-dīn*). Consequently, the methodologies and approaches within *Kalām*, *Fiqh*, as well as Education and *Da'wah*, did not undergo significant development. This stagnation resulted in a constricted and myopic understanding of

¹ Aksin Wijaya, *Kontestasi Merebut Kebenaran Islam Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit IRCiSoD, 2019), 42.

² M. Amin Abdullah, "Merajut Paradigma Filsafat Islam Keindonesian: Fresh Ijtihad Memperjumpakan Ulum Al-Din Dan Sains Modern Dalam Keilmuan Keagamaan Islam Untuk Pembangunan Bangsa," *Filsafat Islam: Historisitas dan Aktualitas* (2014), 242.

Islam, confined within rigid frameworks of worship schools and limited socio-political affiliations.

Nidhal Guessoum, an Algerian Muslim scholar, firmly asserts that religious knowledge, including Islam, can no longer sustain its hegemony or maintain a static stance. Should this hegemonic, static, and dogmatic attitude persist, religious sciences risk conflicting with, or even being undermined by, the advancements of modern science. Consequently, the fundamental principles of Islam may increasingly appear foreign and outdated.³ Based on this premise, the present article aims to elucidate the methodological framework employed in the study of Islam. Specifically, this study adopts a rationalist approach, which experienced significant development within the Islamic world during that period.

To comprehend Islamic teachings that are dynamic and contextually relevant, a comprehensive approach to the study of Islam is essential. Throughout the history of Islamic civilization, various methodologies have been employed in Islamic studies, including normative, anthropological, philosophical, and historical approaches. Among these, the rational approach is particularly distinctive, especially in its examination of the relationship between religious teachings and human intellectual development. This rational approach predominated the classical Islamic scientific tradition of its time. In the Indonesian context, Harun Nasution stands out as a prominent figure who applied a rational approach to Islamic studies. As a rationalist Muslim scholar, he is recognized as a pioneer of rational thought in Indonesia and sought to address the challenges of modernity through the use of reason.⁴

Harun Nasution is recognized as one of the most influential Islamic reformist figures among Indonesian Muslim intellectuals. He is widely regarded as a liberal Muslim intellectual within academic circles. In several of his works, which are extensively utilized in IAIN institutions, Nasution articulates perspectives on Islamic discourse characterized by rationality, openness, and scientific inquiry. Within this liberal framework, he developed the tradition of Islamic studies, particularly at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, emphasizing academic rigor and rational methodologies.⁵

Harun Nasution holds a significant position at UIN Jakarta. He served as Chancellor for two terms and subsequently as Director of the Postgraduate Program for several periods. Harun authored several textbooks used by STAIN/IAIN students across Indonesia, which have notably influenced students to adopt a more progressive mindset. He contends that Islamic education at IAIN remains predominantly focused on fiqh-oriented religious teachings. Furthermore, religious instruction in areas such as

³ Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (India: Thomson Press, 2011), 4.

⁴ Wafda Muhammad and Fadil, "Pendekatan Islam Rasional Kajian Atas Pemikiran Islam Muhammad Abduh," *Salimiya: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Keagamaan Islam* 5, no. 3 (2024), 308.

⁵ Muhammad Irfan, "Paradigma Islam Rasional Harun Nasution: Membumikan Teologi Kerukunan," *Jurnal Ilmiah Sosiologi Agama* 01, no. 02 (2018): 109–127.

philosophy, Sufism, and history is largely confined to the perspectives of specific figures. Consequently, he advocates for the inclusion of courses in philosophy, Sufism, theology, tauhid, sociology, and research methodology in the revised curriculum.⁶

The rational approach employed by Harun in reformulating Islamic studies in Indonesia has had a significant impact on the field's development. This influence is largely attributed to Harun's return to Indonesia, which marked a pivotal moment for Islamic scholarship in the country. The rational mode of thinking he introduced was initially considered taboo within the predominantly doctrinal intellectual climate of Indonesia. At that time, rational inquiry was not widely recognized or practiced in Indonesian Islamic studies. Consequently, Harun's return is regarded as introducing a novel methodological perspective. Furthermore, several scholars have noted that the approach he advocated challenged the prevailing stagnation in Indonesian Islamic thought.⁷

Based on the foregoing explanation, this study aims to critically examine the rational approach employed by Harun Nasution in Islamic Philosophy and Theology, as well as to assess the relevance of his ideas within the contemporary discourse on Islamic religiosity, which is characterized by a textualist-hegemonic nature.⁸ Additionally, this study utilizes a historical-philosophical analytical method to evaluate Harun Nasution's principal works and to determine the extent to which his thoughts remain pertinent to the development of Islamic studies in the modern era.

