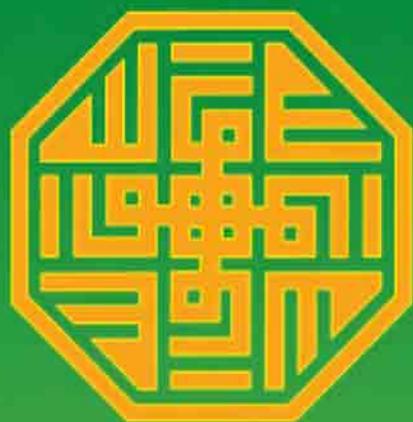


DEFENDERS  
*of* REASON  
*in* ISLAM



MU‘TAZILISM *from*  
MEDIEVAL SCHOOL  
*to* MODERN SYMBOL

RICHARD C. MARTIN  
*and* MARK R. WOODWARD  
*with* DWI S. ATMAJA

Defenders of  
Reason *in* Islam

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*For our children –*

Nia, Steffi, Erik, and Taqwa Aditya



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# Preface

This work grew out of the authors' direction of an M.A. thesis project at Arizona State University by Mr. Dwi Surya Atmaja, now professor of Arabic at the Islamic University (I.A.I.N.) at Pontionak, Indonesia. As his advisors in the Department of Religious Studies, Mark Woodward and I had for several years enjoyed wide-ranging conversations on theological developments in the modern Muslim world, particularly in Egypt and Southeast Asia – our own respective areas of primary interest. With his arrival as a graduate student in the Department of Religious Studies in the early 1990s, Dwi's voice was added to those conversations. All three of us shared the conviction that contemporary theological issues and discussions in the Islamic world could not be understood by non-Muslims – or for that matter, Muslims – who were innocent of adequate knowledge of the theological disputes and schools that arose in the first five centuries of Islam. This conviction suggested the thesis project undertaken by Mr. Atmaja: a translation of a Mu'tazili treatise on the rational foundations of theology, with a brief commentary on the implications of the text for discussions going on among Muslim groups and intellectuals in Indonesia today. The text that I suggested Mr. Atmaja translate was by Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1024), *Kitab al-usul al-khamsa*. A retranslation of that text appears in chapter 5 below.

Several stages marked the development of the project that produced this book following Dwi Atmaja's return to Indonesia in the summer of 1992. First, Woodward and I, in consultation with Atmaja, decided that I should revise and polish the translation of 'Abd al-Jabbar's text to make it available to students in religious and Islamic studies in some sort of published form. That eventually entailed the preparation of textual commentary and background for the modern educated reader who might be unfamiliar with the history, content, and genre of the text. Next, the Indonesian connection was deemed important enough for Woodward to develop further, as a way of demonstrating the modern relevance of the Mu'tazili theological school. In the process of research and writing on the influence of Mu'tazili thought in contemporary Indonesia, Woodward discovered a text by the modern Indonesian Mu'tazilite Harun Nasution. A translation of that text and new

background chapters were subsequently added. This now gave the project two exemplars of Mu'tazili thought to be explained and interpreted – one from the medieval Islamic Middle Eastern heartlands and the other from modern Asia. Beyond the two texts and the chapters of background and commentary they required, the twentieth-century discovery of numerous Mu'tazili manuscripts in places like Yemen seemed to be an important part of the story of Mu'tazilism. That entailed writing a discussion of the roles of Orientalism and *Religionswissenschaft* in the modern textual and interpretive history of Mu'tazilism. That in turn brought attention to numerous discussions of Mu'tazilism by modern Muslim authors writing in the Middle East and the West.

The discovery of the need to add new dimensions to the work often resulted from sharing findings with colleagues in religious and Islamic studies. Bruce Lawrence had read an early draft of the Introduction and suggested the title "Critical Islam," because of the link with the modern uses of Mu'tazilism by Muslim intellectuals, many of whom were concomitantly exploring critical theory. This important insight confirmed the authors' belief that the revival of Mu'tazilism and theological rationalism could be interpreted as a modernist countermove against what Lawrence and others have called fundamentalism. Indeed, Lawrence's book, *Defenders of God*, eventually suggested to the authors the present title for their own work, *Defenders of Reason*, to which the publisher suggested adding "in Islam." Our criticism of the thesis Lawrence has advanced in *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (1989) must be seen against the background of our debt to his collegial friendship and the stimulus of his provocative essay on fundamentalism.

