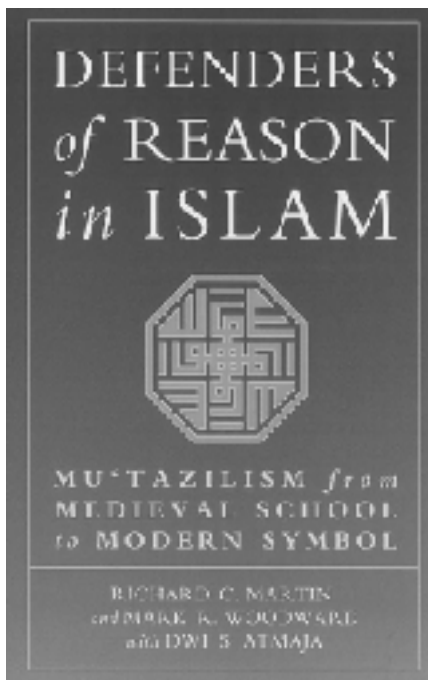


Research approaches
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Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, many of us in Islamic Studies have found ourselves being asked repeatedly by reporters, students, and even university colleagues to explain and interpret Islamic fundamentalism. Certain assumptions often surface in public discussions of Islam. For example, many reporters (and many of my students and colleagues) believe that Islam is an intrinsically violent religion. Another assumption I often encounter is the view that orthodox Muslims (Sunni and Shi'i) are medieval, irrational, anti-modern, and dangerously anti-Western intellectually.



It is this modern public perception of Islam that induced Mark R. Woodward and myself to write, with Dwi. S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997) xv + 251 pages including a glossary, bibliography and index. The following three paragraphs, adapted from the Introduction, entitled 'A Tale of Two Texts', explain our project.

'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.¹ 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 had.² 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 jurist consults (*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... 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 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 C.E., and the other written, as we have indicated, by Harun Nasution in Bahasa Indonesia in the late 1970s-. 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 fundamen-

tals).³ 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.'

A premise of this study is that during the past century very few books have been written about Islam by scholars trained in history of religions or comparative studies of religions. Most studies of Islamic fundamentalism written by scholars in the US, for example, have been written by Orientalists, political scientists, public policy specialists in government, or journalists. We wanted to write about the importance of Islamic religious thought today for each of these groups, but our primary target was scholars and students of religion. It is important to note that in North America there are some 900 departments of religion in private colleges and public universities, and that the study of Islam is still woefully underrepresented in these departments. A large number of departments still do not offer courses on Islam; at best they may cross-list a course in anthropology or political science or history by a Middle East specialist in another discipline to teach about the Islamic religion.

In the Introduction, we try to locate the history of Islamic theology in relation to the political dimensions of Islamic and religious studies in the past century. A section entitled 'From the Project of Orientalism to the Fundamentalism Project' argues that the Western textual study of Islamic theological texts, and particularly the rediscovery of a number of Mu'tazili texts in this century in Yemen and elsewhere, has influenced the direction of both of the modern study of Islamic thought and Islamic thought itself. *Defenders of Reason in Islam* challenges the main theses of the Fundamentalism Project at the University of Chicago headed by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby and the book by Bruce B. Lawrence on the cultural sources of fundamentalism. Indeed, the title *Defenders of Reason in Islam* was inspired by Lawrence's 1989 work, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper and Row). Marty, Appleby and Lawrence have argued that fundamentalism is primarily an ideological reaction to modernity, and particularly to modernism. *Defenders of Reason* argues that so-called fundamentalism in modern Islamic thought is not merely a reaction to modernism; it is a contemporary species of the historically rooted traditionalist reaction to rationalist tendencies in Islamic thought that goes back at least to the circle around Hasan al-Basri in the early eighth century. Hence, the book tells the story of Mu'tazilism and both the political and theological reactions to it in Islamic history.