Extensive scholarly research has been conducted on Harun Nasution's thought, revealing a variety of focal points and analytical approaches. For example, Muhammad Irfan⁹ emphasizes Harun Nasution's rational Islamic paradigm, which he terms the Theology of Harmony – a form of religiosity that prioritizes rationality as the ethical basis for promoting interreligious peace. A comparable interpretation of Harun's rationalism is presented by Depi Yanti,¹⁰ who explores Harun Nasution's concept of reason ('aql). She contends that, according to Harun, reason constitutes a valid epistemological tool for comprehending religious teachings, operating in conjunction with revelation. This perspective highlights Harun's affinity for the rational theological tradition of the Mu'tazilah, as evidenced in his dissertation Muhammad Abduh and Mu'tazilah Rational Theology, which subsequently informed the foundation of his contributions to modern Islamic theology.

⁶ Budhy Munawar Rachman, *Reorientasi Pembaruan Islam Sekularisme, Liberalisme, Dan Pluralisme Paradigma Baru Islam Indonesia* (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Filsafat, 2010), 245.

⁷ Muhammad Arifin, *Teologi Rasional Perspektif Pemikiran Harun Nasution* (Banda Aceh: Lembaga Kajian Konstitusi Indonesia, 2021), 50.

⁸ Nurisman, *Pemikiran Filsafat Islam Harun Nasution Pengembangan Pemikiran Islam Di Indonesia*, ed. Teras (Yogyakarta, 2012), 23.

⁹ Irfan, "Paradigma Islam Rasional Harun Nasution: Membumikan Teologi Kerukunan."

¹⁰ Depi Yanti, "Konsep Akal Dalam Perspektif Harun Nasution," *Intelektualita* 06, no. 01 (2017): 51–62.

Several studies characterize Harun Nasution as a reformer within Islamic scholarship, particularly regarding education and the interplay between religion and science. Sukma Umbara¹¹ emphasizes Harun Nasution's advocacy for reform in Islamic education, underscoring the necessity of liberating human reason from fatalistic and narrowly textualist perspectives that impede the advancement of the Muslim community. Umbara argues that the decline of Islam is attributable to a stagnation in critical thinking, which has led to the erosion of the Muslim scientific ethos. Complementing this rationalist perspective, Wedra Aprison¹² elaborates on Harun Nasution's conceptualization of the relationship between science and religion, rejecting any dichotomy between the two. Aprison contends that both revelation and knowledge derive from a common divine source—God—and thus cannot be inherently contradictory. This body of literature indicates that prior research on Harun Nasution has predominantly focused on his theological rationalism, while insufficient attention has been given to his contributions to the methodology of Qur'anic interpretation, which is the primary focus of the present study.

Building upon the review of previous studies presented above, this research aims to re-examine Harun Nasution's rational thought from a historical-philosophical perspective and to assess its relevance to the development of Islamic studies in contemporary Indonesia. Accordingly, the study offers a systematic analysis of Harun Nasution's philosophy and Islamic theology within the framework of integral Islamic rationalism. Theoretically, this article contributes to the enrichment of discourse in Islamic philosophy and theology in Indonesia; practically, it provides an alternative to the increasing prevalence of literalism in contemporary Islamic thought.

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach based on library research. Its primary objective is exploratory, aiming to uncover new insights within the domain of Islamic philosophy and theology and to examine their significance for the advancement of contemporary Islamic scholarship in Indonesia.¹³ The principal data sources consist of Harun Nasution's publications, including "Akal dan Wahyu dalam Islam" (1989), "Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspeknya" (1986), and "Islam Rasional: Gagasan dan Pemikiran" (1996). Secondary data are derived from journal articles and other scholarly works addressing related themes. Data collection is conducted through an inventory and classification method, whereby the researcher systematically gathers, organizes, and categorizes Nasution's writings that specifically pertain to rationality, philosophy, and theology.

¹¹ Sukma Umbara Tirta Firdaus, "Pembaharuan Pendidikan Islam Ala Harun Nasution (Sebuah Refleksi Akan Kerinduan 'Keemasan Islam')," *Jurnal El-Furqania* 05, no. 02 (2017): 167–184.

¹² Wedra Aprison, "Mendamaikan Sains dan Agama: Mempertimbangkan Teori Harun Nasution," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 4, no. 2 (December 1, 2015): 241–42, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2015.42.241-259>.