Several other colleagues have also made important contributions to this project along the way. Hassan Hanafi read through the English translation in chapter 5, against the Arabic edition, and made several suggestions for better and more accurate renderings. A public presentation of a version of chapter 10 was made at a Fulbright conference attended by both authors and Mr. Atmaja in Jakarta in June, 1995. Responses by Nurcholish Madjid and other Indonesian theologians were helpful to the evolution of the present work. Charles J. Adams, now a part-time colleague in the Department of Religious Studies at Arizona State University, has been an important source of information throughout this project. The authors would also like to thank several friends and colleagues who graciously listened to our ideas, read one or more chapters in various draft stages, and who were willing to offer encouragement and in some cases constructive criticism: Kristin Brustad, Paul Courtright, Richard Eaton, Josef van Ess, Wendy Farley, Wadi Haddad,

## Preface

Walter Lowe, Holly Martin, Ebrahim Moosa, Abdullahi an-Na'im, Gordon Newby, Frank Reynolds, Juliane Schober, Abdulkader Tayob, Norani Uthman, and John Witte. Michael Smith took time out from a busy senior year at Emory College to aid in the preparation of the bibliography.

We are grateful to our editor and publisher, Novin Doostdar, for the efficient, professional, and user-friendly manner in which he and his colleagues at Oneworld Publications have seen this project through. Helen Coward, senior editor, and Judith Willson, project editor, have been a pleasure to work with, albeit almost entirely by Internet, in the final stages of converting the manuscript into its present book form.

We are indebted the most to Dwi Surya Atmaja. He willingly and ably took on a masters thesis suggested to him by his advisors, and in the process forced them, and himself, to think more about many of the issues raised in the present book. Dwi's studies at Arizona State in many ways embody one subject matter of the book – the challenges to young Muslim modernist intellectuals by Islamism on the one side and secularism on the other. If the central text of Dwi's thesis has been retranslated into more nuanced English theological expression and the Nasution translation and seven additional chapters have since been added, the project as a whole was nonetheless motivated by Dwi's initial contribution. We hope that Dwi Atmaja and his younger Muslim colleagues will respond critically and constructively to the book whose existence Dwi has inspired.

It should go without saying that we, the authors, are finally responsible for the book that follows. Nonetheless, we are grateful to have enjoyed such generous collegial and professional support. Our spouses are among those colleagues thanked above, but can never be thanked adequately for making such diversions as the writing of books possible. Our children also saw less of us than they should have. They are the ones to whom we dedicate this work.

Richard C. Martin  
Atlanta, Georgia  
May 1, 1997

# Notes on Style

Arabic and Indonesian names, titles, and technical terms are transliterated following conventions commonly used in English-language journals. In discussions where both Arabic and Indonesian terms appear, or in cases where it has seemed appropriate to identify the language of the term, the abbreviations “Ind.” and “Ar.” are used. The symbol ¶ indicates paragraphs in the translation in chapter 5.

For the sake of simplicity, most extra-literal typographic symbols (such as overbars to indicate long Arabic vowels and underdots to indicate harder forms of certain Arabic consonants) have been omitted. The exception is the Arabic ‘*ayn* (‘), as in ‘Abd al-Jabbar, and the Arabic *hamza* or glottal stop (’), as in Qur’an. Our assumption is that Arabists will not need the full technical markings in most cases. We apologize for confusions that may arise for linguists from simplified transliteration. Our hope is that non-Arabists and non-Indonesianists who want to learn more about Mu‘tazilism and Islamic theology will have greater access to the ideas and concepts discussed in the book.

Technical terms in Arabic are normally italicized when they first appear in a chapter (e.g., *kalam*) and appear thereafter in roman type (e.g., kalam). Islamic terms that appear in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary Unabridged*, such as Qur’an, Hadith, Shari‘a, Sunna, etc. are not italicized. Those same terms, like Talmud, Torah, and Bible, name sacred texts or textual processes, and hence are capitalized. Other terms, such as kalam, (theological discourse), *umma* (confessional community), and ‘*aql* (reason) are normally not capitalized. All such terms are introduced in context. A brief glossary also appears at the end of the book for readers who may run across an important term whose definition lies somewhere in preceding pages.

