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Subject: Your Contributions to Oxford Islamic Studies Online
Date: August 14, 2019 at 6:13 AM
To: muali@ucr.edu
Cc: FOLEY, Catherine Catherine.Foley@oup.com



Dear Dr. Ali,

I am happy to let you know that your essay “Harun Nasution” has been approved for publication by the editors of *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*. It is currently in press and scheduled to be published in our fall update, which will go live on November 13. My colleague Catherine Foley (copied here) will issue payment as soon as she is able if she has not already.

Your second submission, “Kementerian Agama,” is currently under review by our editors. I will let you know as soon as I have received reviewer feedback.

Please don’t hesitate to let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you for your ongoing contribution to OISO.

Sincerely,

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Harun Nasution

Harun Nasution (1919- 1998) was an academic and public intellectual, who elaborated various dimensions of Islam and promoted a rational understanding and educational reform in the Sunni Muslim-majority country of Indonesia. Nasution contributed to the rise of Indonesian Muslim academics and intellectuals synthesizing Islamic rationalist and Western methodology, in an attempt at reforming the Muslim society and advancing the nation.

Reformist Life

Harun Nasution was born in North Sumatera on 23 September 1919. His father, Ahmad Jabar Ahmad, was a merchant and a religious judge who knew the Arabic-Malay script or *jawi*. After attending the Dutch elementary school (HIS), Nasution went to *Moderne Islamiestische Kweekschool* (MIK), a private training school for religious teachers conducted in Dutch and Malay. His mother wanted him to study and become a prayer leader or *imam* in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The young Nasution lived in a time when the old generation (*kaum tua*) and the young generation (*kaum muda*) would often debate on religious and social issues; Nasution was a curious young man, asking questions to teachers, and questioning certain socio-cultural practices he considered making no sense. He questioned the conventional Muslims' prohibition of petting dogs, the necessity of taking ablution before holding the holy Qur'an, and other religious taboos. Nasution went for the pilgrimage to Mecca, studied Arabic, but continued to read books in Dutch, and later decided to go to Egypt in 1938. In Cairo, he visited Al-Azhar, studied with religious teachers, but simultaneously worked and joined the Indonesian-Malaysian Youth Union and followed the current news from Indonesia. He decided to study philosophy at the Department of *Ushuluddin* (the Fundamentals of the Religion) of the Al-Azhar University in Arabic, while learning English and French. But he was unsatisfied in the Al-Azhar's pedagogy of memorization and lack of critical studies. He took classes at the Department of Education at the American University in Cairo and wrote a final paper assigned by his advisor on labor condition in Indonesia. His personal economic condition led him to find work to support his study and life, but he continued learning by ways of interacting with people, reading books, magazines and daily newspapers. During the world wars, Nasution wrote essays on social and political issues related to his country, Indonesia. When Soekarno and M. Hatta declared Indonesian independence was on 17 August 1945, he wanted to spread the news by securing wider support through the Arab League. He added Ahmad to the name Soekarno and made his first name Muhammad explicit in M. Hatta to seek the predominantly Muslim Arabs' support. During these years, Nasution continued to be an informal liaison between the affairs of the Middle East and those of Indonesia, which led him to different posts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Jakarta, Saudi Arabia, and Belgium. He returned to Indonesia in 1953, but he did not join nor support any political party competing for their place and reputation in Indonesia. He argued that political parties worked for party interests, rather than for the nation.

From Jakarta, Nasution returned to Egypt for pursuing his study in the *Dirasat Al-Islamiyyah*, for him resembling the Department of Islamic Studies, which required no memorization of texts. He was able to spend time to discuss ideas, to learn about philosophy, history and development of the Muslim world, mysticism, as well as jurisprudence. He was also interested in studying the Indonesia's state philosophy, Pancasila, and the economic situation under President Soekarno. But his sense of curiosity was not fully fulfilled. He learned about different aspects of Islam through the books by European and American Orientalists who made him more and more interested in Islamic studies. He read also the publications of the Ahmadiyah sect whose base was in London and whose understanding of Islam was for him more rational than other Islamic organizations. When an offer was given to pursue his advanced study at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Canada, in September 1962, he immediately accepted the opportunity. He wrote his M.A. thesis on the concept of the Islamic state according to the Masyumi in Indonesia as he learned that scholars had written about the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Abu 'Ala Al-Maududi in Pakistan instead of similar ideas in Indonesia. For his dissertation, Nasution wrote about the place of reason in Muhammad 'Abduh theology and the Mu'tazila' impact on his theological system and views. From Canada, Nasution returned to Jakarta where he became a professor at the State Institute for Islamic Studies (*Institut Agama Islam Negeri, IAIN*) of Jakarta, and an author of works on different aspects of Islamic sciences.