¹³ Ibrahim, *Metodologi Penelitian Perspektif Aqidah Dan Filsafat* (Makassar: Penerbit Rumah Buku Carabaca, 2018), 5.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical Framework: Rationalism within the Islamic Tradition

The rational approach to the study of Islam, as reflected in numerous historical records, was initially pioneered by the Mu'tazilah, a school of Islamic theology that emerged in the third century Hijri. However, according to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the earliest figure to employ a rational methodology in the study of Islam was Ali Ibn Abi Thalib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Ali is regarded as a foundational figure in the development of rationalism within Islam, as evidenced by his work *Nahj al-Balāghah*, which presents rational arguments for the oneness of God while remaining firmly grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith. From the first century of Islam, the Prophet's companions encountered various theological and philosophical questions concerning the relationship between faith (iman) and deeds (amal), the existence of the Last Day, the authenticity of the holy scriptures, and the legitimacy of political authority. These issues were systematically addressed and synthesized within the discipline of *kalām* (Islamic scholastic theology). Furthermore, the intellectual debates that occurred in Syria and Iraq between Muslims and adherents of other religions—particularly Christians, Zoroastrians (Mazdaists), and Manichaeans—were characterized by sophisticated philosophical and theological arguments aimed at defending their respective doctrines. In response, Muslim scholars endeavored to articulate a rational framework to defend and preserve Islamic teachings.¹⁴

In Islam, reason is regarded as having a prominent role as the guardian of revelation. Within Islamic thought, the rationalist school is among the groups that consider reason to be a fundamental instrument for seeking truth and an epistemological source for acquiring knowledge. Reason holds a special status because it is a gift from Allah to humanity, serving as a means to attain understanding. This is exemplified in a well-known Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), in which he states, "There is no religion for those who do not have reason. Reason in Islam; indeed, religion devoid of reason would merely become a historical artifact preserved in a museum. Consequently, Muslim philosophers and theologians have historically valued and employed reason as a critical tool for the pursuit of reliable knowledge."¹⁵

Rationalism within Islam is fundamentally influenced by political conflicts among Muslim communities. During the 7th century CE, various disputes arose that carried significant theological implications; the opposing factions were motivated to confront their adversaries through arguments grounded in reason, or rational discourse. The Qur'an itself contains numerous verses that emphasize the capacity of

¹⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Intelektual Islam Teologi, Filsafat, Dan Gnosis*, Terj. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2009), 5.

¹⁵ Muhammad Amin, "Kedudukan Akal Dalam Islam: Perdebatan Antara Mazhab Rasional Dan Traditional Islam," *Tarbawi : Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 3, no. 01 (2018), 6.

humans to employ their intellect in comprehending its teachings. Consequently, this openness facilitated the emergence and ongoing development of diverse forms of interpretation, or *ta'wil*, which have evolved over time and culminated notably in the intellectual contributions of the Mu'tazilah school of thought.¹⁶

The development of rationalist Mu'tazilah thought should be recognized as being influenced by the Greek intellectual tradition; however, this influence does not imply that Mu'tazilah originated entirely from Greek philosophy. While Greek texts were translated into Arabic as early as the Umayyad Dynasty, the translation of Greek philosophical works into Arabic primarily occurred during the Abbasid Dynasty, particularly under the reign of Caliph al-Ma'mun. In contrast, Mu'tazilah emerged through the ideas of Wasil bin Atha' at the end of the Umayyad period. This chronology indicates that Mu'tazilah did not originate from Greek philosophy, as Greek philosophical thought entered the Arab-Islamic world subsequent to the emergence of Mu'tazilah. Moreover, prior to the introduction of Greek philosophy, the rational tradition within Muslim intellectual circles had already begun to develop, especially in the domains of Fiqh and Theology.¹⁷

Rational thought extends beyond the history of classical Islamic civilization, reaching its zenith in the twentieth century, particularly with the emergence of the discourse on Islamic renewal in Egypt, led by the reformer Muhammad Abduh. In the realm of theology, Abduh places significant emphasis on the role of individual reason. This emphasis reflects the view that reason provides a foundational framework for understanding a person's religious life, especially concerning the core teachings of Islam. Abduh underscores the importance of reason, freedom, and the continuous effort of Muslims to cultivate complete trust in Allah. He proposes three key principles in theological inquiry: first, human freedom to act; second, belief in the sunnah of Allah, understood as the natural laws governing creation, which are established by Allah and remain constant; and third, the unique function of reason in enabling humans to discern between good and evil. Within this framework, reason also facilitates comprehension of the role of revelation and other related matters.¹⁸

Biography of Harun Nasution and the Context of His Intellectual Development

Harun Nasution was born on September 23, 1919, in Pematang Siantar, South Tapanuli, North Sumatra. He was the fourth of five siblings in a family with a strong religious background. Both of his parents were religiously educated, significantly

¹⁶ Majid Fakhry, *Sejarah Filsafat Islam: Sebuah Peta Kronologis*, Cetakan II. (Bandung: Penerbit Mizan, 2002), 18.