Most references to Arabic texts give volume number (if any), followed by page number and line number(s). For example, *al-Mughni* 16, 27: 3–11 refers to *Kitab al-Mughni*, volume 16, page 27, lines 3–11.

Translations of Qur’an and Hadith passages are our own unless otherwise indicated. We have often consulted the Qur’an translation by Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, although we have endeavored to avoid its archaic use of language.

The Western Common Era calendar is followed throughout.

# Abbreviations

Full reference to works listed below may be found in the bibliography.

Ar.	Arabic
art.	article
BMO	British Museum Oriental
<i>EI</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition</i>
<i>EI</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Religion</i>
<i>Fadl</i>	'Abd al-Jabbar, <i>Fadl al-i'tizal wa tabaqat al-mu'tazila</i>
<i>Fihrist</i>	Al-Nadim, <i>The Fihrist of al-Nadim</i>
fol./fols.	folio/folios
<i>Formative Period</i>	Watt, <i>The Formative Period of Islamic Thought</i>
<i>GAL</i>	Brockelmann, <i>Geschichte der arabischen Literatur</i>
<i>GAS</i>	Sezgin, <i>Geschichte des arabischen Schriftums</i>
Ind.	Indonesian
<i>Jalalayn</i>	<i>Tafsir al-imamayn al-jalalayn</i>
<i>Maqalat</i>	Ash'ari, <i>Kitab maqalat al-islamiyin</i>
<i>Al-Mughni</i>	'Abd al-Jabbar, <i>al-Mughni fi abwab al-tawhid wa l-'adl</i>
<i>reg.</i>	( <i>regnabat</i> ) ruled
S	Supplement
<i>SEI</i>	<i>Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam</i>
<i>Sharh</i>	'Abd al-Jabbar, <i>Sharh al-usul al-khamsa</i>
<i>Sharh al-'uyun</i>	Al-Hakim al-Jushami, <i>Sharh al-'uyun</i> in 'Abd al-Jabbar, <i>Fadl al-i'tizal</i>
<i>Tabaqat</i>	Ibn al-Murtada, <i>Kitab tabaqat al-mu'tazila</i>
<i>Ta'liq</i>	Manekdim, <i>Ta'liq 'ala sharh al-usul al-khamsa</i>
<i>Theologie</i>	van Ess, <i>Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. Und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra</i>



# one

## Introduction

### *A Tale of Two Texts*

In the late 1970s, the Indonesian modernist theologian Harun Nasution published a pamphlet in defense of a medieval Muslim “rationalist” theological school known as the Mu‘tazila. This was somewhat unusual. Although Mu‘tazili theology is discussed, sometimes positively, by modern Muslim scholars, very few have identified themselves with Mu‘tazilism to the extent that Nasution has. Mu‘tazili rationalists had taught doctrines about divine unity, the historical context of revelation, and ethical answerability to God that ran counter to the religious beliefs held by most Muslims. Nonetheless, Mu‘tazili intellectualism enjoyed the patronage of numerous caliphs and viziers during the first two and a half centuries of the Abbasid Age (viz. 800–1050). After the heyday of the school in the ninth and tenth centuries, Mu‘tazili dominance in theological discourse (*kalam*) began to wane, giving way to more centrist and populist discourses, such as those of the Ash‘ari and Maturidi theologians (*mutakallimun*), and the Hanbali, Hanafi, and Shafi‘i jurisconsults (*fuqaha*).

Theological rationalism did not altogether disappear in Islamic thought, however. Shi‘i theologians continued to dictate and comment on medieval Mu‘tazili texts as part of their madrasa curriculum.<sup>1</sup> After the eleventh century and the influence of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) in particular, Aristotelian philosophical method rivaled the more disputational practices of the *mutakallimun*. With the emergence of Islamic modernist thinking in the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, Mu‘tazili rationalism began to enjoy a revival of interest among Sunni Muslim intellectuals. During this past century, the discovery of several Mu‘tazili

manuscripts hibernating in Middle Eastern libraries has led to an increase of scholarly interest in Mu'tazili texts by both Western and Muslim scholars. The former have tended to interest themselves in Mu'tazili parallels with, and origins in, Christian and Hellenistic sources. The latter have often seen in the Mu'tazili texts an indigenous rationalism that could be revived in the service of adapting Islam to the modern world. Although both motivations are pertinent to this study, the latter comes into focus especially in Parts II and III below.