Reforming Islamic Higher Education

Nasution observed that the state institutes for Islamic studies in Indonesia had been traditionalist, dominated by the Middle Eastern curricula and pedagogical models, with much focus on jurisprudence and ritual. He became committed to introducing reform in Islamic thought and initiating educational reform, inviting academics and intellectuals from various different fields of social sciences and humanities to disseminate their ideas in the universities. When appointed a rector of the IAIN of Jakarta, he inserted introduction to the Science of Religion and Philosophy to the curriculum, among other subjects. His inclusion of the diverse sub-disciplines of Islamic knowledge, particularly theology and philosophy and mysticism into the dominantly legal and ritual curricula in Islamic Universities led to more diverse and tolerant perspectives of Islam among students and scholars. He saw the teaching of rationalist theology as an alternative to the traditional, particularly fatalistic theology which emphasized the will of God and the trust in God and contributed to the passive and underdeveloped attitudes of the Muslim community toward science and technology and progress.

Beyond Islamic universities, Nasution lectured on the role of religious education in secular universities like the University of Indonesia. He promoted the training of students and scholars to possess the following characteristics: religious, faithful to one God, pious, philosophical, rational, dynamic, broad-minded, and being prepared to participate in inter-religious cooperation, thus helping develop science and technology and art for national interest. To him, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs should play a crucial role in reforming the curricula and

develop the capacity of their teachers and professors. Nasution was aware that his lectures, speeches, and writings were too philosophical for the ordinary Muslims to understand and follow, but his intellectual reform was indeed primarily targeted for the educated generation. Change should come from the top, he maintained.

His two volumes entitled *Islam Seen in Its Various Aspects* summarize his intellectual journey and systematize Islam into multiple aspects: ritual, spirituality, morality; history and culture; politics; and social institutions; law; theology; philosophy; mysticism; and lastly reform. The two books were used as a textbook for students, teachers, and scholars at the Islamic institutes and secular universities in need for a broad yet multi-dimensional Islam in a scholarly but accessible fashion.

Promoting Rational Islam and Development

Harun Nasution believed that Islam was inherently rational if it was based on both revelation and reason without contradiction because both come from God. He followed the intellectual path of Muhammad Abduh, Ahmad Amin, and Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, but he also learned from Orientalists who approached Islam more rationally than many Muslims had done. He was influenced not by Orientalist and Western thought did not consider God and religion; he cited and reinterpreted the Qur'anic passages and the Hadith narratives that emphasize the use of reason. He argued that the perception that the Qur'an contained everything was false because God had given human beings reason and the natural world as well as scriptural revelation.

Muhammad Abduh particularly influenced Harun Nasution in terms of distinguishing between the absolute and the relative. Abduh divided the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith into the domain of worship, which was unambiguous and detailed, and the domain of social relations, often ambiguous and only in the general terms. The specific interpretation and application of the general teachings could change according to time and place. The absolute contained the oneness of God and the fundamental teachings, and the relative encompassed historical interpretations and practices, related to economics, politics, and government. The concept of *khilafa*, deputyship of God, for example, was relative, whereas just leadership was the absolute. Justice was reinterpreted according to the Qur'an, the Hadith, and to the theological, philosophical, mystical, and legal schools of thought. For Nasution, many of the classical and medieval theological and legal thoughts and practices were no longer applicable for modern Muslims to follow, but they contained rationalist and traditionalist methods in approaching Islam. Nasution made a reference to caliph Umar who did not give money to the newly convert as stated in the Qur'an and exemplified in the Hadith because he saw no reason of such policy when Muslim community had become stronger.

Nasution's lectures on Islamic theology and its different streams were in response to the existing books on the Sunni Ash'ari theology which marginalized the Mu'tazila, the Shi'a and other theologies. The book presented comparison between them and sought to analyze the different attitudes towards free will and predestination, divine

justice, divine actions, divine attributes, and the concept of belief. All the theologies should be deemed Islamic because they all use reason and revelation in addressing the questions. They vary only on the degree given to reason and revelation and on the ways of interpreting the Qur'an and the Hadith. Nasution further argued that Mu'talizi liberal theology engaged the Greek philosophy and supported the development of science and technology whereas the traditionalist Ash'ari theology hindered it due to its dogmatic and literal interpretation of the scripture. The Ash'ari books had tended to charge the Mu'tazila theologians as being *kafir*. Among the Mu'tazilis, there was also the charge of *kafir* against the Ash'ari. But Muslims were free to choose which theology suitable for them, citing a hadith, "difference in thought in my community is a blessing."

On philosophy, Nasution introduced Al-Kindi as well as others, who believed that philosophy and revelation were not incompatible and said that to learn philosophy was not forbidden because theology was part of philosophy and Muslims should learn theology. On Sufism, Nasution introduced its origins and instead of discussing Sufis, he briefly discussed the Sufi paths, such as *al-zuhd* (asceticism), *al-mahabbah* (love), *al-marifah* (knowledge), *al-fana* (annihilation) and *al-baqa* (subsistence), and *wahdat al-wujud*, (unity of existence). By introducing the diversity and richness of Islamic theology, philosophy and mysticism, Nasution wanted to reform the Muslim community from within their own tradition. In his observation, a secular community saw philosophy as being the producer of naturalism, materialism, and atheism, whereas religious communities would philosophical ideas in line with their religions.