¹⁷ Heru Chakra Setiawan and Afif Gita Fauzi, "Rasionalisme Mu'tazilah Dan Pengaruhnya Analisis Historis," *Al-Mufasssir* 4, no. 1 (2022), 79.

¹⁸ Khairiyanto Khairiyanto, "Pemikiran Jamaluddin Al-Afghani Dan Muhammad Abduh Serta Relasinya Dengan Realitas Sosial Di Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Theology and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2020), 151.

contributing to the religious upbringing he received.¹⁹ His father, Jabbar Ahmad, was a scholar and trader, while his mother was also a cleric and the daughter of a cleric from Mandailing. Their marriage initially faced opposition due to prevailing customs, as they belonged to the same clan; consequently, they relocated to Pematang Siantar, where Harun Nasution was born. Harun's religious education began at home, with his father imparting various religious teachings. Additionally, his mother, who had lived in Mecca and possessed religious knowledge, also instructed him in religious matters. This environment ensured that Harun's early life was deeply immersed in religious education.²⁰

He commenced his formal education at HIS and MIK (Moderne Islamietische Kweekschool), institutions owned by the son of Syekh Jamil Jambek. At that time, Harun intended to continue his studies at MULO, a secondary school. However, his parents did not permit this, as he had planned to pursue his education at Muhammadiyah in Solo, which was deemed more appropriate for Harun's progressive mindset as a young person. Harun's aspiration was perceived as deviant by the older generation, despite his acceptance by the school in Solo.²¹

Upon his return to Indonesia in 1953, Harun Nasution was appointed to the Middle East Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Beginning in 1955, he served for three years at the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Brussels, where he participated in numerous meetings, leveraging his proficiency in Dutch, French, and English. Nasution subsequently traveled to Egypt to pursue further studies at al-Dirāsah al-Islāmiyyah; however, financial constraints prevented him from continuing. In 1962, he was awarded a scholarship by the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He earned a Master of Arts (MA) in Islamic Studies from McGill in 1965, completing a thesis entitled *Islamic State in Indonesia: The Rise of the Ideology, the Movement for Its Creation, and the Theory of the Masjumi*. Three years later, in 1968, he obtained a Doctorate (Ph.D.) in the same discipline and from the same institution, with a dissertation titled *Place of Reason in Abduh's Theology: Its Impact on His Theological System and Views*.²²

In 1969, Harun Nasution returned to his homeland and actively engaged in academia as a lecturer at the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Jakarta. Additionally, he served as an extraordinary lecturer at IKIP Jakarta (from 1970), the National University of Jakarta (from 1970), and the Faculty of Letters at the University of Indonesia Jakarta (from 1975). Concurrently, he held the position of rector at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta for eleven years (1973–1984). Furthermore, he was appointed Head of the

¹⁹ Muammar, "Nurcholish Madjid Dan Harun Nasution Serta Pengaruh Pemikiran Filsafatnya," *Petita: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Hukum Dan Syariah* 02, no. 02 (2017): 211–227.

²⁰ Arifin, 12.

²¹ Saiful Muzani, "Reaktualisasi Teologi Mu'tazilah Bagi Pembaruan Umat Islam Lebih Dekat Dengan Harun Nasution," *Jurnal Ulumul Qur'an* 04, no. 04 (1993), 121.

²² Muhammad Zainal Abidin and Wardani, *Dinamika Kajian Filsafat Islam Di Indonesia* (Banjarmasin: Antasari Press, 2017), 38.