The current study is structured by two short expositions of Mu'tazili doctrine, one dictated in Arabic in Iran toward the end of the tenth century, and the other written, as we have indicated, by Harun Nasution in Bahasa Indonesia in the late 1970s. In his pamphlet on Mu'tazilism, Nasution several times cites a theologian, Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1024). Indeed, Nasution specifically cites a work attributed to 'Abd al-Jabbar that had been published in Egypt in 1965 under the title *Sharh al-usul al-khamsa* (Commentary on the five fundamentals [of theology]). In addition to Nasution's text, this study also presents the original treatise at the basis of the commentary, 'Abd al-Jabbar's *Kitab al-usul al-khamsa* (Book on the five fundamentals). These two texts, 'Abd al-Jabbar's original treatise and Harun Nasution's modernist commentary, form the two textual and historical foci of this study.

The identification, translation, and general significance of these two texts, considered together as examples of Mu'tazili thought and separately as discourses belonging to quite different historical moments, form the subject matter of Parts I and II (chapters 2 through 9) below. The rest of this chapter and the next set the stage for considering the specific matters of text and context by discussing the history of Mu'tazilism and, more generally, the conflict between rationalism and traditionalism in Islam. Part III considers further the archeology of Mu'tazilism by modernist Muslim intellectuals – scholars who do not necessarily refer to themselves as Mu'tazilites, as Harun Nasution does, but who nonetheless find in the rationalism for which the Mu'tazili theologians are remembered a counterpoise to Islamist, including fundamentalist, movements.

## From the Project of Orientalism to the Fundamentalism Project

Harun Nasution's text, as well as the works of other modernist Muslim scholars we shall discuss in Part III below, raises the question of Orientalism – the colonial and postcolonial project to recover and reconstruct the classical

religions and civilizations of colonial subjects. That Orientalist scholarship was political in motivation and effect was argued lucidly in 1963 by the Egyptian Marxist intellectual Anwar Abdel Malek.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen years later, criticism of Orientalism itself became a “project” that jolted academe and reverberated throughout the social sciences and humanities with the publication of Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*.<sup>3</sup> Said characterized the discourse of Orientalism in a well-known passage that is itself polemical and rhetorical:

The Orientalist surveys the Orient from above, with the aim of getting hold of the whole sprawling panorama before him – culture, religion, mind, history, society. To do this he must see every detail through the device of a set of reductive categories (the Semites, the Muslim mind, the Orient, and so forth). Since these categories are primarily schematic and efficient ones, and since it is more or less assumed that no Oriental can know himself the way an Orientalist can, any vision of the Orient ultimately comes to rely for its coherence and force on the person, institution, or discourse whose property it is . . . [W]e have noted how in the history of ideas about the Near Orient in the West these ideas have maintained themselves regardless of any evidence disputing them. (Indeed, we can argue that these ideas *produce evidence that proves their validity*.)<sup>4</sup>

More recently, Peter van der Veer has carried the critique of the Orientalist project a step further. Speaking of the work of Sanskritists and other Orientalists working on the South Asia subcontinent, van der Veer has argued:

Orientalists brought modern philological methods and concepts to bear on India’s past. In critical editions of Hindu scriptures they replaced a fragmented, largely oral set of traditions with an unchanging, homogenized written canon. The critical editions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana as well as the ongoing Purana-projects show this process of selection and unification very well. In that way a “history,” established by modern science, came to replace a traditional “past.”<sup>5</sup>

Van der Veer makes the case that Western Orientalists working in South Asia fastened onto the Brahmanical textual tradition, thus privileging a view of South Asian religion held by the Brahmin “caste” (itself a social concept that is prominent in Orientalist scholarship). Thus, the Orientalist project in India, he concludes, was the construction of a “Hindu” historical and textual tradition. This in turn became an (unintended) scriptural focus for Hindu (and Muslim) communalism based on religious nationalism. In