Religious reform, rather than secular Western modernism, was a necessity for the Muslims to live in the modern time characterized by the development of science and technology. Muslims should adapt its religious understanding to modern scientific advancement. Having reviewed reformist ideas in Egypt, Turkey, and Indo-Pakistan, which emerged as a response to their contact with the West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Nasution believed that the twentieth century had witnessed some signs of reform, in the Muslim world, but much more were in order. He argued that fatalistic theology made people live passively and rational theology made people active and productive. In Indonesia, the absolute will of God had long prevailed, rather than the human free will theology. Consequently, Indonesian Muslims had lacked productiveness in science and technology. Mystical organizations focusing on the hereafter at the expense of this world were flourishing but did not support people's rationalism and productiveness. Muslim universities and schools should teach a theology of the Law of God or *sunnatullah*, with its rational, philosophical, and scientific basis, to challenge the traditional theology of fatalism.

Nasution's promotion of rational Islam went hand in hand with the development ideology of the New Order under President Soeharto (1966-1998). With a liberal rational philosophy and rational mental attitude, he supported a national development and the resolving of its problems and effects. Nasution was in support

for the Indonesian state ideology of *Pancasila*, the five pillars comprising elements of monotheism, humanism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism. He elaborated the first pillar on belief in one god in light of the belief in one god or *tawhid* as interpreted by the Mu'tazila who rejected divine attributes as being false association with the divine essence. He cited a Sufi master Ibn 'Arabi on the unity of existence and the pure devotion to the one god only. On the second pillar on a just and civilized humanity, Nasution cited Qur'anic passages, such as Q. 7:189; Q. 10:19; and 49:13, which were related to the ideas of human diversity and one humanity. He saw the third pillar of Indonesian unity as being supported by the Islamic teaching of loving one's country. He further suggested that the fourth pillar on peoplehood on the basis of the consultative representativeness, was elaborated in terms of Islamic idea of piety and *shura'* or consultation (Q 3:159; 42:38). Nasution discussed the five pillar on social justice by quoting the Qur'anic passages instructing an act of justice (Q 16:90) and prohibiting the concentration of wealth among the rich (Q 59:7). For Nasution, the five pillars were also Islamic teachings and Muslims should not see contradiction between Islam and the state's philosophy.

On governance and politics, Harun Nasution agreed with other modernist scholars who argued that Islam did not specify a form of state and only teaches principles and values such as enjoining good and forbidding evil (Q. 3:104), becoming a middle path society, a good and safe society (Q. 3:143; 34:15) and a just and consultative government (Q. 51:42; 42:159). In the domains of law, economics, culture, and security and defense, Islam provides only principles and values rather than a system that changes according to time and place.

In line with the President Soeharto's ideology of religious harmony, Harun Nasution supported interfaith dialogues, religious tolerance, and interfaith cooperation. In their long history of encounters, Islam and Christianity underwent tension due to their missionary character. To ease the tension, he urged the government to host Muslims and Christians to have dialogues and work together to address common problems such as education, family, and other social problems. In monotheistic religions, there were intolerant teachings but there were also tolerant ones. Intolerance had happened place because the tolerant passages were given priority over the intolerant ones. In Indonesia, to cultivate a spirit of religious tolerance, certain efforts were in order: to see truth in other religions, to minimize difference in religions, to emphasize commonality in religions, to nurture brotherhood in the same god, to education people to be good, to emphasize tolerant teachings and to avoid attacks among different religions. In pursuing interfaith cooperation, a non-governmental inter-religious institution could be established to address common social problems, provide religious guidance in the modern society, and improve the religious life of the people. Religious groups should conduct research on social and religious problems, conduct seminars on these problems, disseminate research outcomes, improve religious morality and increase awareness of the function of religion as the guidance for making balance of life in the modern society.

Producing Critical Muslim Intellectuals

Harun Nasution's ideas and reform met with positive responses from Muslim students and intellectuals, as well as criticisms by others. He was criticized for rehabilitating and promoting the Mu'tazili thought considered heretic or at least controversial in Indonesia and for adopting Western historical approaches in studying Islam. But according to others, Nasution did not intend to weaken a Muslim's faith. He taught Muslims about the positive and negative sides of Islam in its history, and to come to make their own choices. More fundamentally, Nasution sought to reconcile reason and revelation. Others criticized Nasution's approaches for being dry, elitist, and not focusing on the socio-economic problems of the oppressed and marginalized people in society. They wanted more concrete intellectual projects and translation into plans of action for transforming Indonesian society. But Nasution and the younger academics who continued his intellectual legacy, including non-Muslim intellectuals, believed that any concrete social and institutional change should begin with changing their viewpoint and their intellectuals. More specifically, the teaching of philosophy in Islamic and other religious institutions, which had become a subject of suspicion because it could weaken the faith, could actually open the gate of understanding other sciences, and could reveal and even reinforce the true meanings of religion in history and society.

Harun Nasution contributed to the rise of an intellectual tradition at the Islamic institute and universities across the country. His rationalist ethos, scientific inquiry, openness and courage to question established doctrines paved the way for Islamic progressivism and opened the veil of traditionalism in society. Nasution was a true believer in science and religion as great assets in modernizing the Muslim community in Indonesia.

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