Institute for the Development of Religious Education at IKIP Jakarta and subsequently became the Dean of the Postgraduate Faculty at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta beginning in 1982. Harun Nasution's scholarly contributions include the following works: (1) "Teologi Islam Aliran-Aliran, Sejarah, Analisa Perbandingan", first published by University of Indonesia Press (UI-Press) in 1972; (2) "Falsafah dan Mistisisme dalam Islam", published by Bulan Bintang in 1973; (3) "Falsafat Agama", published by Bulan Bintang in 1973; (4) "Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya", published by UI-Press in 1974; (5) "Pembaharuan Dalam Islam", published by Bulan Bintang in 1975; (6) "Akal dan Wahyu Dalam Islam", published by UI-Press in 1982; (7) "Muhammad Abduh dan Teologi Rasional Mu'tazilah", published by UI-Press in 1987; and (8) "Islam Rasional", an anthology comprising fifty-six papers written since 1994, published by Mizan Bandung in 1995.

Three primary factors underpin Harun Nasution's critical and open-minded approach to thinking. First, he was raised in a family that, at the time, challenged traditional norms, particularly regarding marriage practices. Second, his intellectual development was significantly shaped by his cross-cultural and international experiences, especially during his studies in the West. Third, he lived amid a generational conflict between the old and the young, which had reached a critical point during his lifetime.²³ An examination of his life history reveals that at least three major cultural influences shaped Nasution's thought: Indonesian culture, specifically that of North Sumatra, his birthplace; Egyptian Arabic culture, where he pursued religious studies; and European culture, which, according to the author, exerted the greatest influence on his rationalist style of thinking.²⁴

Intellectually, the factors shaping the rational framework in Harun's thinking were significantly influenced by his academic experiences in various countries, particularly during his studies in Eastern regions such as Indonesia and Egypt, as well as in the West. Harun expressed disappointment with the teaching methodologies and academic environment in the East, which he perceived as lacking openness. Consequently, he chose to continue his studies in the West, specifically at McGill University in Canada. During this period, Harun's rational thinking pattern was further strengthened. This development can be attributed to at least four factors: first, Harun believed he had discovered an Islamic pedagogical approach that resonated with him while studying in the West; second, although he studied alongside Orientalists, he acknowledged that their perspectives did not influence him, as he gravitated more towards the rational aspects of Islamic thought; third, he recognized the need to modernize the understanding of Islam that had evolved in Eastern contexts such as Mecca and Indonesia by adopting a more rational approach; and fourth, he considered that teaching and learning methods based on seminars, discussions, and

²³ Saidul Amin, *Harun Nasution Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya* (Riau: Penerbit Asa Riau, 2019), 57.

²⁴ Muh. Subhan Ashari, "Teologi Islam Persepektif Harun Nasution," *AN NUR: Jurnal Studi Islam* 12, no. 1 (September 30, 2020): 77, <https://doi.org/10.37252/an-nur.v12i1.82>, 76.

dialogues were more suitable for educational institutions than the traditional lecture methods prevalent in the Middle East.²⁵

Reformulating Islamic Philosophy: Harun Nasution's Critique of the Stagnation in Religious Thought

According to Harun, Islamic philosophy should serve as a means to address the intellectual stagnation currently observed within the religious sphere of the Islamic world. This stagnation, he argues, stems from the inability of Muslims to differentiate between immutable Islamic teachings and those that are contextually relative. Harun categorizes Islamic teachings into two distinct groups: first, fundamental teachings that are absolute, eternal, and unalterable; and second, teachings that are relative, impermanent, and subject to change in response to temporal and spatial developments. The absolute and unchangeable teachings are derived from the Qur'an and hadith, whereas the relative teachings emerge from *ijtihad* – the scholarly interpretation and reasoning applied to the foundational teachings. These relative teachings manifest in various disciplines, including *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), hadith studies, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *kalām* (Islamic theology), *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism), among others.²⁶

The productivity of scholars and Muslims during the Middle Ages experienced a significant decline compared to that of the Classical Age. Notably, advancements in the fields of science and philosophy ceased, while productivity in economics, industry, and agriculture diminished considerably. The political sphere, however, remained relatively prominent, as evidenced by the existence of three major Islamic empires during this period: the Ottoman Empire, the Safavid Empire, and the Mughal Empire. Overall, Muslims witnessed a decline across various domains, whereas Europe experienced rapid progress in science, politics, economics, military affairs, and other areas. This disparity can be attributed, in part, to the prevailing orientation among Muslims at the time, which emphasized the afterlife and regarded worldly life as inferior. Consequently, occupations such as trade, industry, and agriculture were often deemed lowly and considered appropriate primarily for non-Muslims. This perspective contributed to the stagnation and eventual disappearance of scientific inquiry within the Islamic world during the Middle Ages, even as Europe underwent significant scientific and technological development. Additionally, the lack of adherence to the concept of *sunnatullāh* – the divine laws governing nature – may have further influenced the decline of scientific activity in the Islamic world during this period.