The rest of the Introduction has the task of explaining the concepts of 'rationalism', 'traditionalism', and theology (*ilm al-kalam*) itself – all of them multivalent terms – in scholarly discourse. The strategy is not to be comprehensive and detailed, but rather to be schematic in order to bring contrasting trends into relief. Historians will easily be able to problematize the information provided in defence of the main theses when they look at particular thinkers and periods. Our purpose, however, was to find theological patterns over what historian Fernand Braudel has termed *la longue durée*, the larger scope of trends over time. The pattern that dominates this study is the long historical tension between Mu'tazilites and Hanbalites/Ash'arites, rationalists and traditionalists, modernists and

Islamists. Interestingly, these two conflicting trends were never mutually exclusive: some Hanbalites were accused (accurately, in some cases) of rationalism, and some Mu'tazilites relied heavily on scriptural arguments. Nonetheless, we argue that Islamic orthodoxy (Sunni and Shi'i) was always fluid and pluralistic. Mu'tazilism and Hanbalism each enjoyed moments of being at the centre of orthodox thinking in various times and places, but for the most part they formed on the margins and each tried to influence the orthodox centre. Since the Middle Ages, Mu'tazilism has been more successful in Shi'i Islam, Hanbalism and certainly Ash'arism in Sunni Islam.

Defenders of Reason also claims that the struggles going on within Islamic societies today have to be seen as theological disputes that matter deeply; they can not simply be reduced to social, political, or economic causes, even though a particular political breakdown (*fitna*), for example, may provide a context in which theological arguments are reformulated and vivified. A quote from Christian theologian Alister E. McGrath, citing German sociologist of religion Niklas Luhmann, summarizes the book's concept of the social origins of theology: '[D]octrine arises in response to religious identity, which may be occasioned socially (through encounters with other religious systems) and temporally (through increasing chronological distance from its historical origins and sources of revelation)... Doctrine is thus linked with the affirmation of the need for certain identity-giving parameters for the community, providing theological justification for its continued existence.'⁴ Theology, or *ilm al-kalam*, then, is a function of what ethnologist Fredrik Barth calls 'boundary formation' and 'boundary maintenance'. It is the language by which members of a group reach an agreement and thus a self-identity (*madhhab*), which is fortified by a corresponding notion of the other – those who are outside the community. The poetics and social uses of that language, theological discourse, as well as its social contexts, constitute data the scholar must take seriously.

The first two parts of the book present translations, textual analyses, and historical expositions of the two texts, 'Abd al-Jabbar's eleventh-century *Kitab al-usul al-khamsa* and Nasution's twentieth-century *Kaum Mu'tazilah dan Pandangan Rasionalnya*. A chapter in Part II, 'The Persistence of Traditionalism and Rationalism', summarizes the history of this theological tension from the waning Mu'tazili influence in the Seljuq Age (eleventh and twelfth centuries) through the fourteenth-century revival of traditionalism of Ibn Taymiyya, down to the modernism of Muhammad 'Abduh and its influences in Southeast Asia. In Part III, entitled 'Mu'tazilism and (Post)Modernity', we look at traces of Mu'tazilism in the work of contemporary thinkers whose writings are available to our readers in European languages: Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, Fatima Mernissi, and Hasan Hanafi. In the final chapter, 'The Implications of Modernity: Deconstructing the Argument', the bracketed question of the relation of modernity/modernism to fundamentalism closes the book.

The final discussion within that chapter is on 'Other People's Texts'. The post-Enlightenment critical study of religious texts was rooted in nineteenth-century textual and historical criticism, mainly by Protestant scholars examining

the Old and New Testaments – the texts of their own faith tradition. The reaction within Christianity to critical biblical scholarship is well known and still at play. The same century saw the beginnings of sustained Western research by some of the same Protestant scholars on the 'Sacred Books of the East', including the Islamic textual tradition. Orientalism and *Religionswissenschaft* have dealt with other people's texts, thus crossing certain boundaries that had been unmarked earlier in post-Enlightenment modern scholarship. During the second half of the twentieth century in particular, those boundaries have become more clearly marked. That is the problem with which *Defenders of Reason in Islam* ends. It is the problem raised by a recent controversial article, 'What is the Koran?', in the popular American magazine *Atlantic Monthly*.⁵ It is a problem that defenders of reason and of other warrants in religious studies – Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and non-religious – shall have to negotiate at the boundaries of scholarly and religious domains in the public marketplace. ♦



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Notes

1. *Kaum Mu'tazilah dan Pandangan Rasionalnya* 'The Mu'tazila and Rational Philosophy'.
2. Regretfully, Nasution died in the early fall of 1998.
3. I based the translation on the edition of the Arabic text prepared by Daniel Gimaret, 'Les Usul al-Hamsa du Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbaret Leurs Commentaires,' *Annales Islamologiques* 15(1979).
4. Quoted in *Defenders of Reason*, 17, from Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 38.
5. Toby Lester, 'What is the Koran?', *Atlantic Monthly* 283/1 (January 1999): 43-56.