What, then, is the nature and essence of philosophy? According to Harun, the essence of philosophy lies in deeply contemplating existing reality (existence) down to its most fundamental elements, following a process of clear and free thinking. Thus, it

²⁵ Amin, *Harun Nasution Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya*, 59.

²⁶ Harun Nasution, *Islam Rasional Gagasan Dan Pemikiran*, Enam. (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), 122.

can be concluded that the essence of philosophy encompasses three aspects: deep reflection, logical reasoning, and intellectual freedom. Reason, or ratio, holds a significant role in the development of Islamic civilization; it influences not only cultural domains but also religious spheres. In addressing religious issues, Islamic scholars and thinkers do not rely solely on revelation but also place considerable emphasis on reason. The prominent role of reason in religious discourse is evident across various fields, including jurisprudence, theology, interpretation, and philosophy. While jurisprudence and theology extensively employ reason in matters such as worship and social transactions (*muamalah*), philosophy primarily applies reason to questions concerning the nature of existence itself, consistent with its fundamental purpose of profound inquiry. Consequently, the perspectives of philosophers are often characterized as liberal, contrasting with the views of jurists and theologians. This divergence has led to debates and, at times, accusations of infidelity and disbelief.²⁷

Philosophy as developed within the Islamic world has consistently faced criticism. From the perspective of traditional religious scholars—those who base their understanding on religious texts and interpretations, such as those found in the sciences of exegesis, hadith, *ushuluddin* (*aqidah*), and *fiqh*—philosophy is often regarded as *bid'ah*, or innovation, lacking a legitimate religious foundation. Furthermore, Islamic philosophy has incorporated substantial elements from foreign intellectual traditions, particularly those originating from Greece, India, Persia, and Rome,²⁸ sometimes without proper attribution. Harun contends that efforts to improve the perception of philosophy within Islam require more than merely defining philosophy; it is essential to comprehend its nature and essence to dispel the various misconceptions that circulate among Muslims regarding philosophy.²⁹

Wardani offers an alternative interpretation of the nature of philosophy as described by Harun. According to Wardani, the essence of philosophy, as articulated by Aaron, encompasses the following aspects: (1) methodical thinking, which aligns with standards of reasoning that derive correct conclusions from a logical perspective. This does not necessarily adhere strictly to formal logic as formulated by Aristotle but emphasizes the use of reason; (2) free thinking that is not constrained by tradition, dogma, or religion, since philosophical inquiry begins with reason to seek universal truth (a bottom-up approach), rather than starting from revelation or tradition as an established truth (a top-down approach); and (3) a thorough examination of problems by addressing their fundamental roots (radical, from *radix*: root).³⁰

Since the essence of philosophy lies in thinking correctly and logically, there is, in reality, no inherent conflict between reason and revelation, or between philosophy and

²⁷ Harun Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1986).

²⁸ Haidar Bagir, *Buku Saku Filsafat Islam* (Jakarta: Mizan, 2006), 220.

²⁹ Harun Nasution, *Islam Ditinjau Dari Berbagai Aspeknya Jilid II* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1986), 20.

³⁰ Muhammad Zainal Abidin and Wardani, *Dinamika Kajian Filsafat Islam Di Indonesia* (Banjarmasin: Antasari Press, 2017), 54.

religion. Harun further asserted that religion places great importance on the use of reason, thereby granting it a significant role within religious thought. Indeed, numerous verses of the Qur'an address the functions and definitions of reason, as documented by Harun in his book.³¹

Harun Nasution's Rational Theology: A Critique of Classical Islamic Theological Orthodoxy

Harun's contribution to the field of Islamic theology is evident through his rational approach to understanding Islam. He emphasized the importance of employing reason not only in cultural or social contexts but also within the religious domain. This perspective aligns coherently with the intellectual framework of the Classical Kalām tradition. Harun asserted that during the classical period, Islamic theology upheld the primacy of reason in religious discourse, a concept he termed Sunnatullāh Theology. This theology is characterized by at least six key features: first, the elevated status of reason; second, the affirmation of human freedom in will and action; third, the discourse on freedom of thought constrained by the fundamental teachings of Islam, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah, which contain relatively few verses; fourth, the belief in the existence of sunnatullāh (divine law) and causality; fifth, the interpretation of holy texts or revelations in a metaphorical sense; and sixth, a dynamic approach to attitudes and thinking.³²

The theology of Sunnatullāh emerged during the classical period, as scholars of that era recognized the prominent role of reason in the Qur'an and hadith. Furthermore, these scholars encountered Greek science and philosophy, which were prevalent in centers of Greek civilization such as Alexandria (Egypt), Antakia (Syria), Jundisyapur (Iraq), and Bactra (Persia). In Greek intellectual traditions, reason also held a central position; thus, the emphasis on reason in the Qur'an and hadith resonated with the high regard for reason in Greek science and philosophy. This convergence encouraged Islamic scholars of the classical period to develop rational modes of thought. They employed rational, scientific, and philosophical methodologies in their understanding of Islam. This approach is exemplified in the doctrine of Qodariyah theology, which posits that humans possess the capacity to determine their own destiny, thereby affirming human free will and agency. Consequently, the Muslim attitude during this period became dynamic, with a balanced orientation toward both worldly life and the hereafter. It is therefore unsurprising that, in the classical era, both temporal and spiritual concerns were regarded as equally important, fostering rapid creativity and productivity among Muslims across various fields.

According to the author, Harun Nasution critiques classical Islamic theological orthodoxy primarily regarding the concept of human free will, which is viewed as limited, thereby rendering human life entirely dependent on divine predestination.

³¹ Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam*.

³² Nasution, *Islam Rasional Gagasan Dan Pemikiran*, 112.

This perspective, as Nasution argues, results in a loss of human freedom to determine one's own path in life, since all events are predetermined by God, leaving humans to passively surrender and accept their fate. Such a viewpoint, he contends, may hinder the creativity and productivity of Muslims. Consequently, Nasution proposes a new theological approach termed rational theology. In this framework, reason is accorded a significant position and role, while humans, as free agents, are able to exercise their will, albeit within the foundational teachings of Islam, namely the Qur'an and hadith.

The belief that human beings lack free will, with their fate and all actions predetermined by God from the outset, fosters fatalistic and static attitudes among individuals. The concepts of *qaḍa* and *qadār* have inevitably shaped popular perceptions. This intellectual stagnation is further intensified by dogmas that frequently constrain freedom of thought. While in the Classical Era only the fundamental teachings of the Qur'an and hadith—relatively few in number—limited intellectual freedom, during the Middle Ages, scholarly interpretations solidified into dogmas that were not to be challenged. Consequently, such dogmas often restrict freedom of thought, resulting in a significantly narrowed intellectual scope. A strict adherence to the literal meanings of Qur'anic verses and hadith renders individuals narrow-minded and fanatical, impeding their acceptance of alternative viewpoints, even when these align with sound reasoning. This rigidity in attitude and thought has contributed to the intellectual and social backwardness of Muslims, rendering them out of step with contemporary developments and causing them to lag behind other societies during the Middle Ages.

The rational theology developed by Harun is no longer dogmatic; rather, it is more open and contextual, responding to the dynamic cultural conditions of society. Harun emphasizes that traditional theology tends to focus solely on adherence to the *ijtihad* outcomes of classical scholars, which are regarded as absolute, similar to the status of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Harun does not challenge the absolute and definitive nature of revelation, as rational theology is not based solely on reason but also incorporates and relies upon revelation. The issue arises when the *ijtihad* of scholars within traditional theology is treated as absolute, despite the fact that the truth of *ijtihad* outcomes is relative and contextual, unlike the truth of revelation, which is clear, absolute, and universal.³³

Harun Nasution's theological thought exhibits distinctiveness and uniqueness when compared to prevailing theological perspectives within the broader Islamic world and specifically in Indonesia. As previously discussed, Nasution underscores the significance of free theology, realistic theological reflection, and its direct implications for social life, which he terms rational theology. However, the designation of this approach as rational theology does not imply that he has developed an entirely new theological framework.³⁴

³³ Nasution, *Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Islam*.

³⁴ Arifin, *Teologi Rasional Perspektif Pemikiran Harun Nasution*.

Harun Nasution did not develop a new theological framework; rather, he aligned himself with rational theology and the principles of Mu'tazilah thought. The ideas introduced by Harun elicited both support and opposition within society. Consequently, this study aims to elucidate Harun Nasution's concept of rational theology and examine its relevance to social life. Theoretically, this research seeks to reconstruct Harun Nasution's theological perspectives, which are dispersed across his various works. It is noteworthy that Harun Nasution did not author a dedicated book specifically focused on Islamic theology.³⁵

The Significance and Challenges of Harun Nasution's Rational Thought

Harun Nasution is recognized as a pioneer of rationalism within Indonesian Islamic thought, particularly through his efforts to introduce rational theology influenced by the Mu'tazilah and classical Muslim philosophers. He underscored the significance of employing reason in the interpretation of Islamic teachings and advocated for distinguishing between universal (*qat'i*) and contextual (*zanni*) doctrines, thereby enabling Muslims to adapt to contemporary developments without compromising the core principles of their faith. However, Nasution's rationalist approach is not without its limitations. From the author's perspective, a notable critique of Nasution's thought is his tendency to attribute the decline of Muslim societies predominantly to the fatalistic theological framework of Asy'ariyah, while insufficiently accounting for other critical factors such as political policies and socio-economic conditions that also significantly influence Muslim dynamics.³⁶ Furthermore, an overly hegemonic rational approach may diminish the spiritual and emotional dimensions of religious life, potentially fostering excessive skepticism toward established doctrines.

The significance of Harun Nasution's rational thought is considerable in the advancement of contemporary Islamic studies in Indonesia. He successfully advocated for curriculum reform in Islamic universities by incorporating courses in philosophy, kalam, tasawuf, and research methodology. This transformation fostered the emergence of a more open, critical, and inclusive academic tradition capable of addressing the challenges of the modern era. Furthermore, Harun Nasution's rational approach played a crucial role in establishing a balance between the intellectual and moral dimensions of Islamic education. He emphasized that reason and the heart must operate in harmony to ensure that education produces graduates who are not only intellectually proficient but also possess commendable moral character. This approach remains pertinent in addressing social and moral challenges in the era of globalization, where the integration of scientific knowledge and spiritual values is essential.

Harun Nasution has played a significant role in fostering a culture of dialogue and tolerance within Islamic academic circles. By advocating for freedom of thought

³⁵ Muhammad Arifin, "Relevansi Dan Aktualisasi Teologi Dalam Kehidupan Sosial Menurut Harun Nasution," *Jurnal Substantia* 16, no. 01 (2014): 87-102.

³⁶ Safwa Yusuf, "Rational Thinking Of Harun Nasution: The Renewal Of Islamic Moral Education In Indonesia," *Qolamuna : Jurnal Studi Islam* 10, no. 01 (2024), 10.

and respect for diversity, he created an environment conducive to constructive scholarly discussions and encouraged students to express their opinions freely, even when these diverged from prevailing views. This approach is particularly pertinent in the context of Indonesia's pluralistic and dynamic society. Although Nasution's rationalist perspective has certain limitations—particularly regarding social acceptance and a tendency to oversimplify complex issues—his contributions remain crucial to the advancement of contemporary Islamic studies in Indonesia. The rationalism he promoted has enriched the intellectual heritage of Indonesian Islam and served as a foundation for educational reform and the reinforcement of a critical and open scientific tradition.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, Harun Nasution's rational thought significantly contributes to the advancement of Islamic philosophical and theological discourse, particularly within the framework of modern Islamic scholarship. His rational approach underscores the role of philosophy as an analytical tool for comprehending both absolute religious doctrines and those that are interpretive and subject to change. Rooted in reason, logical argumentation, and critical thinking, this approach rejects closed, exclusive, and dogmatic religious perspectives. In the realm of theology, Nasution provides a robust critique of classical orthodox views inclined toward *jabariyyah*, or fatalism—the doctrine that humans are entirely constrained by divine predestination and lack the capacity for effort and choice. He contends that fatalistic attitudes and religious fanaticism constitute primary factors contributing to the intellectual, economic, social, and civilizational decline of Muslim societies. Conversely, he maintains that Islam places great emphasis on the use of reason and promotes rational thinking as a means to engage effectively with the complexities of the contemporary world. Although his ideas have not been universally embraced, Nasution's rational approach remains pertinent as a methodological foundation for addressing the rapid flow of information and social transformations engendered by technological development.

Theoretically, the findings of this study contribute to the advancement of discourse in Islamic philosophy and theology by proposing a novel paradigm that addresses contemporary intellectual demands. Nonetheless, the study exhibits certain limitations, particularly concerning its methodological approach, which necessitates further refinement to facilitate a more profound analysis of the research questions. Consequently, future research is advised to employ a more comprehensive methodological framework that incorporates interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives. Such an integrative approach is anticipated to yield more precise scholarly responses to the challenges facing modern Islamic thought and to foster constructive dialogue between classical Islamic intellectual traditions and contemporary intellectual issues.

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